



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Assembly Members

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Allen, Andy (East Belfast)  
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)  
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)  
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)  
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)  
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)  
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)  
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)  
Blair, John (South Antrim)  
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)  
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)  
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)  
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)  
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)  
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)  
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)  
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)  
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)  
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)  
Chambers, Alan (North Down)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)  
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)  
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)  
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)  
Easton, Alex (North Down)  
Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)  
Flynn, Ms Órlaithí (West Belfast)  
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)  
Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)  
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)  
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)  
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)  
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)  
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)  
Kelly, Ms Catherine (West Tyrone)  
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)  
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)  
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)  
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McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)  
McHugh, Maolíosá (West Tyrone)  
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)  
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)  
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)  
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)  
Maskey, Alex (Speaker)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Muir, Andrew (North Down)  
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)  
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Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)  
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Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)  
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)  
Stewart, John (East Antrim)  
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Weir, Peter (Strangford)  
Wells, Jim (South Down)  
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 March 2020

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

### Committee Membership

**Mr Speaker:** As with similar motions, these will be treated as business motions, and there will be no debate.

*Resolved:*

*That Mr Pat Catney replace Mr John Dallat as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. — [Mrs D Kelly.]*

*Resolved:*

*That Mr Fra McCann replace Ms Emma Sheerin as a member of the Committee for Communities; that Ms Martina Anderson replace Mr Fra McCann as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office; and that Ms Emma Rogan replace Ms Martina Anderson as a member of the Committee for Justice. — [Mr O'Dowd.]*

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget Bill: Final Stage

*That the Budget Bill [NIA 02/17-22] do now pass. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]*

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

#### **Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):**

Today's Final Stage debate concludes the financial legislative process for the 2019-2020 year. I recognise concerns that there has not been enough opportunity to consult on and debate the public expenditure position set out in the Budget Bill. The circumstances for this financial year have been far from ideal. However, these institutions have been restored for only a matter of weeks. I express my gratitude, once again, to the Finance Committee, which acknowledged the unique circumstances that we have found ourselves in this year. Accelerated passage was essential to allow the continuation of public services, and that will not be the situation for the next financial year.

There will be every opportunity for Members to debate the Executive's 2020-21 Budget plans when I bring the Budget to the Assembly later this month. There will be a further opportunity when the Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill come to the Assembly before the summer. The debates on the earlier stages of the Bill and the associated Supply resolutions have been informative, and I thank all the departmental Committees for the level of scrutiny that they have brought to the process.

I hope that it is now completely clear to everyone that the Budget Bill is focused on the 2019-2020 financial year. Whilst it also provides legal authority for Departments to spend into the first few months of 2020-21 through the Vote on Account, that does not constitute the

setting of the 2020-21 Budget. The Vote on Account is simply a mechanism that allows Departments to deliver services at the start of the new financial year pending the Assembly's consideration of the Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill. That Bill will set out the detail of the 2020-21 spending plans in the Executive's Budget.

Since the restoration of the institutions, I have announced allocations of some £59 million. Those allocations are helping to address the backlog in the assessment and diagnosis of children with special educational needs and meet the shortfall in contractual pay costs for teachers and non-teaching staff. They are increasing the financial support for people affected by the contaminated blood scandal. They fund the preparation costs involved in taking forward the recommendations from the historical institutional abuse inquiry and the victims' payment service scoping study. They ensure that the Department for Infrastructure can maintain our roads, provide winter services and maintain street lighting.

This is the Final Stage of our financial legislative process for 2019-2020, and the legislation has already been subject to considerable debate. I now look forward to hearing any final thoughts from Members on this important legislation.

**Mr Frew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance):** As Members will be aware, the Budget Bill provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2019-2020, as specified in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which take account of what happened during the in-year monitoring rounds. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year until the Assembly votes on the Main Estimates for 2020-21 in June.

The Committee for Finance took evidence on the Budget Bill from Department of Finance officials on 19 February. As I alluded at Second Stage, that session marked a very short period of Committee consultation on the Bill. The Committee was grateful to Mr Allister for raising an issue at Second Stage about the:

*"sole authority of the Budget Act being used for much more substantial costs than is normally the case in black-box issues." — [Official Report (Hansard), 25 February 2020, p97, col 1].*

He referred specifically to black-box provisions of more than £105 million in the Executive

Office for victims and survivors. That provision was duplicated in black-box provisions in the Department of Justice. Almost £15 million of black-box provisions highlighted in the Department for the Economy's budget for Northern Ireland Screen appeared again as grant resource for Northern Ireland Screen. The Committee considered that further at its meeting on 26 February and is due to receive oral evidence from the Department on the matter at next week's meeting. Perhaps the Minister is in a position to update the House on those black-box issues during his winding-up speech.

At the meeting on 19 February, the Committee asked the Department for clarification of the adjustments in DAERA between the Main Estimates position and the spring Supplementary Estimates. The Committee also asked the Department to provide more detail on the breakdown of the Department of Finance's resource requirements of £24 million for 2020-21. Those responses were emailed to the Committee on Friday morning.

It is apparent from the response to the Committee that the Department of Finance faces considerable pressures of over £24 million in the coming financial year, including more than £8 million relating to the 2020-21 census, the loss of almost £4.5 million in land registration income and just over £4.5 million in costs associated with EU exit. Mr Speaker, I am aware of the agreed timescales for interaction between Departments and Committees and the agreement that the Department has 10 days to respond to questions raised in Committee. The responses were received from the Department within that target. However, because they were not received in time for the Committee to consider them in advance of today's debate, I am not in a position to provide the House with a Committee for Finance view on these important issues. I ask the Department and, indeed, all Departments to remain mindful that the agreed timescales refer to deadlines and not targets. That said, it is worth mentioning that, in most cases, the Department of Finance responses to Committee queries and departmental papers for Committee evidence sessions have been provided to the Committee promptly and within the agreed timescales. I thank the Minister and the Department of Finance officials for their commitment in adhering to those agreed timescales, and I look forward to that continuing as the mandate progresses.

I recognise that this is about tidying up the 2019-2020 financial year and making provision for the first part of the next financial year. The Department considers the latter to be routine.

However, the Committee considered the fact that approximately £9 billion of public expenditure for the next financial year was authorised through the Budget Bill without any indication of how allocations would be distributed within each Department. It is, therefore, much more than merely routine. Statutory Committees — the Committee for Finance in particular — have a duty and a responsibility to scrutinise how that £9 billion of public money is being used. It is also important that the House knows where money goes and how Departments intend to spend it between April and the Budget (No. 2) Bill receiving Royal Assent in late July. The Committee was grateful to have received information from all Statutory Committees on the spending priorities for their Departments in the 2020-21 financial year which forms the Vote on Account. The Committee for Finance and other Statutory Committees have, therefore, been able to undertake some scrutiny in that respect and get some idea of where the priorities and pressures are for Departments. I thank the Chairpersons and members of all Statutory Committees for requesting the information and for responding to the Committee for Finance on that important matter in such a timely manner.

The Committee will continue to consult on spending priorities and pressures and to treat the budget process as a key Committee priority. Once we know the detail of the Budget later this week, the Committee for Finance will ensure that consultation with the Committee provides sufficient time for meaningful consultation, provides sufficient information to give informed consideration and is at a sufficiently early point in the process to give the Committee an opportunity to influence decisions. That will enable the Committee to provide a comprehensive response to the Department to help inform the final budget allocations in the Main Estimates. On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motion.

I now wish to speak as the DUP finance spokesperson. Whilst today will feel like we are going through the drill, having already debated the Bill with no amendments, there should never be a feeling of routine for the House. Through the Budget Bill, £9 billion of public money for the next financial year will be authorised without any indication of how allocations will be distributed within each Department. But we look to the future. This week's Budget on Wednesday must start a process for a new and fresh Budget by the Executive. That is one prong of the process. The other prong must be that the Executive also puts in place procedures and measures to commence the work on the Budget for 2021-22

as soon as possible so that there is maximum input from the Assembly, all the Statutory Committees and, of course, the public with a timely and sufficient public consultation, hopefully in the autumn.

### 12.15 pm

It would be remiss of me not to add that all those processes will be undermined if the Finance Minister does not give some sort of closure to the Quinn family. This is not about politics but about decency, so I appeal to the Minister: please give the Quinn family some sort of closure; please say that Paul was not a criminal; and please cooperate with the gardaí investigation and answer the questions that they put to you.

**Mr O'Toole:** As the Deputy Chair of our Committee said, today is somewhat like Groundhog Day. We are speaking again about a Budget Bill that reflects spending that has already occurred or that will occur in the first half of the new financial year. Nevertheless, it is extremely important that we debate the Budget Bill and discuss our priorities for the forthcoming financial year and the improved scrutiny that we wish to see in our budgetary processes going forward. I do not intend to take up too much of the Assembly's time, but I will touch on a couple of matters that relate to the budgetary process and specifically to the Budget Bill that we are discussing.

I congratulate the Minister on coming to sit through another debate on the Budget. I am sure that he would rather be spending his time deciding what his budgetary priorities are for 2020-21 with his Executive colleagues, but we are glad that he is here, and I hope that he gets used to sitting here and facing Assembly scrutiny, because hopefully we will be doing a lot more of it in the months and years ahead.

I reiterate what we have discussed twice already, in the Vote on Account debate and at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, and that is to welcome the fact that the Bill is proceeding at all and that we are here to debate it. For three years, we have not been. As the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee made clear, it would be better if we had been part of a longer-term scrutiny process and if the spending that the Bill relates to had been discussed in the Assembly in more detail, this year and last. However, we are where we are, and the Bill is proceeding.

The Deputy Chair raised a couple of technical matters relating to black-box spending. During our scrutiny of the Bill, I raised issues around

financial transactions capital. The Minister has given a pledge, as have others inside government, to improve radically the way in which we deploy financial transactions capital in the Northern Ireland institutions, given what we all know, which is that we are not overburdened at the minute with capital resources and need to maximise them when we have them. The Supplementary Estimates, which were published just a few weeks ago, showed how much we have to do to improve that capability. However, since we started to debate the Bill, we have seen how unique and strange the situation in which we find ourselves is, and by that I mean not just what is happening in Northern Ireland but what is happening across these islands and internationally.

I want to touch on those points in my remarks. We can sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that the Budget process in Northern Ireland is about only what we debate in the Chamber, when, in fact, we are part of a much broader and more complicated set of political and economical relationships within these islands. We get a block grant from Westminster, but we are also part of a global economy. Since we last debated the Bill, we have entered into a major international public health emergency. We have also seen the markets' reaction to that public health emergency, which is, to put it at its least strong, somewhat troubling. We have yet to see the UK Budget. The UK Budget will presumably be produced in the light of an updated forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), which may also reflect the fact that economic growth in the UK and internationally will be lower as a result of the coronavirus issue and broader global economic trends. Therefore, although we hope to see delivery from the UK Government on financing for some of the pledges that they agreed to in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, we have to be realistic about the fact that, first, the UK Government do not have a record for living up to their promises to Northern Ireland and that, secondly, they are not likely to be in a position to have a particularly fortuitous economic and fiscal forecast from the OBR.

What does that mean for us? It means that, in the financial year 2020-21 and when a Budget is set for the forthcoming year, we need to speak with a united voice, insofar as is possible in the Chamber, to maximise pressure on the UK Government to live up to the promises that they made to this place in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. We need to be robust in our scrutiny with the Department of Finance and all relevant devolved Departments on their spending priorities and how they intend to deploy what will be, unfortunately, limited

resources after a decade of very limited resources for this place and jurisdictions elsewhere. We need to ensure that, insofar as is possible, we have a changed approach and, hopefully, a move towards more transparent multi-year budgeting, which enables the devolved institutions and the public bodies that receive their funding to plan their spending in a more thought-through and strategic way. As we know, short-termism has been a chronic failing of the institutions here.

I want to make one final point on a related subject, which I have harried and hassled the Minister about in the few weeks that I have been in the Chamber. It is something that I am personally interested in — I think that he is interested in it and, I hope, others from all sides of the House are — and that is the construction of a fiscal council and the related idea of creating an independent fiscal commission. A fiscal council was promised in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. It would, hopefully, not only provide independent scrutiny of how we spend money but, I would argue, provide detailed economic forecasting for this place, and the related question of an independent fiscal commission to look at the long-term picture of public spending in the North along with related challenges, including how we spend money in the long term.

Those two things are completely critical to the future proper running of this place, whatever your constitutional perspective, frankly. Let us not pretend that constitutional perspectives are the same in this place. Whether your preference is for Northern Ireland to stay in the United Kingdom or is for a new or united Ireland, we need to have a clear picture of exactly what we are spending and what we are spending it on, and we need a long-term view on it.

To return to the Budget Bill that we are discussing for 2019-2020 and to authorising spending for the first few months of the next financial year, I congratulate the Minister and his team for bringing the legislation to the Assembly. It is much better that we are doing this, albeit belatedly and in a slightly hurried way. It is also extremely important that we scrutinise in a much more planned and coherent way in the years ahead and, hopefully, have independent and robust information to improve the quality of scrutiny in the Assembly.

**Mr Muir:** In speaking to the Budget Bill at its Final Stage, I am conscious that the debate is not timed and that many issues have been well rehearsed previously. We are here today to discuss the Budget Bill rather than many other

issues, important though they are, but not directly related to the Bill. I will vote for the Bill at Final Stage with my Alliance Party colleagues, in the clear knowledge that failure to pass it would, in fact, result in the collapse of public services. Wages would not be paid, and we cannot let that happen. I am in politics to lead and take decisions, not to dodge them.

The full Budget for 2020-21 will, hopefully, be presented soon, and we can debate the merits of the overall package. Today, however, we are here to keep the wheels turning, to have services delivered and wages paid. Failure to do that would be a dereliction of duty. As I said, many of the issues relating to the Bill have been well rehearsed before at length.

One matter that I wish to focus on today is the revenue derived to cover the expenditure to be authorised. As Members will be aware, the direct revenue-raising powers of the Northern Ireland Executive are rather limited, with the overwhelming majority of revenue raised directly by the UK Treasury. One power that does exist, however, is domestic and non-domestic rating and, in particular, the regional rate.

In the circumstances in which we find ourselves, with the UK Budget not to be delivered until Wednesday, the regional rates order has not been made. I have been advised by the Finance Minister that domestic and non-domestic rates bills will be issued in April once the order is made, but I call on the Department and the Minister to provide more clarity on what that means, especially the collection of direct debits from those who pay by instalments and when the first instalment will be taken.

Many people will be waiting for their bill to arrive and need to know what is due to happen for budgeting and planning purposes. The delay in the dispatch of rates bills may, however, be a blessing in disguise for some, especially for owners of non-domestic properties, who have been badly affected as a result of Reval2020. The relatively short notice that was given to businesses about the potential rise in their net annual value (NAV) and subsequent rates bills is not ideal and puts real pressure on the finances of local businesses at a time when they are under more and more strain, especially in the context of the downturn now being experienced as a result of coronavirus. The timing of Reval2020 is a matter of real concern in the context that I have outlined and something that I hope the Finance Minister will look at.

As part of the informal review and appeals process for the new NAVs, Land and Property Services (LPS) ought to consider any material changes that have occurred since valuations were done on 1 April 2018. I urge the Minister to explore that and ensure that Northern Ireland is brought into line with other parts of the UK, where a material change in circumstances is considered.

If we are to pass the Budget, we must be confident that businesses are able to pay the rates to be levied. Failure to provide support via, for example, transitional relief, risks a Budget that cannot be properly funded. We must therefore consider transitional relief for businesses affected by Reval2020.

The wider review of the non-domestic rating system is in the pipeline and will herald some welcome changes. In considering the Budget Bill, however, we need to be providing flexibility and support now, not promises of action. Whatever comes in the future is not certain. The independent oversight of the recommendations arising from the Department and LPS will be essential to ensure that whatever proceeds attracts credibility and confidence from businesses that will be affected. I ask the Minister to ensure that that occurs.

Securing the funding for this and future Budgets is not easy, with difficult decisions to be made. However, with genuine engagement, independent oversight of changes and a willingness to respond flexibly, the task can be made much easier with a listening Government striking Budgets in an open style.

Striking a Budget is a fundamental duty of any Government. Governments survive and fall on the ability to pass a Budget. After three years without a Government, people deserve these institutions to continue. The process for striking a full Budget for the next financial year needs to be done in an engaging manner, recognising that the reasons why we are in the financial situation we are in are not related just to the politics of austerity but the failure of these institutions to effect proper structural reform and attend to the cost of division.

It is important that we do that, but today we need to pass this Budget and give certainty for public services.

**Ms P Bradley:** I want to make some remarks first as Chairperson of the Committee for Communities. As the Minister said in the House, the term "Budget Bill" is something of a misnomer. What we have considered to date is

the reallocation of surrendered moneys to reach agreement on the Vote on Account in order to allow Departments to provide services over the next few months.

I imagine that we are looking forward to debating the Main Estimates, which we hope to see in June. A key issue addressed by the Minister, and specific to the Department for Communities, is the requirement to spend £7 million until the end of May 2020 for the extension of welfare reform mitigations. That is required until the necessary legislation is passed. The Committee heard from the Minister for Communities a number of weeks ago on the need for accelerated passage for the Bill to extend mitigation payments on the social sector size criteria. We have yet to see anything following those discussions. I can only assume that the matter is in hand. All members of the Committee had considerable sympathy for the views of stakeholders in relation to welfare reform mitigations, yet some of the figures discussed that are required to extend and strengthen all other mitigation measures were startling — around £200 million per year.

That is just one of a multitude of areas crying out for resources. We will, undoubtedly, be faced with the prospect of prioritising our expenditure more than ever. As a result, I fear that some stakeholders of every Committee and Department may learn that sympathy is possibly all that they can get from us.

Our ambition has to be tempered by our finances. That is not to say that we should show a lack of ambition. Rather, when the Executive are determining the required outcomes for the Programme for Government, they should ask whether the support they are providing to service providers is sufficient to achieve those outcomes. If not, we are just fooling ourselves and misleading the public. We need to be clear about the link between the setting of the Budget and the establishment of outcomes in the new Programme for Government.

### 12.30 pm

We often hear the phrase:

*"Politics is the art of the possible".*

The Canadian-American economist and diplomat, J K Galbraith, took a different view:

*"Politics is the art of choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable".*

If we find ourselves in that position when we come to look at the Main Estimates in June, we should have the honesty to tell the people that. The idea that we can pay for everything is an illusion. That is not political dogma or pessimism; it is simply fact.

We find ourselves in a budget-setting phase at a time when a virus looks set to impact on our society in ways that we are yet to understand. However, it seems certain that the impact on the global economy will be strongly negative. We cannot escape that impact, but what will it mean for future budget priorities? What recourse to financial assistance will the Executive have to address the short- and longer-term impact of the virus? In an era when we have heard stories about our public transport, education, sewerage systems and, of course, the health service in the most dreadful terms, how do we choose where to spend our limited resources? I certainly do not have the answers to the difficult questions that the Minister of Finance and his colleagues face. I can only assure him that the Committee for Communities will work closely with the Department for Communities to achieve all that we can in the limited time ahead on the issues under its remit, whatever the budget allocation might be.

I want to say a few words as DUP spokesperson for communities. It would be remiss of me not to mention that we celebrated International Women's Day yesterday. Much of what we are discussing in respect of the Department for Communities has deep impacts on women and families here in Northern Ireland. I talked about how we have to be honest, but we should not lack ambition. We need to empower those women and make a difference to their lives. The Department for Communities should certainly do that, but we need to look at all those other things as well. We need to look at better childcare in Northern Ireland. We need to look at better infrastructure. We need to look at apprenticeships for women to empower them to go out and provide. I am ambitious, and I look forward to working with the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance.

**Mr Catney:** Most of the points that I was going to make have been made. I welcome the opportunity for us to pass the Budget Bill in these uncertain times. As I have said before, I hope that we can get to the stage of having multi-year budgets to provide greater certainty and security for all our small businesses. I thank the Minister and the Department for always having their door open and being readily available, despite their busy schedule. I also

thank and say, "Well done", to the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee, who stepped in for our Chairperson, who is away, and did an excellent job. I hope that our Finance Committee will be able to work alongside the Department and the Minister to bring about better scrutiny. We did not have much time to scrutinise the Bill, but we are where we are. We must consider revenue in the context of Reval2020, as my Alliance Party colleague said. I hope that the Minister will make sure that the regional rate takes Reval2020 into consideration so that businesses are not hit at both ends.

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

We will talk about COVID-19 later. I hope that the Minister is confident, maybe through the borrowing powers in clause 5, that there is scope in the Budget to deal with the pressures that a full outbreak would bring. Can emergency funding be given to the health service for more intensive care unit (ICU) beds? Could businesses hit by the quarantine protocol be given access to short-term loans? Is there scope for an emergency payment to workers who have lost earnings due to having to self-isolate? I welcome the Budget Bill as an opportunity for us to work together to the betterment of everyone, which is the job that we were all sent here to do.

**Mr Beggs:** I, too, recognise that the Budget Bill regulates the expenditure for 2019-2020, taking on board the in-year monitoring that occurred during that process. It also authorises 45% expenditure in the following year — some £9 billion — which should not be taken lightly. However, although we have to recognise that this budget process is flawed to a degree, we are doing the best that we can given the circumstances. In particular, there was a gap of three years, and Ministers are only recently back in post, as are the Committees, which do detailed scrutiny. Secondly, there has been limited time since January to do something. We have to recognise that, even before that, there was a flawed process, because we had been doing something that was not hugely dissimilar: we got into the habit of discussing the Budget and the next year's expenditure much too late. As I indicated to the Minister at Second Stage, lessons were set out in 2012, when the Finance Committee made recommendations about wider and fuller consultation so that we got better decisions. In particular, I understand that online tools have been developed and that much better processes are available so that we can engage directly with the public. I hope that, in the future, we will introduce that so that we

can benefit from a much earlier process and a much more effective means of consulting.

Others mentioned the black-box provision. That is like some magic trick. I think that we, as Members, all need training on what this black-box provision is. I confess that I do not recall having heard of it previously; I may have, but I do not recall it. It also appears that civil servants need some training on it, because, as indicated, mistakes have been identified in how it has been processed. I hope that the entire process will be improved to be much more user-friendly and meaningful so that the public will have much more direct engagement with Budget decisions and processes. Doing so will help to connect the public to politics and to decisions that are being made up here on the hill, so there is much to learn.

There is huge uncertainty at present, as others indicated, because of the coronavirus. I appreciate that the Budget moves forward 45%. I hope that the Executive will move speedily forward to finalise the detailed expenditure during the subsequent year, because none of us knows how the virus may impinge on society or on health expenditure. We may think, "Oh, 45% expenditure; that is safe", but we need to move speedily to ensure that there are mechanisms to ensure that, if additional moneys are needed for health because of the emergency that may be developing in our midst, we will be able to react.

As I indicated, this has been a flawed process, but we have all done as well as we could. I hope that we have a much better process in the future.

**Mr Buckley:** I will be brief, as I spoke on this at Second Stage, but I think that it is only right that I make comment today. I realise that this is mainly going through procedure and process, and I very much look forward to the Budget (No. 2) Bill, when we will get into the depth of what Westminster brings in the Chancellor's new Budget.

At Second Stage, I listened to some passionate pleas from Members about priorities in their constituencies. I heard some good examples of how the lack of governance in this place really has affected day-to-day communities, whether that be at a constituent level or more regionally on infrastructure projects or our health service. With that said, I recognise that, as a lot of Members have said today, fundamentally, the process has been flawed. The lack of a Government for three years has meant that there is pressure on our public services like never before. The processes around that need

to change, whether that is moving towards a multi-year Budget or something else. More importantly, it will be about allowing for proper scrutiny from Members, be that in the Finance Committee or here in the House.

In closing, I want to hit on a key point. As has been mentioned, our economy is in a state of flux at the moment with fears surrounding the coronavirus, and it is about time that Members got real and started to deal with the people's priorities: education, health and the economy. Many Members talked in the House last week, the week before and since this place has been restored about the projects and priorities in their constituency, but we must be realistic about what can be achieved and not only in the next budgetary year. Going forward, there must be long-term strategic thinking.

I want to put on record the impact that the coronavirus could have not only on our economy and the Economy Department but, indeed, on the health service, given the pressures that it already faces. I fielded calls over the weekend about the pressures facing Craigavon Area Hospital, which is putting out constant daily reminders to constituents to stay away, if possible, from an already overburdened health service. We have people on trolleys; we have severe pressure on our staff. This will have a severe impact on future Budgets. I know that there has been collective agreement across the House about how we try to address waiting lists, but we face a public scare now like we have never seen before, namely coronavirus. While I welcome the work being done across the Executive to allay public fears and allow the correct information to get out there, more needs to be done.

It is on public record that one of the confirmed coronavirus cases is in Portadown in my constituency of Upper Bann, and I was talking this morning to a representative from the construction company that the individual is associated with. He told me that he has already had to close down sites for fear of the spread of coronavirus and that he is liaising with the Public Health Agency about it. There is also grave concern among employees about what it means for them. We must factor in those concerns.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for giving way and welcome his comments and his example. Is it not the case that the Executive, particularly the Communities Minister, alongside the Minister for the Economy, should be looking at a hardship fund for people in the self-employed sector or, indeed, those on zero-hour contracts

so that they are supported whilst they have to self-isolate?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order. Just one moment. While I am keen to allow debate and discussion, the Member was in danger of veering away from the content of the Budget Bill.

**Mr Buckley:** Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. On that point, it is important to note that this will have an impact on our economy and our community that will, indeed, have an impact on budget allocations, so it is important now that we are vigilant and that we have that a joined-up approach from government to look at how we tackle the impending crisis. I hope that I have linked that adequately to the Budget.

In reality, we must be real and practical about what we as an Assembly can achieve. I hope that, going forward, the Minister has outlined the severe pressures that face this place in the next year or more. It is important that we as Members look strategically at Northern Ireland and at our constituencies and deliver best value for money, which, sadly, to date, has been lacking.

**Ms S Bradley:** I speak as a member of the Health Committee and as the SDLP spokesperson on health. The Minister may recall that, at Second Stage, I sought an assurance from him that the remaining in-year Budget and the start of next year's Budget would allow adequate flexibility for all front-line public service across all Departments to fulfil their duties in accordance with public health requirements. Whilst I appreciate that we are, today, effectively tidying up the 2019 Budget and allowing provision for the 2020 financial year, it is clear to everybody in the House that significant financial pressures will arise as a result of COVID-19. Whilst I appreciate that it is difficult to measure that, we must be assured that we are financially prepared.

Disruption and pressure on all our public services are, at this stage, sadly inevitable. In that context, those services may not be graced with having the waiting times to wait for the Main Estimates. Whilst it may be unusual practice, these are unusual circumstances, and the Minister may wish to use the opportunity to advise whether he has bid for additional funding or is confident that sufficient scope exists in the Budget as presented to deal with those pressures.

**12.45 pm**

Finally, the health service's transformation agenda simply cannot and will not be delivered with short-term budgeting. There is agreement across the House that we should be looking for longer-term fiscal proposals, and I will second any such proposal being made to the House.

**Mr Butler:** My speech will be as short as the time that we have had to scrutinise the Budget Bill, although I recognise the work done by the Committee and departmental officials to get the Bill to this stage.

The allocation of funds to support children with SEN in particular is timely. Given the emerging picture of the struggles and difficulties faced by pupils and parents who are having to start to try to navigate the statementing process, the reality of the lived experience of those children and their families is compounded by the pressures that are placed unfairly on our teachers and classroom assistants.

We are not speaking today about future Budgets, but I welcome any commitment that the Minister can make to the early production of future Budgets, for the House to scrutinise and to instil confidence. However, given recent events globally, with the outbreak of the coronavirus, and closer to home, with the collapse of Flybe, job losses and the difficulties that businesses are going to face should make us focus on the absolute need for a collegiate approach to be taken to fiscal responsibility and the responsibility that we owe the taxpayer. That applies not just to future Budgets but to the current Budget.

With that in mind, I seek assurance from the Minister that, when addressing mental health and the creation of a mental health framework and strategy that fit not only within the Department of Health but within other Departments, particularly Education, he will make significant and particular commitments to timely allocations to allow us to fix the problem together.

**Mr Allister:** Like other contributions to the debate, mine will be mercifully short. There are, however, a couple of issues to which I will direct the Minister's attention.

There has been reference made to the unfolding coronavirus crisis, which, of course, is having an impact across the world, and our economy and the demands on our finances will not be immune from it. It is in that context that I want to hear from the Minister about the budgetary provisions that we make for contingencies to deal with unforeseen emergencies.

In the document that the Treasury published in November 2015 titled, 'Statement of funding policy: funding the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly', paragraph 6.2 states:

*"Devolved administrations also have the freedom to adopt whichever arrangements they deem suitable for establishing Departmental Unallocated Provisions or retaining budgets at the centre as contingencies."*

What unallocated provisions have we in Northern Ireland? What budgets have we retained at the centre for contingencies? Will the Minister cast some light on that? Is he reviewing the scale and extent of such contingency funding in the light of the emerging crisis from the coronavirus? It is clear from that document that it is not just a matter of waiting for the next handout from Westminster. There is an obligation on the devolved institutions to think ahead, to retain budgets at the centre as contingencies and to ensure that, insofar as they can, they make appropriate provision. Will the Minister indicate what provision is being made and what steps have been taken?

I refer briefly to the infamous black boxes. The Minister has yet — maybe he will do so today or maybe he will write to me or the Finance Committee — to give us a fulsome explanation of that matter. I look forward to obtaining that.

Finally, I endorse entirely the comments of the vice-Chairman of the Committee that the Minister's credibility is on the line so long as he fails to do the right thing by his constituents, the Quinn family. We now have an indication from the gardaí that they are anxious to speak to the Minister, although the Minister hitherto, I believe, had told us that he had answered all the gardaí's questions. Clearly not. I hope that the Minister —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member will resume his seat. I said earlier that I am loath to stifle debate, but I ask the Member to return to the content of the Budget Bill, please.

**Mr Allister:** Principal Deputy Speaker, I was following the august example of the vice-Chairman of the Finance Committee.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Yes, but I was not here then.

**Mr Allister:** I thought that I could not possibly go wrong if I followed such an example. The

point is made, and I make it again. It is a serious point that goes to the very heart of public confidence in those who hold office in these institutions.

**Mr Carroll:** I will make my comments brief because I have already made clear my views on the lack of scrutiny and accountability involved in approving past financial decisions in the Budget Bill. It is somewhat coincidental that the Bill will likely be passed in the same week that the RHI report will be published, given how fundamental issues such as a lack of accountability, scrutiny and transparency were in the RHI scandal. Indeed, the last Assembly was plagued by these issues long before the RHI crisis eventually brought it to its knees.

It is difficult to see what is new about this approach of ramming through a Budget Bill unscrutinised, and it would not inspire any hope in an electorate that wants nothing more than a clean break from the scandal-laden past of the Assembly.

I have said this before but I will say it again because it is important to reiterate it today: a key test for this new Executive will be whether or not they overcome the negative perception that Stormont is a gravy train where politicians turn up and sign off on legislation, schemes, public statements and more that have been prepared by officials or unelected advisers, with little oversight or transparency. The passing of this Budget Bill with so little scrutiny is a failure of that test as far as I am concerned.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Carroll:** I will give way briefly.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member advise how he proposes to pay workers if the Bill does not pass?

**Mr Carroll:** It was very easy for the Assembly to bring forward a different Budget Bill with ample time for scrutiny. Indeed, I outlined in detail how that could have been done during the previous debate on the Budget Bill. Time could have been made, but time was not made by the Assembly and the Executive.

I will return to my comments. We were told that the financial changes in the Budget Bill are just totting up figures, just run-off from Departments and just the usual movements of unspent or unnecessary funding. If that were the case, it should be very easy to explain, for example, where the massive £24 million reduction in DAERA came from and who thought that it was

pertinent not to use whatever financial ability we had to tackle the climate crisis in the Department that is responsible for the environment. Unfortunately, answers to that question could not be given at Committee level, nor when I spoke to the Department, nor when it was raised in the Assembly at a previous stage of the Budget Bill. For me, that is not good enough, and I suspect that it will not be good enough for those environmental activists who watch the actions of the Assembly very closely.

To sum up, as one member of this very small opposition in the Chamber, I cannot support this kind of roughshod practice, and I see it very much as my role to challenge it.

**Mr Murphy:** I appreciate and thank Members for the views that they have expressed in the debate. As I have done in previous debates on the Bill during its earlier stages, I will respond to Members who raised issues that were actually pertinent to the Bill.

A number of Members, primarily those who sit on the Committee for Finance, raised the issue of the black-box payments and the sole authority of the Budget Act. As the Deputy Chairperson mentioned, the Department, as a consequence of the debate at an earlier stage, has arranged a session with the Committee in order to take members through that and how it is done. I think that that session will occur next week. The use of the sole authority of the Budget Act occurs when no specific legislation has been passed by the Assembly to authorise the delivery of a service, and the Department relies on the Budget Act not only to authorise the money to pay for that service but to authorise the service itself.

Ordinarily, sole authority of the Budget Act should be used only for relatively small levels of expenditure — below £1.5 million — or for a relatively short period of no more than two years. However, as Members know, the Assembly has not sat for the past three years. Therefore, it has not been possible for a number of pieces of legislation to have been brought through the Assembly to authorise a range of services which must be delivered. As a result, services are highlighted in the black boxes in the Estimates for larger than normal amounts and that have been delivered under the sole authority of the Budget Act for longer than would normally be the case.

Guidance on the use of sole authority of the Budget Act is set out in 'Managing Public Money Northern Ireland' (MPMNI). That is guidance for the Civil Service to follow in

normal circumstances. The situation that we have been in for the past three years has not been normal. MPMNI does not limit the Assembly's ability to legislate for anything that is within its competence to ensure that services are delivered for citizens. Ministers are now in the process of bringing legislation for those services to the Assembly to be considered and debated in the proper manner. As the Assembly legislates separately for those functions, the number and scale of services that are being delivered under sole authority of the Budget Act will be reduced. In future, it will exist only for the purposes for which it was designed, which is very small levels of expenditure or delivery of services for a very short period, that do not warrant the passing of separate primary legislation. As I said, officials will be with the Committee in the next week or so to go through that process in much more detail.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Whilst we will have to see what will come out of the session with the Committee for Finance, I think that we all understand the total amounts. However, the Minister has not addressed the issue of duplication, whereby it is on two different pages and budget lines.

**Mr Murphy:** If the Member can recall, I did address that issue in the debate on the previous stage, when I said that it was not yet certain which Department would be responsible for HIA payments. Therefore, the ability of either the Department of Justice or TEO had to be covered in that regard. If the Member did not get it at that stage, officials can explain it further to the full Committee next week. Essentially, it is to ensure that at least one of those Departments could cover that cost; certainly not that both would cover it.

In relation to some of the other issues that were raised, of course there are broader economic trends. I will deal with the Coronavirus, which seemed to be a common theme for most Members who spoke. We continue to engage with Treasury on the New Decade, New Approach money, as we do on the confidence and supply money. I will be there again in the morning, although that will be a meeting with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers as well, primarily to do with the European money that will be lost to us and to get some certainty around that, and on the money that we will be required to spend with regard to the protocols here. We will continue that discussion with Treasury. We will certainly not let up on that.

Mr O'Toole raised, as he has previously — we have spoken about it on a number of occasions

— the fiscal council and a fiscal commission. That remains as I outlined previously.

Andrew Muir raised the issue of rates bills. Of course, there was a discussion at the Executive about the pros and cons of waiting until the Budget is done in London before we do our Budget here. One issue that raises a challenge is the issuing of rates bills. The Executive are very aware of the pressures that that puts not only on those who issue rates bills, but on ensuring that people who pay by direct debit have them in time.

That was taken into consideration, and the Executive decided, nonetheless, to wait until beyond 11 March before producing our Budget. We spoke to LPS to ensure that it believes that it is in a position to get rates bills out in a timely fashion so that we do not cause any unnecessary delay and ensure that people can pay in a timely manner the bill that will come to them in April. He raised other general rates issues that will be part of a future debate. Members will be aware, of course, that district councils have already set their rates.

#### 1.00 pm

I share the ambition of Paula Bradley, on behalf of the Committee for Communities, and a number of other Members for women and groups who are generally unrepresented. That is for a future Budget debate, but I look forward to hearing from her and others who want to see genuine change in the support, promotion and ambition for sectors and communities that have not received those as part of previous Budget allocations.

Several Members asked questions on coronavirus, and I will deal with that in general. The Executive do establish central funds, but they do not routinely hold Departments' unallocated provisions; instead, we use the in-year monitoring rounds to reallocate resources when new pressures emerge. We are at the very tail end of this financial year, when all of the remaining money available to us has been allocated; indeed, a late adjustment by the British Treasury left us in a position where we had to cut spend on the repayment of capital and put that back to next year. The Treasury clawed that back due to its accountancy issues. Therefore, it is not possible to do what Members suggest. However, the Executive are able to access reserve in the same way as Whitehall Departments and other devolved Administrations for exceptional and unforeseen circumstances that cannot be easily absorbed without the major dislocation of existing

services. As Members know, coronavirus is an unfolding issue. There was a COBRA conference call this morning, and, as far as I know, we are still officially at the containment stage. The situation will unfold as the virus continues to spread. Of course, we will talk to the British Treasury about that. We are able to access reserve, but, as yet, it would be hard for people to identify what costs might be associated with coronavirus, other than the general sense that there will be an impact on economic performance, probably globally. Certainly, that will take its effect here. It is an unfolding issue, and the Executive are availing themselves of not only the best medical advice they can in advising citizens but advice on the impact on our budgets and spending.

Gerry Carroll again raised the point that the Bill had not been properly scrutinised. We have not been here. That is the problem. We were not here to scrutinise in the normal fashion. I am not sure whether that passed him by, but we have not been here to do the work. We were upfront about that and readily accepted that it has not had the same scrutiny process as a normal Budget Bill at this stage of the year would have had. That is simply down to the fact that, until 11 January, we had not been here for three years. The next Budget Bill will be fully and properly scrutinised according to Assembly procedures, and the Member will have full opportunity through the Committee that he sits on and, indeed, in the Assembly Chamber to scrutinise all the issues that he wants to scrutinise before making a choice on how to vote.

I do not recall the Member raising the reduction of DAERA spend, particularly in relation to the environment. I will have officials check Hansard. I will be surprised if he cannot get the answers that he wants from the Department or at the Committee; part of their function is to provide answers to MLAs on these matters. He can take that up with the Business Office, if he feels that he has not been given appropriate answers by the Department. Departments are required to answer questions that are properly put to them and to give Committees the information that they ask for. The Committees have statutory powers and can request the attendance of persons and the provision of papers from Departments. I would be surprised if that is the case, but, nonetheless, we will check through Hansard to see if that issue was raised. The primary Department that he would want to bring it up with is DAERA, but we will have a look as well.

I have tried to respond to as many of the relevant issues raised as possible in today's

debate and in previous debates on the Bill. As in previous debates, we have strayed into future spending and plans; of course, that is a debate for another day and one that we will have in the not-too-distant future. It is imperative that the legislation debated today completes its passage through the Assembly so that public services here can be delivered without delay or interruption.

In conclusion, I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising spend by Departments in 2019-2020 and into the early months of 2020-21 in the Vote on Account. That will ensure the continued delivery of public services.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 66; Noes 4.*

## **AYES**

### **NATIONALIST:**

*Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGuigan, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.*

### **UNIONIST:**

*Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.*

### **OTHER:**

*Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Ms Kimmins.*

**NOES**

**UNIONIST:**

*Mr Allister.*

**OTHER:**

*Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bailey and Mr Carroll.*

*Total Votes 70 Total Ayes 66 [94.3%]*

*Nationalist Votes 34 Nationalist Ayes 34 [100.0%]*

*Unionist Votes 28 Unionist Ayes 27 [96.4%]*

*Other Votes 8 Other Ayes 5 [62.5%]*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That the Budget Bill [NIA 02/17-22] do now pass.*

**Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019**

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** I beg to move

*That the Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

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

**Ms Hargey:** The Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2019 set out the detail of the bereavement support payment scheme that was provided for in the Pensions Act (NI) 2015. The regulations were introduced following a public consultation that sought views on the reform of bereavement benefits, the principal aim of which was to consider how the former scheme could be improved to make it more effective and relevant in the 21st century.

Today, many bereaved spouses and civil partners are already in regular employment, calling into question the need for bereavement benefits to provide a subsistence level of income after the household breadwinner has passed away. The death of a working-age spouse causes a particularly acute financial impact in the months following bereavement. Accordingly, the main aims of the bereavement

support payment are to focus financial support on that period, to provide a more effective and supportive system without encouraging long-term benefit dependency and to ensure fast direct help to people of working age to meet the immediate financial needs that can arise at a difficult time.

The new bereavement support payment simplifies financial provision and extends eligibility to those under the age of 45 with no dependent children and replaces the previous suite of bereavement benefits for new claims with effect from 6 April 2017. Those already in receipt of bereavement benefits will continue to receive their current benefit over the lifetime of their award. An initial lump sum with a further 18 monthly instalments is payable to a surviving spouse. Recipients with children will receive an initial larger payment of £3,500 and 18 subsequent monthly payments of £350. Those without children will receive a smaller payment of £2,500 and 18 monthly instalments of £100.

Contribution conditions have been simplified. The surviving spouse will receive a full payment if the deceased had paid National Insurance contributions at 25 times the lower earnings limit for any one year prior to their death. Payments will not be taxable and will be disregarded from means-tested benefits, contributory jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance and in the assessment of benefit income.

Age is not a factor in determining entitlement to bereavement support payment or the amount received. However, as that is now the case, entitlement will cease at state pension age. Remarriage or repartnering will not disqualify the bereaved individual from receiving the payment, as it is intended as a help with the additional costs of bereavement rather than as a replacement for earnings. Stopping payment because of repartnering or remarriage would be inconsistent with the revised function of bereavement support payment.

The original regulations were subject to confirmatory procedure, which meant that they ceased to have effect if not approved by resolution of the Assembly within six months of the operational date of 6 April 2017. As that was, obviously, not possible, the original Bereavement Support Payment Regulations have been revoked and remade twice each year since the Assembly fell in 2017, thereby ensuring continuing statutory cover under which to pay the bereavement support payments.

The current regulations, with an operational date of 29 September 2019, will cease to have

effect on 29 March 2020 and, therefore, prevent further payment to new claimants if not formally approved by the Assembly.

**Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** The Committee considered the regulations on 6 February. As the Minister stated, the regulations stem from the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which makes provision for bereavement support payment to surviving spouses and civil partners after 6 April 2017. The bereavement support payment replaces three existing payments: bereavement payment, bereavement allowance and widowed parent's allowance.

The restriction of the payment to surviving spouses and civil partners was the focus of the Committee's discussion with the Department during its consideration of the regulations. A number of members expressed concern that the eligibility criteria excluded cohabiting couples from receipt of the payment and queried the human rights implications of that position, particularly in light of the Supreme Court ruling in the McLaughlin case, in 2018, in respect of widowed parent's allowance. The Supreme Court ruled that restricting eligibility to the allowance to married couples and those in a civil partnership, therefore excluding cohabiting couples, was incompatible with human rights law. The regulations that we are discussing were already in effect and had replaced widowed parent's allowance, but the exclusion of cohabiting couples from receipt of bereavement support payment has also been considered by the courts. In February 2020, the High Court in GB also ruled that the eligibility criteria, which denied payment of the higher-rate bereavement support payment to unmarried, cohabiting partners with children, are incompatible with human rights law.

Clearly, courts do not make laws, but they can often point politicians in the direction of where laws should be made or amended. The Department told the Committee that it has been in detailed discussions with DWP on the issue and is actively considering possible options, but, clearly, the law has not changed yet.

The Committee urges the Minister to look closely at the issue and engage with DWP on the back of the recent ruling by the High Court in GB to bring the bereavement support payment into line with human rights law and make cohabiting couples eligible for the benefit. The Committee is otherwise content to recommend that the Assembly approves the regulations.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Minister for bringing the statutory rule forward. Our Committee Chair, Paula Bradley, has outlined the discussions that we had in relation to ensuring that couples who are not married but cohabiting and their families are not discriminated against.

The move to change the statutory rule was already in progress when the McLaughlin case took place. We need to get it cleared so that we can go forward with more definition and detail. As the Committee Chair, Paula, mentioned, the case in England, last month, has ramifications for the statutory rule here.

### 1.30 pm

This is a good move, and it provides much more clarity. It does not discriminate between families with married parents and those with unmarried parents. The process ensures that everybody has clarity, particularly children and families, on the bereavement payment. It goes without saying that bereavement is hard enough. Families have to deal with their emotional loss and all that comes with that, and, on top of all that, there is the financial burden. The new rule makes things easier, and the Committee looks forward to the introduction of statutory rules that provide greater clarity and certainty for everybody concerned.

**Miss Woods:** The motion is to maintain parity of payment with the legislation in the rest of the UK. It is a formality of legislating locally now that we have the opportunity to do so, and I am thankful for that. I want to reiterate a point that was brought up by others. The High Court in England ruled that denying bereavement support payments to unmarried cohabiting partners with children is incompatible with human rights. Currently, payments are made to those whose husband, wife or civil partner has died, but not to those who are living with but not married to their partner. That means that, each year, around 2,000 families with children lose out on a payment worth almost £10,000. Grieving children and their surviving parents deserve support whatever their marital status.

I want to bring the case of Siobhan McLaughlin to the House's attention. Siobhan was denied bereavement support by the then Department for Social Development when her partner of 23 years and father of their four children died in 2014. Eighteen months ago, she won a landmark Supreme Court judgment that the decision to deny her the widowed parent's allowance in respect of her four children was incompatible with human rights law, but she has still not heard how she will be compensated.

A recent case was brought by the Child Poverty Action Group on behalf of two families. The mothers had died, leaving the fathers caring for their young children. That case tested the principle that was established by the McLaughlin case. Both fathers were denied bereavement support payments on the basis that they were not married to the mother of their children, despite living with them for 14 years and 10 years respectively.

More recently, the Department for Work and Pensions was refused leave to appeal that decision, so we need to ask: what steps is the Minister discussing with DWP to amend the legislation? In addition, this question needs to be asked: what measures has the Minister explored to assist that family and others in the same situation in Northern Ireland while they wait for the legislation to be amended? For example, could an extra-statutory payment be made?

Grieving children's needs are no less for the fact that their parents did not marry.

**Mr Carroll:** I am very concerned that the motion, if successful, will introduce Tory austerity through the back door. The bereavement support system that we are voting on today was designed by the Tory-led Department for Work and Pensions, and its motive was clear. A Department statement championed the fact that it could save up to £40 million a year. Let us consider for a moment a system designed to take money from vulnerable, grieving families to make savings for the Government. That is exactly the kind of logic behind the brutal welfare reform system that the Assembly voted for on the Tories' behalf. It is exactly the kind of rotten Tory austerity that we have heard decried in the Chamber over the past few weeks.

Just a few weeks ago, as I sat in a Unite community branch educational session, I heard about the devastating impact that these changes have already had on people. Last week and today, I spoke to benefits advisers. They told me that the system is a disgrace and that it should be scrapped and replaced by something that provides for people in their time of need. It is astounding to me, then, that the Minister for Communities would ask us to introduce a blatant tool of Tory austerity.

This new system leaves some recipients, including widowed parents, up to £12,000 worse off, and bereaved parents will lose out on financial support in the long term. Widowed parents with young children are hardest hit. The Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that

91% of widowed parents will be supported for a shorter period and claims that the latest DWP figures show that 75% of bereaved families will be worse off in cash terms under the new scheme. Worse still, because the new bereavement support payment will not rise in line with inflation, the support will lose value over time as the cost of a funeral or the cost of bringing up a child increases.

As the cost of living rises, we should be looking at how we can provide additional support to vulnerable people, not how to make savings at their expense. That is not even to mention the High Court case, as mentioned previously, which challenged the blatant disregard for human rights that this payment system upholds. That partners and parents who are not married cannot receive the payment has been legally proven to be incompatible with human rights. How, then, can the Minister expect us to support this system? To vote for this, as far as I can see, would be to endorse Tory austerity, approve human rights violations through the Chamber and send out a message to the recently bereaved that we do not think that they should get the financial support that they deserve.

I call on Members to vote against the motion, and I call on the Minister for Communities to bring forward urgent legislation that will introduce our own bereavement payment scheme to ensure that no parent or partner is left without support and to reintroduce those aspects of the previous system that were brutally cut out by the Tories.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** As there are no further speakers listed, I will —. *[Interruption]* I am about to, yes. I will call the Minister. They are very keen to keep me right. I call the Minister for Communities to conclude and make a winding-up speech.

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you to all those who contributed. I share the concerns that Members have about recent judgements in the McLaughlin and Jackson cases and even about the comments of Mr Justice Holman in the High Court about looking at the human rights implications. When I came into the Department, I gave a commitment to protect the most vulnerable and to embed a rights-based approach at the heart of the Department and government.

There are concerns. I am moving on this today, and I am not here to defend what the British Government do. I am here to protect the most vulnerable. If the motion is not passed, it will affect families that are bereaved and going

through a really hard time. I come from a family that was bereaved, when I lost my daddy, and I saw the impact of that on my mother, who had seven children.

I do not want to leave any family in circumstances whereby, by the end of March, they will not have support through the bereavement support allowance. That is not to say that we do not need to look at the seriousness of the alleged human rights breaches that the High Court commented on. I am liaising with my departmental officials and with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that we uphold international human rights obligations and standards. I will roll out my intention on that in the coming weeks. I have touched on this in the wider welfare agenda, which is to ensure that we are embedding a rights-based approach and protecting the most vulnerable.

I have engaged with a variety of human rights and welfare organisations, and they know my intentions. I will outline in the weeks ahead how I will take forward all this work, again while protecting the most vulnerable.

By approving the regulations, we will ensure that continuing statutory cover is provided under which we can financially assist those who, sadly, will suffer a bereavement in the future. I thank Members for their interest in the regulations and the concerns that they genuinely raised. I hope that they will now back them. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

## **The Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, then I will call the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion.

If that is clear — as mud — I shall proceed.

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** I beg to move:

*That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

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

**Ms Hargey:** These two rules are part of the annual uprating package, which increases the rates of certain social security benefits, pensions and lump sum payments. Uprating usually occurs on an annual basis, and these two rules relate to the 2019-2020 uprating package.

Under sections 150, 150A and 151A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in Britain undertakes a review each year of the level of benefits relating to the general level of prices. This is measured by the growth of the consumer price index (CPI) and determines the rate at which the various amounts should be increased, which allows benefit levels to maintain their value against inflation. The percentage uplift rate is determined by the change in the CPI in the previous 12 months up to September. The 2019-2020 uprating package is based on the rate at September 2018. For the period up to the end of September 2018, the CPI indicated a positive growth of 2.4%. It was therefore determined that price-indexed benefits will also be increased by 2.4%. When an uprating order is made for Britain under sections 150, 150A and 151A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, my Department is empowered to make a corresponding order. My Department cannot increase the amounts of the benefits by a different or greater amount in the annual uprating order.

Most Members will be aware of the triple-lock guarantee, where the basic and new state pension would be increased in line with the highest of the growth in earnings and the growth in prices of 2.5%. The growth in earnings is measured by the increase in the average weekly earnings for the quarter ending July 2018. It showed an increase of 2.6%. Therefore, the basic state pension and new state pension were increased for 2019-2020 by 2.6%. The pension credit standard minimum guarantee also rose in line with average earnings at 2.6%.

Some technical provisions relating to the annual uprating are required to be made by regulations

and, therefore, cannot be included in the uprating order. The Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2019 make the technical provisions required for the correct implementation of the increased rates. The regulations are made as a consequence of the uprating order. For the 2019-2020 uprating package, these regulations are included in the increase to the carers' allowance earnings limit, which was usually made as a separate rule in previous years.

As a result of the 2019-2020 uprating package, approximately an additional £110 million will have been paid out by my Department to people here on social security benefits and pensions. I will shortly bring the 2020-21 uprating package before the House for approval. In the meantime, I am sure that Members will wish to ensure that people here can continue to receive the 2019-2020 rates and will, therefore, join me in supporting the uprating order and the consequential uprating regulations.

**Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** Statutory rule 2019/188 provides, as the title suggests, for the annual uprating of a range of social security benefits. Members will note that the majority of benefits will increase by 2.4%, and others by 2.6%. Quite a number of benefits are subject to this increase and referred to in the regulations. However, it would be disingenuous not to mention that some benefits were not uprated. That is a result of the Westminster Government's decision, in the summer Budget of 2015, to freeze increases to certain benefits for four years beginning in 2016-17. Therefore, the following are not being uprated: the personal allowance element of income support and jobseeker's allowance; the personal allowance and work-related activity components of the employment and support allowance and housing benefit; and the standard allowance limited capacity for work element and the lower disabled child addition under universal credit. That freeze is due to end this April, and we look forward to a possible increase in those benefits as well.

The Department informed the Committee that it has no power to set any other rates in respect of benefits or pensions in the annual uprating order. Overall, therefore, the Committee was content to recommend that the Assembly approves statutory rule 2019/188.

On statutory rule 2019/189, the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019, the Committee was informed that that package of seven regulations

makes technical provisions that cannot be made in an uprating order.

They are necessary to ensure that the increased rates provided by the uprating order are implemented correctly.

The regulations, specifically regulation 4, include an increase in the amount that a person can earn in the preceding week without losing their entitlement to carer's allowance. The amount has increased from £120 a week to £123 a week. I am sure that Members will agree that carers are the unsung heroes of our social care sector, although the ability to earn an extra £3 will not noticeably improve their circumstances. There are also some increases in the earnings limit for child dependency payable with a carer's allowance, although those apply only to transitional cases. The Committee is content to recommend that the Assembly approve both sets of regulations.

**1.45 pm**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Members are listed and no one has indicated a wish to speak, so I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you to the Chair of the Communities Committee and its members for considering the regulations. All benefits from April of this year will have the increase applied to them. That includes those that had the four-year freeze. I am pleased with the consensus and support across the Assembly for the uprating order and regulations. I again thank the Chair of the Committee and its members for the positive way in which they looked at and dealt with the rules, which provide for the continuation of the 2019-2020 increases in the rates of benefits and pensions. I commend the motions to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

## **Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019**

*Resolved:*

*That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved. — [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

## **Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019**

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** I beg to move

*That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no limit on the time allocated to the debate.

**Ms Hargey:** The regulations are part of the annual uprating package and increase the compensation payable under the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (NI) 2008. There is no explicit legislative requirement to review the level of the payments each year, and the mesothelioma scheme stands apart from the main benefit uprating procedure. However, the regulations have increased the amounts payable in line with the rate of inflation. The amounts payable under the mesothelioma scheme have been increased for 2019-2020 by 2.4%, in line with the uprating of industrial injuries benefits.

I will provide a little background to the mesothelioma scheme. Under the scheme, those who have been exposed to asbestos can claim a lump sum payment if they are not entitled to claim under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (NI) Order 1979 or have a civil claim elsewhere. The scheme provides financial help to persons diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma or, if the person has died, to their dependants within a matter of weeks of diagnosis and without the need to establish an occupational link or, indeed, any causal link. That means that people who suffer from mesothelioma are eligible for a payment regardless of whether they were employees, self-employed or have never worked, provided

that they have not already received a compensation payment from another source. For 2019-2020, the amount payable, for example, to a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis has increased from £90,097 to £92,259, which is the same maximum as can be paid under the scheme.

The regulations ensure that the compensation provided under the mesothelioma scheme maintains its value relative to inflation. I am sure that all Members will warmly welcome the provisions.

**Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** I thank the Minister for saying "mesothelioma" so many times. That will maybe help me in what I have to say.

As detailed in the explanatory memorandum, the regulations increase mesothelioma payments by 2.4%, in line with the increase in industrial injuries benefit. The Committee is content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The next item of business in the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 1.51 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Communities

#### Social Housing: East Antrim

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on any plans she has to improve social housing stock in East Antrim. (AQO 282/17-22)

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):**

In respect of the maintenance of existing social homes, over this year and the next three years, the Housing Executive has programmed some £20 million of investment in improving and maintaining its stock in the east Antrim area. This will involve a range of scheme types, including the replacement of bathrooms, kitchens, electrics, windows and heating systems; external cyclical maintenance; the installation of external wall insulation; and other external improvements. Such a programme will be subject to the necessary funding being available and the timescales required for programme and scheme approvals.

In the East Antrim parliamentary constituency, 20 new social housing units have been completed to date in 2019-2020, and 117 social housing units are under construction. Currently, 50 social housing units are programmed to start through the social housing development programme in 2019-2020 and 2020-21: 20 units in 2019-2020; 30 units in 2020-21. Of course, programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons, such as those relating to delays in acquiring sites or difficulties with securing planning permission.

'New Decade, New Approach' committed the Executive to:

*"enhanced investment in new social home starts".*

Mindful of this, I am considering the plans of my Department's social housing development programme for the next three years, and I should soon be able to set these out in detail.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for her answer. It is encouraging to hear that some investment

will come. Recently, I have been trying to assist a disabled constituent who, following major surgery, has been virtually imprisoned on the first floor of his private rental property for over three months and unable to get to some hospital appointments as that requires four Ambulance Service personnel. Minister, will you review the currently inadequate provision of three-bedroom, disabled-friendly accommodation in my constituency with a view to providing more?

**Ms Hargey:** I am more than happy to look at that, and, if you want to share the specific details with me, I will get the Department and the Housing Executive to address that directly. I am more than happy to discuss the wider implications and the issues in your area.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Minister for the information that she has imparted to the Assembly today. A scheme that was to take place in April 2020 at Bridewell Drive, Sunnylands Grove and Greenisland in Carrickfergus has now been pushed back, supposedly to September. We are always out to try to improve the stock. Can the Minister guarantee that that scheme will take place in September, as I think that the funding is already available?

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, I am keen to move with schemes as quickly as possible, but I will double-check that specific scheme and follow up in writing to you as soon as possible.

**Ms Anderson:** Minister, what plans are in place to improve the Housing Executive stock, particularly in places like Foyle?

**Ms Hargey:** We are looking at the quality of stock. I have raised that at Question Time and at the Committee previously. There are huge challenges in the Housing Executive, given its budget requirement over the next 30 years and the £3 billion of investment that is needed over the next 11 years. I am engaging in the Department and having discussions with the Department of Finance around issues such as corporation tax and debt legacy issues to see whether we can do something. Our obvious priority is to ensure that we retain our current stock and make sure that it is fit for purpose. Once I have concluded all those conversations, I will lay out plans on the longer-term trajectory of the Housing Executive to ensure that stock is maintained to the highest standards.

**Mr Blair:** Can the Minister confirm her commitment to shared housing by ensuring that new housing that is planned for the south

Antrim area and, indeed, all other areas will be shared housing? Will she also commit to ensuring that all shared housing projects are promoted and managed as being inclusive for all citizens?

**Ms Hargey:** Previous Executives made commitments to look at shared housing. It is part of the overall housing agenda to build communities and neighbourhoods, but there is also a priority for me to ensure that I deliver housing going forward on the basis of objective need and where that objective need sits. I will outline that in the new housing development programme in the coming weeks.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Question No 2 has been withdrawn.

### Liquor Licensing: Reform

3. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the reform and implementation of liquor licensing legislation. (AQO 284/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Licensing laws have remained largely unchanged since the 1990s, since there has been increasing concern about alcohol-related harm. On the other hand, there has also been a change in the social landscape here, with people going out later to enjoy what the night-time economy has to offer. For those reasons, reform of licensing laws is an Executive priority under New Decade, New Approach, and it is one that I am keen to progress as soon as possible.

Last week in the Chamber, the First Minister and deputy First Minister outlined the Executive's legislative programme. It includes a commitment to introduce the licensing reform Bill before the summer recess. Towards the end of last year, my Department carried out a consultation to determine public opinion on current licensing laws. It also sought views on what should be changed in order to make the system more modern and flexible. There was a huge response to that consultation exercise. Over 1,500 responses were received, with an overwhelming number — there were 1,418 — coming from individual members of the public.

I have engaged over the last few weeks with stakeholders as part of my consideration of those issues. I have heard at first hand the impact that the current licensing framework is having. My officials have analysed the responses to the consultation, and I am considering them. I will move on with the next step over the coming weeks, which is to send a

draft report to the Committee for Communities and to allow members time to comment on the consultation. An announcement will be made in the coming weeks.

**Mr O'Toole:** I thank the Minister for her answer. As we all know, pubs are a critical part of the fabric of our society here. They are part of the tourism offer on the island. They are a unique part of how we define ourselves and our communities. However, in this part of Ireland, we have to put up with the absurd anachronism of our licensing laws, which have been overdue for reform for far too long. Pubs are already struggling with the threat of increased rates bills. Indeed, some are dealing with the reduced connectivity that has come about thanks to the Flybe collapse. Has the Minister given any consideration to the impact that delay and not having reform of those absurd, anachronistic licensing laws in place by Easter will have on those businesses?

**Ms Hargey:** Just on that, of course there needs to be change. There is no doubt about that. Most people reflected that there needs to be change, hence the consultation and why the issue is now included in the legislative programme before the summer recess. It will not be done before Easter this year, because time constraints just would not allow it. Obviously, it has to go through due diligence at the Committee and then in the Chamber. I am committed to bringing the paper to the Executive in coming weeks and then for that to go into the Committee system and to the Assembly itself. In the interim, I have met Hospitality Ulster and others, listened to their views and concerns and outlined my intent on the way forward.

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Minister for the update and the commitment to bring forward licensing legislation. It is long overdue. One area in the licensing laws that needs to be changed is support for our microbrewers and microdistillers. The Minister will know that, as part of the consultation, there was a mass response from that industry. They are the innovators and entrepreneurs of Northern Ireland. There is a significant opportunity to drive the economy forward. Can you, Minister, give a commitment that their concerns and the limitations that that industry faces will be heeded and reflected in the new legislation? Will you also commit to meet the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) and other brewers when I bring them here in two weeks' time to air their ongoing concerns?

**Ms Hargey:** Thanks very much. Having read articles on this issue over the past couple of weeks, I am acutely aware of it. This is one of the new areas that was picked up in the most recent consultation that maybe was not there a number of years ago, because obviously the industry has developed. I am aware of the constraints and it is something that I am considering strongly in the new legislation and proposals. If diary commitments allow me, I will be more than happy to meet that organisation in the next two weeks.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Minister, as a fellow South Belfast MLA you will be aware that, while pubs and hoteliers provide great benefits to our local economy, there is sometimes a downside. In what way are you engaging with councils around the renewal of entertainment licences as part of this process? As you know, sometimes they can contribute to the antisocial behaviour that falls out into our streets.

**Ms Hargey:** Obviously, I have a good experience of looking at issues in the Holylands and the Ormeau Road from being a councillor in Belfast up until two months ago. I am conducting a review of entertainment licensing, which will come forward soon, along with looking at renewed gambling legislation. All of this is being considered in the round. I will be moving first on the reform of liquor licensing, and, in the coming months, I will be looking at issues around entertainment licensing. I will obviously want to listen to residents and to drinking establishments and to engage with councils. I know that they will be putting in formal responses to the review and the consultation, as they have done with the liquor licensing review. I will be considering all of that in the round as I move forward with my recommendations.

**Ms Ennis:** I concur with the comments from my colleague across the Chamber, and I think that restrictive licensing laws have really hampered the growing industry of craft breweries. I hope that any legislation will reflect that and will enable our craft breweries to grow and flourish and actively contribute to our tourism product. In the interim, will the Minister look at increasing the Easter opening hours for licensed premises?

**Ms Hargey:** I will consider that, going forward. The consultation has picked up the emerging issues of craft breweries and microbreweries, and they will be reflected in the new legislation that will be put to the Assembly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Member who was due to ask the next question is not in his place.

### **Regional Stadium Fund: Casement Park**

5. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for Communities whether the recent announcement of the additional funding required for the redevelopment of Casement Park will impact other applications to the regional stadium fund. (AQO 286/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** In March 2011, the Executive allocated a budget of £110 million to deliver the regional stadia programme. While both rugby and soccer stadia have been delivered, resulting in benefits for sport and the wider community, there have been delays to the Casement Park project. These delays have resulted in cost estimate increases which are higher than the budget approved nine years ago.

The Member asked about the regional stadium fund. To clarify, in March 2011, the Executive also endorsed a programme budget of £36.2 million for a subregional stadia programme for soccer, to be confirmed in a future budget period. On that basis, the Executive endorsed a programme budget of £36.2 million at that time.

I have stated my clear intention to deliver against the commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement for both Casement and the subregional stadia programme. Given the time that has elapsed, it is important that the programme reflects the current needs of the sector. To that end, my officials have been engaging over the past few weeks with key strategic stakeholders, including the IFA, the NI Football League and district councils, to inform the development of detailed plans for delivering a successful subregional stadia programme. Once that engagement is complete, I will consider proposals on how best to take the programme forward, including budget considerations.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for her detailed response. The state that Northern Ireland's football stadiums are in means that they need emergency help. How soon do you think you will be able to roll out this programme, and how soon will the funds be available to be drawn down?

**2.15 pm**

**Ms Hargey:** As was said, staff in my Department's sports branch are engaging with organisations. The initial report that was done in 2011 was updated in 2012, and there was an interim review of subregional stadia in 2016, but those are almost 10 years and three years respectively out of date. Since 2016, there have been changes in intermediate football, and those have had a knock-on effect on councils. I want to make sure that we future-proof anything that we do to meet the needs of soccer in the here and now and going forward. I am keen to move on the issue as urgently as possible. Once the initial engagements are concluded, I will outline my plans to take the programme forward. I am meeting the IFA in the next few weeks, so I will discuss that directly with it.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Minister has already said that there are plans to go out to further consultation on the subregional stadia. In her discussions with the IFA, the Minister needs to raise the primacy rule and designated grounds, because, otherwise, other soccer clubs will be hampered.

Will she provide details about any future subregional stadia to the three big sporting bodies? Are there any plans to introduce funding measures for them?

**Ms Hargey:** All those matters will be part of the discussion that I will have with the IFA. I need to work closely with it in the time ahead to ensure that the investment that the Assembly puts in has a long-lasting impact on sport and participation in sports.

When I looked at the subregional stadia programme, the two other stadia, for rugby and Gaelic games, were not included. There was a commitment from a previous Minister for a subregional stadia phase 2, and I have asked officials to start scoping out that work. I will update the Committee and the House once that work is done.

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Minister be seeking to increase the budget available for the subregional football stadia fund, similar to the increase that she is bidding for for the regional stadia fund? As part of her consultation, will she be engaging with football clubs? If so, I would be delighted to invite her to visit Glentoran Football Club in east Belfast.

**Ms Hargey:** The current budget commitments are £36.2 million for the subregional stadia. The increase for Casement Park, as I explained to the Committee and previously in the Chamber, is as a result of uncontrollable costs. There was

a redesign of the stadium as the result of a judicial review hearing, and its spectator capacity was reduced. The budget commitments also take into account inflation over the past six years, with increased inflationary rates year-on-year. We will not know the final budget until planning permission has been determined, and we will then go out to tender. As I said, the subregional stadia budget is £36.2 million, and I am keen to make a commitment to deliver on that programme. If there is a phase 2, I will look at what else needs to be done for soccer, but also for Gaelic games and rugby.

I have had 700 invites from organisations right across the Department's remit, and it will take time to get through them. I want to engage with the sporting code. That is why I am meeting with the IFA, but I am more than happy to go out and try to meet as many local football teams as I can. Glentoran has a good lobby. I have had a number of invites from the club. I am more than happy to go there when my timetable allows me.

**Mr Nesbitt:** To follow on from Mr Lyttle's point, if my maths is right, the uplift for Casement is 43%. Will the Minister commit to a similar 43% uplift for the subregional stadia, which, I think, would take the figure up to £51.8 million? I would love to invite her to visit Ards Football Club, but we do not have a permanent home.

**Ms Hargey:** On the reasons for the Casement uplift, there was court case. Therefore, Casement Park differs from what is happening with the subregional stadia programme. I have to consider the regional significance of the stadium. The increases are to do with health and safety, the redesign of the stadium and the six-year delay. There is a commitment to deliver on the £36.2 million for subregional stadia, but, as I said, I have already started scoping work to look at a phase 2. That would look at new moneys potentially coming forward to address any outstanding issues for the three sporting codes of soccer, rugby and Gaelic games. If time permits, I would be more than happy to visit.

## **Urban Regeneration: East Londonderry**

6. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Communities to outline any urban regeneration projects in East Londonderry. (AQO 287/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Through its regeneration programmes, my Department has an important role in delivering the Executive's Programme for

Government outcome 10: creating places where people want to live, work, visit and invest in. Those regeneration programmes are designed to reverse the economic, social and physical decline in areas where market forces will not do that without our support.

Our main programmes are the public realm and revitalisation schemes, which are delivered in close partnership with councils. Officials in the appropriate development offices liaise with councils in the planning and delivery of those schemes. My Department has invested £11 million in a number of urban regeneration projects in the Member's constituency, including £10.7 million on the Portrush regeneration programme to prepare the town for the successful Open championship, and a £213,000 revitalisation scheme in Limavady that was delivered recently and complements previous public realm works that were carried out in the town.

My officials continue to work with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council to consider regeneration initiatives in towns in the constituency and recently agreed to provide funding to allow a public realm scheme at the Recreation Grounds in Portrush to proceed to full design.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline any planned projects that her Department has to improve access to accredited training for young people in my East Londonderry constituency?

**Ms Hargey:** I do not have those details at hand, but I will follow that up with you in writing.

**Mr Durkan:** I am delighted to hear that more public realm schemes are in the pipeline for East Derry; it is great to see them wherever they may be. Will the Minister assure the House that any maintenance contracts associated with the upkeep of such schemes will ensure, or at least demand, swift responses from contractors to repair remedial defects?

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, all those things are considered when you go to procurement. The issue was raised recently, so we are scoping that out and looking at it. We will obviously consider that as we write procurement contracts. If the Member has any specific details, I would be happy to respond to him directly, but we will want to tighten up that area in the foreseeable future.

**Mr Buckley:** I also welcome the words about the increase in public realm works. The Minister

may be aware that there is a considerable issue with some of the legacy public realm schemes, where there has been a failure to supply adequate disability access. Will the Minister commit from the Dispatch Box today that, going forward, disability rights and access will be at the forefront of any public realm schemes that come from the Department?

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, it is important to ensure that all our public realm schemes are accessible to all members of the public. I am responsible for the disability strategy, which will include co-design with those who are disabled and organisations that represent them. We will consider the issue of regeneration and public spaces as part of that strategy. If the Member has any specific points about legacy projects, I am more than happy to look at those. In the time ahead, we will want to ensure that we design public spaces that are public and accessible to people, no matter what their disabilities. I commit to doing that.

## Disability Strategy

7. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on a new disability strategy. (AQO 288/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, thanks very much. In line with New Decade, New Approach, I will publish a timescale for the delivery of a new disability strategy in the coming weeks. That deal sets out that I should publish timescales on all the strategies by the end of March, and I have a commitment to meet that timetable.

As I said, the strategy will be developed using a co-design approach, which will be based on meaningful engagement with disabled people at all stages of the process. My Department will work closely with disability stakeholders and engage with people at the grassroots to identify the issues and barriers that are faced by disabled people in the North.

The disability sector has spoken to me about ensuring that the voices of disabled people are heard and has emphasised the need for measurable outcomes that will make a real and lasting difference to be built into the new strategy.

I trust that my commitment to embedding the principles of co-design and co-production into the strategy's development will address those concerns. Through this approach, we will work together with stakeholders and other Departments, which is obviously key — this has to cut across the Executive — to put in place a

strategy that targets and measures the things that will make a noticeable improvement to quality of life for all those with disabilities.

I am committed to ensuring that the most vulnerable have their voices heard and receive equal opportunities to participate in society. That will be reflected throughout the development and implementation of our new disability strategy.

My officials are drawing up the terms of reference for it at the moment and looking at who the engagement groups are. It is important that we engage with those at the grassroots, and, obviously, we will be engaging with the sector as to the best way to do that.

**Ms Rogan:** How will you ensure that all the Departments are signed up to deliver on their commitments in the strategy?

**Ms Hargey:** I have asked for engagement across all these strategies. Senior officials in each of the Departments can ensure that their people who are responsible for delivering policies can make decisions and look at the allocation of budgets within each of their Departments. That will be picked up in the terms of reference. Obviously, there is a responsibility on the other Ministers to ensure that the officials sent are at a high enough level to take the strategy forward in a meaningful way.

**Ms P Bradley:** The Department for Communities has many strategies that have waited an awfully long time to be brought forward. I welcome the fact that the Minister hopes to bring some of those forward before the end of March.

We had a briefing last week with engaged communities, and it was highlighted to us that an arts strategy is lacking, just to add to the list. Will the Minister also consider that in the round?

**Ms Hargey:** That is an issue that I looked at early on. We have an arm's-length body, the Arts Council. However, I am looking at how we can develop a coherent, overarching arts strategy within the Department, and that will impact on the Arts Council as well. Once I start to formulate my position and approach to that, I will be more than happy to present it to the Committee and, ultimately, to the Assembly, if it is requested.

**Ms Armstrong:** I am delighted to hear the Minister state her commitment to co-production

and co-design. I was very interested when she described the terms of reference that are going to be used for the disability strategy. How many people with disabilities are working to pull together those terms of reference?

**Ms Hargey:** I am not sure about individual staff members. The terms of reference are, at the moment, being worked on by the equality unit in the Department. It is looking at international obligations and domestic law around equality and disability rights. Before the terms of reference are formally adopted, I will discuss them with the sector to ensure that co-production starts from the terms themselves. I will be doing that across all the strategies that my Department has responsibility for. I will lay that out in the time ahead. I have not received the draft back yet. I have just had an initial meeting, but those sectors will see the terms of reference in draft before they are implemented and signed up to.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** There is time for one more quick question.

**Ms S Bradley:** I, too, welcome the news that the strategy is moving forward and that there is co-production and co-design so that the voices of disabled people are heard there. While the Minister has the stakeholders at the table, and, more importantly, she hears the voices of disabled people, could she also tell me what scoping exercise, if any, will be carried out to look at international good practice?

**Ms Hargey:** That is part of what the group will look at. Obviously, the strategy must reflect international human rights and embed those at a domestic level. It will also look at good practice in other Governments and local authorities here, across the island and, more broadly, across these islands. I imagine that it will be directed by those involved in the development of the strategy, which is a co-design piece. Looking at international standards and best practice across all the strategies is an element that will be addressed seriously.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Before we move to topical questions, I want to clarify to Members that they should continue to indicate if they wish to ask a question during oral questions. Otherwise, it will be presumed at the top Table that a Member has been fully informed by the Minister's previous answer and has no requirement to ask a question.

**2.30 pm**

## PIP: Successful Appeals

T1. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Communities, given the high number of personal independence payment (PIP) applications, whether she knows how many people submit appeals and, of those appeals, how many result in a decision being overturned. (AQT 201/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** I do not have the exact figures with me, but I can send them to you. I know that the rate of appeals overturned is higher, and I will seriously consider that in the time ahead. I will outline plans to look at the overall social security system, which includes PIP, universal credit and any future mitigations. I want to engage with the advice sector, human rights organisations — for example, the Human Rights Commission — and particularly those who are impacted on by social security benefits. I want to see what we can do to improve them in order to ensure that they protect the most vulnerable and that they embed a rights-based approach to the impact that the social security system should have on protecting the most vulnerable. I am more than happy to provide you with the specifics in writing.

**Mr Clarke:** In the short term, could a piece of work be done on the number of people whose initial application is refused, only for that decision to be subsequently overturned at appeal? In our offices, many of us hear about people who, when they go to appeal, are told by the appeal panel that they should not be there in the first place. That suggests that there is a problem with some of the people carrying out the initial assessments.

**Ms Hargey:** Marie Kavanagh, a former head of Gingerbread NI, is carrying out an independent review of PIP. She comes from the sector that represents people at the grassroots who are impacted on. I look forward to hearing about it. I have not been involved in it yet. I cannot engage, because it is independent, but I know that she is asking to speak to people on the ground. Information has gone out to the advice sector, where she, as the independent assessor, wants to engage with them to look at their experience. She will, obviously, engage with my Department and officials. We want a system that really meets the needs of people as and when they need it and without having to go through an appeal process, so I will look at that. However, I will not just rest and wait for the independent review. In the coming weeks, I will outline plans to look at the social security system, including PIP, and how we can make it more effective in meeting the needs of those

who need it most. I am more than happy to discuss it with you after this sitting, and, in the time ahead, I will come back to outline my plans.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Mr Kelly's question has been withdrawn.

## Neighbourhood Renewal Programme

T3. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities, after welcoming her recent announcement on the neighbourhood renewal programme, within which a number of organisations, including the Glen Development Initiative, were very pleased to hear that she is to consider workers' rights, to outline how that funding will assist those in the most deprived areas to access the best services. (AQT 203/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** As Members may know, I wrote to neighbourhood renewal partnerships just over a week ago to advise them that, to give certainty, I am securing their funding as is for this year and into the next financial year. Over 900 people are employed through the neighbourhood renewal programme. In our 10 most deprived communities, it delivers a variety of services both in the community and in a statutory setting. For me, as somebody who came from a neighbourhood renewal position and lives in a neighbourhood renewal area, it was fundamental that I give that certainty. I also gave a commitment that neighbourhood renewal areas will be involved in the co-design of the new programme. Obviously, the neighbourhood renewal programme needs to be reviewed to ensure that it meets the need and that we look at how we can eradicate poverty and address inequality. Those partnerships and communities will be involved in a co-design process over the next two years of the programme.

As you touched on, I have initiated a review of workers' rights, because there are concerns and issues in that people have not had a pay increase over the last nine years. There are no maternity leave entitlements for those working in the community and voluntary sector. It is a sector that I have worked in my whole life, and I have committed to an urgent review of all those issues and at how we can address them. I will meet the neighbourhood partnership chairs on 18 March to discuss the issues.

**Ms Anderson:** Thank you, Minister, for that comprehensive answer. It is welcome news that you are meeting the neighbourhood renewal chairs. In line with the planning of that review,

their workers would also like to be involved in the co-design. Will that be part of your outreach work when you take the plan forward?

**Ms Hargey:** The review will be with the partnerships, those involved in the partnerships, those who develop programmes and, more widely, those in the neighbourhood renewal area. Things have changed in the last 10 or 15 years since the neighbourhood renewal strategy, "People and Place", was first implemented. We need to make sure that, in a new programme, we address not only new and current needs but those needs that may emerge in the time ahead. I want there to be a serious co-design approach, and, as part of my engagement on 18 March, I will start to look at how we address that. I will also work with, for example, the Human Rights Commission on human rights issues and, again, on embedding a rights-based approach to the programme.

## Protect Life 2 Strategy

T4. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Communities to make a commitment that her Department will work with the Department of Health to progress the implementation of the Protect Life 2 strategy. (AQT 204/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Yes. The Executive's new working group looking at health and well-being — mental health and well-being — and suicide met for the first time last week. Minister Swann chairs that group, and there was a good discussion at the meeting among all the Ministers who were there, including the two First Ministers. There is a commitment that we will follow up with specific actions in the Department for Communities looking at positive mental health and well-being and suicide to see if there are more actions that we can take. More importantly, there was a good discussion about these issues being cross-cutting across the Departments, and it is important that resources, commitment in time and priorities are shared and discussed and not sectionalised in each of the Departments. There is a commitment to work with the Health Minister on that strategy and to look at mental health and well-being more broadly. In my Department, I have good instruments to do that in social security benefits, housing and tackling inequality in our most deprived communities. For all the issues, I rely on the Department of Health and all the Departments in the implementation, going forward. I have a commitment that I will continue that engagement with Robin and with the House on this crucial issue.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Minister for her response, and I commend some of the sporting and community activists who have recently established a new well-being forum in my constituency of West Belfast. Building on the Department's 'Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan', does the Minister agree that we need more mental health awareness training and initiatives for sporting and community groups, such as the well-being forum in West Belfast?

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, you are right. Participation in sport and physical activity has a really strong role to play in addressing positive mental health and well-being and tackling suicide. Working with the Department, Sport NI and partner bodies, we are looking at how we can increase efforts on that. Part of that will include looking at training programmes, and that is where the discussion with the Minister of Health last week and the other Ministers was useful. When you look across the Departments, you see a variety of programmes and training being organised, and we need to make sure that it has the impact that it needs to have and targets the areas that we know about. One of the alarming but unsurprising figures is that it is areas of poverty and deprivation that really feel the impact of this. Particularly as we are a society that is emerging from a political conflict, we need to address those issues. I am committed to doing that. We will also look at how we can involve our sports and community sector, because, in many ways, they are leading the debate and the campaign on the issues, and we need to support them in doing so.

## Event Grant Scheme

T5. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities, given that she will be aware of the rich culture and heritage associated with the Strangford constituency, and in light of the commencement of the latest event grant scheme for Belfast, does she have any plans to introduce similar grant schemes for other parts of Northern Ireland. (AQT 205/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** I answered some of that in a question a few weeks ago. The Belfast grant scheme is something of a legacy programme that has been there for a long time. Whilst there is no intent to develop other programmes, my Department works with the other 10 councils in running programmes. We have a festivals fund that is disseminated across the 11 councils in which programmes are developed. Indeed, some of the moneys from our regeneration programmes and the neighbourhood renewal programmes go into events and funding. I will meet the Member soon, so I am more than

happy to look at the issues, and, if there is anything that the Department can do in specific programmes, I will consider it and discuss it with you.

**Mr Harvey:** Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we use any publicly funded grants to grow our tourism potential and attract more major events to all parts of Northern Ireland?

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, we see the impact that having events and international events can have on a place. It will be important to work with local government, because it knows the issues on the ground, the impact and the cultural and arts organisations that we can dovetail into. If we can adopt a partnership approach to these events, I will be more than happy to do that. My officials already engage with the 11 councils, including the Member's council area, and, if there is something specific that we can look at, I will be more than happy to do that.

### **Finlock Gutters: Silverstream**

T7. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities to work with her Department and the Housing Executive to put an end to the appalling conditions at Silverstream in North Belfast, given that she might know that, last year, he met with the chief executive of the Housing Executive and the permanent secretary of her Department in relation to the Finlock gutters that have been installed on houses in Silverstream, where many constituents are having to endure dreadful conditions, including damp, while problems in other parts of the estate have been addressed through previous schemes. (AQT 207/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** I do not have the specifics of that case, but I am more than happy to look at it after Question Time. I am meeting the chair of the board of the Housing Executive soon. We will look at such issues as upgrading its stock, and the issue of damp has come up in discussions. I am more than happy to bring up the specific issue and write to the Member with an answer.

**Mr Humphrey:** On 9 January, we received information from the Minister's Department in relation to funding for cricket over the past five years. Over the past five years, the Department has funded somewhere in the region of £1.8 million towards cricket — I declare an interest as the vice president of Woodvale Cricket Club — but, sadly, only £232,000 of that has gone to local cricket clubs in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister address that situation? I was speaking to the president of the Northern Cricket Union

on Friday. Local cricket clubs are struggling. They need support; they need funding. That is a derisory amount of money over a five-year period, given the amount of money — £1.1 million — that was given to Cricket Ireland over the same period.

**Ms Hargey:** I hit a cricket ball in Woodvale park a number of years ago when I was on Belfast City Council. It is an excellent venue — just within Woodvale. You would not know it is there until you walk in. Obviously, Sport NI is the main arm's-length body for the dissemination of funds for sporting events and with the sporting codes. I am more than happy to look at that issue and to engage with the cricket union in the time ahead to see what we can do.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That concludes topical questions to the Minister for Communities.

2.45 pm

## **Economy**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** We now move on to questions to the Minister for the Economy. The Minister has given notice to the Speaker that she is not available to respond to questions, as she is overseas. The Minister of Education has agreed to respond to questions on her behalf today.

### **Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project**

1. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy what action is being taken to ensure that young people and student representatives are given the opportunity to contribute to the transition of young people into careers (14-19) project. (AQO 294/17-22)

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** I thank the Member for her question. Following on from the previous question, my aim is not to be stumped or bowled in the next 45 minutes by some of the questions.

The transition of young people into careers project is a collaborative project, jointly funded by the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education. The project aims to implement a more strategic and joined-up approach to the 14-19 education and training provision. Stakeholders are critical to the success of a 14-19 strategy. In recognition of that, the project has adopted a co-design approach, working alongside stakeholders to

identify key challenges and build the evidence base that will support the development of a future strategy.

The project has engaged with a range of stakeholder groups, including young people, parents, schools, further and higher education institutions, training organisations, work-based learning providers and employers. The engagement with young people has been crucial, and it has focused on their personal experiences of progressing through the 14-19 education and training system. To date, the project has met a range of youth councils, youth clubs, young people on training programmes and further education students who are attending the South Eastern Regional College, the North West Regional College and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The meetings have included young people aged between 12 and 25, who are from many different backgrounds and following a range of pathways.

The engagement has been immensely valuable, with the young people clearly articulating areas of strength and weakness in the current provision. Their views have informed the work of the project and will support ongoing policy development. It is essential that the 14-19 strategy be focused on the needs of our young people. As its development progresses, we will continue to ensure that their views are central.

**Ms C Kelly:** I thank the Minister for his answer. The strategy will affect students and young people more than it will any other group. Does he agree that it is essential that student unions and other organisations be afforded adequate opportunity to have input into the development of the strategy?

**Mr Weir:** I agree that they are central to the strategy. As we develop the 14-19 strategy, it will be important that it is fit for purpose and, given the learner experience of those who have gone through the existing strategy, that there is a level of future-proofing to make sure that whatever is done is fully available, if you like, and fit for purpose as we move ahead. For organisations such as the Youth Council and some of the further and higher education bodies, it is critical that, from submissions received and one-to-one engagements with officials, the widest possible amount of information be obtained. That can come from what is effectively a representative body of students or, indeed, from individual students' experiences. Sometimes, it is about learning from the successes of the past, but it is also about trying to ensure that, where there has

perhaps been a failure at some point, we do not repeat it.

On behalf of both Departments, we are open to having that engagement. The restoration of devolution will also create an opportunity whereby a lot of the groundwork that has been done, particularly by officials, can be examined by Ministers and scrutinised by the Economy Committee to make sure that what we have is fit for purpose as we move ahead.

**Mr Robinson:** Given the challenges in agreeing a joined-up position on 14-19 education and training, what can we expect to be addressed in a strategy?

**Mr Weir:** Alongside the Minister for the Economy, I recognise that the 14-19 education and training landscape is complex. We are committing to working together to progress the development of a 14-19 strategy. To progress the development of the draft strategy, the project has identified a number of work streams. The identified areas that the project is focusing on include progression and pathways, funding, careers, curriculum delivery and post-16 education. That is based on the original ministerial correspondence, which dates back to the previous Assembly; the issues that arose through the innovation lab in 2018, when it was progressed; and subsequent engagement with stakeholders. A wide range of those are being covered by the work streams.

The project's initial output will be a high-level draft strategy that will outline the vision and guiding principles, the challenges associated with the current approach, and the features of a more strategic, joined-up approach. This will be cross-cutting, and the project is finalising a baseline position. It is also arranging to engage with further stakeholders, such as those mentioned by the previous Member, to agree the strategic priorities and to ensure that we have something that is fit for purpose.

## Apprenticeships

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to increase apprenticeships in local businesses. (AQO 295/17-22)

9. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department's apprenticeship strategy focuses on creating apprenticeships in areas that are most deprived. (AQO 302/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 9 together. They come from a similar position.

Increasing participation and awareness of apprenticeship programmes is a key objective for the Department for the Economy as apprenticeships play a central role in creating an effective and sustainable pipeline for skills development across Northern Ireland. Around 6,000 apprenticeships are created by employers across Northern Ireland each year — that number will vary from year to year — supported by the Department across a wide range of sectors.

The Department supports apprenticeships by funding the cost of off-the-job training through ApprenticeshipsNI and the higher-level apprenticeship programmes. Apprenticeship funding is paid directly to further education colleges, universities and contracted non-statutory training providers operating across Northern Ireland, several of which are in areas of deprivation.

The Minister for the Economy has met a number of employers and business organisations that are benefiting from the apprenticeship programmes. Minister Dodds attended the Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Awards 2020 ceremony during the first Northern Ireland apprenticeship week. She got to hear at first hand about the positive impact that apprenticeships are having on businesses as well as the difference that the programmes are making to the lives and careers of apprentices.

The Department is working to increase demand for apprenticeships through a range of measures. It has initiated a project to widen access and increase participation, including considering the current apprenticeship age policy and the role that public-sector apprenticeships might play; improving support for employers; how participants access partnership opportunities; and considering what more can be done to widen access to a greater range of participants, particularly among under-represented groups.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Minister for his answer. How can we ensure that local employers have the same rights as those in England and can access their contribution to the apprenticeship levy?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his supplementary. The apprenticeship levy is a UK-wide fiscal policy. The levy is a reserved matter for the UK Parliament. While Northern

Ireland receives the Barnett consequentials from the levy, that has not had a significant impact on the block grant. Although the collection of the levy is a reserved matter, with no scope for derogation for Northern Ireland, the delivery of apprenticeships is a devolved matter.

The Department provides funding to support the cost of apprenticeship training for private-sector employers regardless of the level of their levy contribution. Those apprenticeship programmes are largely demand-led. All employers are encouraged to avail themselves of the programmes to drive business growth.

The Department continues to consider the issues raised by employers during the consultation on the impact of the levy in Northern Ireland, including the current age-related criteria; potential public-sector apprenticeships, which are, effectively, barred; and how to improve transparency for employers on the level of funding support that is available through participation in apprenticeship programmes.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister rightly referenced the scheme in England. He also indicated that there is a need to increase the demand for these schemes. I understand that, in England, 90% of the cost is paid by the Government and 5% by the employer, whilst, in Northern Ireland, 50% is paid by the employer. Does he accept that, if we were to follow the English model, we would encourage many more firms to come forward and invest their time and energy in developing the workforce for the benefit of the entire economy?

**Mr Weir:** Anything that the Department can do to help to facilitate an increase in the number of apprenticeships should be looked at and encouraged. While all of us would like to reach an ideal funding mix, it will need to be examined in the context of the available resources. If we are going to change the mix to create a much greater resource allocation coming directly from the Government, that will need to be funded. As part of the overall Budget settlement, there will be an examination of what is available through the Department for the Economy and what can be done. Clearly, if there is going to be a shift in resources, that will have to be centrally funded.

**Mr Lyttle:** How are the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Education working together to promote parity of esteem for apprenticeships as part of the 14-19 strategy?

**Mr Weir:** The Member raises a very valid point. While, broadly speaking, in Education, we have seen an upward trend in academic success, there is a need — it was raised an issue when I spoke to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, for instance — to ensure that there is a much more-level playing field and that non-academic routes are valued. We need to ensure a greater parity of esteem. In that context, we will be considering pathway proposals. It is about ensuring that society places that parity of esteem on non-academic routes, but it is also about having clear pathways for those non-academic routes, particularly into business. That will be of potential value both to employees and employers, who will not get such a diverse range. It is about ensuring that we have that recognition. The Minister and I will be working to take the work that was done in the non-devolutionary phase and embed it in a proper 14-19 strategy.

**Ms Dolan:** The latest NISRA report on apprenticeships measures a programme's success on apprentices completing their final year and attaining a qualification. There is no reference to retention rates during the first or second year, when apprentices are more likely to drop out. Will the Minister review how success rates are monitored on apprenticeship programmes?

**Mr Weir:** The Department will always want to look to see that we deliver success from the investment that is put in and, indeed, in respect of the life chances of the young people who go through the apprenticeships. We will keep under review the monitoring of the apprenticeship intake — obviously, the aim is not simply to give a year's or two years' training and for that simply to go to waste — to try to ensure that we get that follow-through in apprentices helping to feed the economy. The Member makes a valid point in that regard. By their nature, apprenticeships are not necessarily an end in themselves. They are a means to an end of ensuring, from an economic point of view, that there is a throughflow of a technically skilled workforce but also, from the point of view of being able to transform the lives of young people, that they benefit from it and are helped to develop as economically active citizens.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Department think that our larger employers, who are paying the national apprenticeship levy, are getting a fair deal? Yes, money comes back in Barnett consequentials, but is that money even spent on apprenticeships? Are we not in a situation

where major employers are paying a hefty levy but not getting anything like the return that their GB colleagues are getting?

**3.00 pm**

**Mr Weir:** The Member has to realise that the levy is a reserved matter. Therefore, the amount that comes from various employers is not set by the Department in Northern Ireland. Indeed, there are concerns — wearing my hat as Minister of Education — that a levy will come from schools when there is no opportunity for apprenticeships in the public sector, which means, effectively, that it will become a drain on our resources.

As I indicated, the funding of apprenticeships is very much demand-led. Consequently, although we do not have any particular control over the amount taken out by the apprenticeship levy, part of it is to help to facilitate and encourage employers to take on apprentices. What is drawn out is very much in the hands of the employers. That is managed by the various sectoral bodies that were set up to look at various sectors of the economy. Although the Department can be the facilitator, it cannot be the provider that says, "Here's precisely where this money is diverted to". It has to be demand-led.

**Ms Bailey:** Will the Minister let us know what the balance is between available apprenticeships for those educated to degree level and those not educated to degree level? Where can we get information on all available apprenticeship courses? Is that published by the Department?

**Mr Weir:** Undoubtedly, the Department can provide that information. I think that the Minister will be happy to provide you with the balance and statistics in writing, I do not have the detail of the balance. The Department has been trying to encourage uptake. For instance, the number of employers has increased. We have tried to make sure that, through widening participation in apprenticeships, there is encouragement for those who come from a less academic background or, indeed, a background that does not always take up apprenticeships, and that there is greater availability. There has been some success with that. As with all these things, it is a work in progress.

## **Broadband**

3. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the basis for the statement that 18,390 more houses are now

receiving broadband coverage of at least 30 megabytes. (AQO 296/17-22)

5. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for the Economy whether premises in rural areas with the poorest access to broadband will be the first to benefit from Project Stratum. (AQO 298/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take question 5 with question 3.

On receipt of updated broadband coverage data from suppliers during the procurement process, the number of premises in the targeted intervention area has been reduced to just over 79,000. That means that some 18,000 premises already access, or will be able to access, services of 30 megabits per second or greater over the period of the open market review. That is positive news because the public funding, together with the anticipated bidder contribution, will, potentially, go further in extending coverage across a reduced intervention area. The significant proportion of the 18,000 or so premises removed from the initial targeted intervention area relate to a data refresh exercise that was carried out by a major supplier on a national UK basis. Minister Dodds is satisfied with the progress that followed. The outcome has been validated by Building Digital UK and assurance provided to all UK regions and devolved institutions.

Over 95% of the revised target area is rural, defined using the NISRA guidelines as band H villages, which have a population of fewer than 1,000 and premises that are in open countryside. Analysis undertaken by the Department and advice from independent advisers indicate that it is not possible to prioritise specific geographical areas without potentially sacrificing overall coverage, increasing cost and slowing delivery. Although the precise number and location of premises that are to directly benefit will not be known until after the contract award, the continued aspiration of the Department is to maximise broadband coverage from the funding available.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware from my previous question to him in his former role as Education Minister that we are very interested in Project Stratum in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, which has the worst access on these islands to superfast broadband. Does he believe that the Department for the Economy is accurate in its assessment that 18,390 fewer premises will require superfast broadband under Project Stratum?

**Mr Weir:** I appreciate the Member's concerns, particularly about the Fermanagh and Omagh area. The statistics that I have are based upon constituency returns rather than council area returns, and they suggest that Fermanagh and South Tyrone has the lowest level of coverage above 30 megabits and that West Tyrone has, I think, the second lowest level. I appreciate the Member's concern. I can only reiterate the assurance on the accuracy of the figures. Obviously, the figures on the roll-out have been verified on a UK-wide basis as being accurate. Clearly, from the point of view of what is still to be covered, particularly in the Member's constituency of West Tyrone, just under 10,000 premises in West Tyrone do not have access to 30 megabits, and those are within the overall 79,000 that we are looking at in the targeted intervention. The aim is to deliver the whole project. As I said, this is very much based, particularly as 95% of the premises are in rural parts of Northern Ireland, on having those from a rural background on a level playing field with those in other parts of Northern Ireland. There are variations throughout Northern Ireland, and even in Belfast, there are some pockets in very urban constituencies that do not have the full roll-out of 30 megabits.

**Mrs Barton:** You spoke, Minister, of villages with fewer than 1,000 people being targeted for this broadband, which is excellent. However, you also talked about value for money. Once again, that seems to avoid the most rural areas that still will not have broadband at the end of the roll-out. In rural areas, you do not get value for money if you target those who are most isolated.

**Mr Weir:** To be fair, I am not sure that I used the expression "value for money". It is about trying to ensure that whatever resources we have are spread as widely as possible. Again, I may have given the slightly wrong impression, but, when I talked about settlements of below 1,000, I was also covering open countryside. The definition in the NISRA statistics is, I think, band H. That is used as part of the definition for the rural side. Using that condition, 95% of the 79,000 premises targeted will be in band H. That can be smaller villages, but it can also be individual properties in the open countryside. It is meant to cover both those. As indicated, the aim is to get that level of coverage throughout Northern Ireland as a whole and to cover even individual properties. It is not aiming to discriminate against any individual. Clearly, if we are in a position to provide it, hopefully, there will be 100% coverage, or we will, at least, get the vast bulk of areas covered.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his response today in his new role in his new Ministry. I obviously welcome the Minister's commitment to deliver on this project, with £150 million being allocated through confidence and supply. Can he advise when the contract is likely to be in place and when installation work is planned to commence?

**Mr Weir:** Obviously, there is an issue with securing all the funding. As has been mentioned, this project was initiated through confidence and supply, which probably puts it in a different position to some other projects. There is ongoing work with Treasury in relation to the delivery timetables, but, on the open-market side, the contract is expected to be awarded in September of this year. The Department's early engagement with industry indicates that about a six- to nine-month period is required for network design and delivery preparation. It is therefore anticipated that the deployment of infrastructure will not commence until April 2021. The aim is to look at the earliest point of completion, and it will probably take three years to roll out as a minimum. So it is not something that is going to happen instantaneously; there will be progression over time to deliver it.

**Mr McCrossan:** The Minister will join me in acknowledging the importance of this infrastructure, particularly for rural communities like West Tyrone, when we see the closure of rural banks, homework being done online and also the benefits system being online. It is vital for my constituents. The Minister clarified that 10,000 homes in West Tyrone are affected. What is the figure for Fermanagh? How quickly will this be rolled out in my constituency, which is suffering quite a bit?

**Mr Weir:** Obviously, we are taking this as the number of premises in West Tyrone that do not have access to the 30 megabits. The exact figure that we have is 9,973 premises. We will not know the specific time frame until the evaluation of the bids has been completed and a contract awarded, because the time frame will play a part in that. As I said in answer to the previous question, we are looking at work on the infrastructure starting in 2021 and hopefully being completed by 2024 at the earliest.

On the comparison of numbers, as I said in answer to a previous question, West Tyrone has the weakest provision. The proportion of people who receive above 30 megabits in West Tyrone is 74%; the proportion in Fermanagh and South Tyrone is lower than that at about 70%. I do not know offhand the exact

population figures for West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but, proportionately, that means that there is a slightly higher number to be delivered in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone area. Across the piece, the next lowest percentages are Mid Ulster at 76% and South Down at 78%. There is no constituency that is 100% above the 30 megabits that may be regarded as having superfast broadband. Clearly, the more rural the constituency, the lower the provision at present, which means the higher the level of intervention that will take place. As I said, around 12.5% of the overall number of properties that will need to be hit will come from the West Tyrone area.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** A brief question from Mr Humphrey.

### **Belfast Zoo**

**Mr Humphrey:** The Minister is doing rightly in his double-jobbing role. He will, I am sure, accept that Belfast Zoo is an important regional attraction for Northern Ireland in tourism, animal husbandry and education. Will the Minister commit to meeting the directors of Belfast City Council to take forward Belfast Zoo and develop it as a growing and important tourism destination in Belfast?

**Mr Weir:** The Member is right that there has not been any recent engagement between the Department for the Economy and Belfast City Council on Belfast Zoo or its site. As with other Departments of the Northern Ireland Executive, the Department for the Economy is facing a very challenging budgetary environment, so any potential spend for tourism development at Belfast Zoo would need to be considered in the context of the emerging tourism strategy and strategic priorities for the economy.

However, that strategy needs to be based on the greatest level of knowledge and engagement. I am sure that the Economy Minister will be happy and keen to meet representatives of the city council to look at the zoo, which is essentially a regional facility.

**3.15 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That ends listed questions to the Minister. We now move on to topical questions.

### **Childcare Workers: NICICTU Policy Paper**

**T1. Ms Rogan** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, what action will be taken to improve the pay conditions for childcare workers in the light of findings published in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions' (NICICTU) report on the sector. (AQT 211/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Development of childcare is, to a certain extent, cross-cutting, particularly for the Executive as a whole. As part of that, the Department of Education is aiming to bring a childcare strategy to the Executive fairly soon, and the level of support for workers will form one element of it. It is clear that, if there is to be a further level of intervention and a greater level of support for childcare, the Executive will need to be able to commit to that, because, although childcare strategy lies within the Department of Education and has implications for certain economic facilities, there is not the budget in the Department of Education to pay for an expansion per se. It will therefore need to be an Executive commitment.

On the broader childcare strategy, a commitment to increase the offer is made in New Decade, New Approach, so there is a requirement to do that. That having been said, the Executive will have to weigh up the various pressures that are there, because, as has been highlighted by the Finance Minister and others, the amount being sought for a range of activities is beyond what the overall budgets will be. That is also on another track. The Finance Minister has been engaging with Treasury on the issue to try to ensure that there is that support, particularly for the delivery of New Decade, New Approach.

**Ms Rogan:** The report published in June 2019 highlighted the fact that childcare workers are paid below the median rate of other workers and are less likely to be paid the real living wage, despite the important work that they do. Meanwhile, average weekly childcare spend by workers here is higher than in England, Scotland and Wales. Will the Minister address the issues that affect childcare workers and working families?

**Mr Weir:** There is a conjunction of issues within that. An expanded childcare offer is critical to being able to support our education system. It is important to get that earlier intervention, because it leads to an educational bonus. There is also an economic bonus, because the focus has been on three- to four-year-olds and the aim is to provide an affordable childcare offer. That will require, as I said, a level of investment from the Executive. That is not to

say that any childcare strategy will focus purely on three- to four-year-olds, and we will debate that issue tomorrow. Any increase, even in the offer that can be made for three- to four-year-olds, will require a large expansion of the sector. At present, for instance, about 62% of those who are receiving support through the preschool programme are getting it on the basis of the place being a part-time one. That needs to change. With expansion, we will create further opportunities for people on the workforce side.

As we move ahead, it is not simply a question of getting some additional resources, putting them in and the strategy happening. We will also need to look at where we can have greater support for workforce development. A more holistic approach is required. Even if the Executive give the green light to a childcare strategy, it will not be able to be delivered overnight. Time will be required to help build up the sector. Much of that is revenue-based, but, in part, a certain level of capital assumption will need to be made, because we simply do not have the scale of premises. Some childcare providers have one group of children in the morning and one group in the afternoon. If we move to a situation in which there are more full-time places, that will create pressure on the capital side as well.

## Flybe

**T2. Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, what efforts are being made to mitigate the current difficulties being experienced at Belfast City Airport and beyond, given that the collapse of Flybe has resulted in job losses, customer chaos and a direct hit to our local economy, particularly the tourism sector. (AQT 212/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** There has been engagement. Flybe was very much an anchor airline at Belfast City Airport. Clearly, some work was done in January 2020 with the UK Government. They announced that they had reached agreement with the shareholders of Flybe, who would put more money into the business on the basis that there would be reviews into air passenger duty (APD) and connectivity. That turned out not to be enough. We can speculate about the extent to which current travel problems with regard to coronavirus have exacerbated the situation.

On 5 March 2020, the Minister met the airport's management and was encouraged to note that it had stated that there was interest in all of the route network, and it was confident of

announcing backfill in the next few days and weeks. As a result, the chief executive of Belfast City Airport was able to reach agreement with Loganair to take up the first two of those slots. It is hoped that there will be good news as we move forward.

That is a very specific issue with that element of Flybe. Clearly, if the overall situation is to flourish, air connectivity and air passenger duty, which are reserved matters, need to be examined thoroughly. The Minister has raised the issue with the UK Minister for aviation, Paul Maynard, and the Secretary of State. Due to the geographical location, there is a dislocation, which means that available substitutes for travellers by the road or rail infrastructure in other parts of the UK are simply not available here. It is important that the Government take heed of the very clear message that the Minister has given and ensure that there is a thorough review that actually leads to changes to APD and air connectivity.

**Ms S Bradley:** Flybe cited COVID-19 as being the final stress for its business, which forced its closure. Will the Minister advise the House on the measures that are being considered or delivered by the Department for the Economy in order to ensure that businesses and the economy in general are protected in the best possible way against the impact of COVID-19?

**Mr Weir:** The Member rightly highlights the fact that COVID-19 was seen very much as the final straw for Flybe. We should recognise that, unfortunately, Flybe was in difficulty prior to that, which led to intervention by the Government.

On the broader preparations, the Department for the Economy is working closely with the rest of the Executive, and particularly with Treasury, because it is likely that the Budget will be announced on Wednesday 11 March 2020. That will look particularly at additional measures that can be put in place to provide protection for business. We can speculate about what some of those measures will be, but we need to ensure that there is follow-through for Northern Ireland businesses. Some measures are likely to be direct support for businesses. Some will be about at least seeing whether some of the burdens on businesses can be postponed. The Department will work closely with its counterparts in London to ensure that the full range of measures is available. There is no doubt that it is a fast-moving situation. It will, therefore, be a question of trying to anticipate, where possible, where changes can take place and then be able to try to implement those as quickly as possible.

## Coronavirus: Zero-hours Contracts

T3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, in continuing the coronavirus theme, whether she has held discussions with the Minister for Communities about the establishment of a hardship fund for people who are employed on zero-hours contracts. (AQT 213/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I know that we are in an era of fluid gender recognition and self-identification, but I was not aware that the Member was going to self-identify me on my behalf with regard to my gender.

Part of the UK action plan looks at the impact on workers, particularly with voluntary leave, and ensures that, where there are temporary absences, it is able to kick in at an earlier stage to ensure that those workers are covered. We will be working with the UK Government, and we will be seeing where there are any examples from other devolved Administrations. I suppose it is about seeing what additional money can be brought in and then what can be spent, because we cannot spend beyond what is available. The Department will be looking at having those ongoing discussions to try to ensure that maximum provision is made to combat the economic impact of coronavirus.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I trust that the Minister will understand and appreciate that my question referred to the Minister for the Economy, thus the use of "she". It was not an attempt to realign his gender in any way. I do not think that people listening will be content with the answer given. People will be thinking that much more needs to be done to help people who have to self-isolate and who are on zero-hours contracts or are self-employed. Will the Minister undertake to urgently address this matter and provide some confidence to the people who are affected?

**Mr Weir:** I am sorry that the inadequacy of my answer has disappointed the Member. I think that work will take place and that there will be discussions between the Northern Ireland Executive, particularly the Department for the Economy, and the Treasury. To be fair, this will be responded to as soon as it can be, and the detail that emerges out of that will lie within the direct remit of the Minister for the Economy and will be based on the information that she has. I am sure that, as announcements are made, Members and all of us who are in a very concerning situation will be informed of developments as they take place.

## Teachers: Irish-medium Sector

T4. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, whether the Department for the Economy has had any discussions with the Department of Education about developing a workforce strategy to increase teacher numbers in the Irish-medium education sector. (AQT 214/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** There will be ongoing discussions on that. There is an unusual situation, which is that the Department of Education sets the numbers for any section of teacher training, and the Department for the Economy is responsible for paying for that. I have met representatives from Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), who, I think, are drawing up more detailed proposals. I am certainly taking on board what is being said, and that will form the basis of any discussion. I think that that organisation has some initial thoughts on that, and we have to scope that out to ensure that what is there is deliverable.

There is also the issue of what is done in the medium term for Irish-medium-education training. Clearly, you cannot turn someone from being a student, even a postgraduate student, into a teacher overnight. Even if additional numbers were provided this September or the September after that, we would then be seeing what interim measures could be put in place to ensure that sufficient support is being provided for this sector — indeed, all sectors — to meet the needs of their students. We will be working with the sectoral body on that. That may be a question of identifying people with teaching backgrounds who could do a conversion course or examining the issue through an audit. I am open to whatever suggestions are made. The main aim is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of teachers to be able to provide for the students who need to be taught.

**Ms Mullan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I think he crossed over to speak as Minister of Education. I thank him for his meeting with CnaG and the action he has already taken. I suppose, in working with his colleague in the Department for the Economy, it is about ensuring that the increased resources will be provided to facilitate the teaching of subjects through the Irish medium, as it is the fastest-growing education sector here at the minute.

**Mr Weir:** It is important that initial teacher education is fit for purpose and provides for that. Obviously, we will be working on the numbers and what interim measures to take, but the matter of longer-term financial

commitments will directly involve the Department for the Economy. I am sure that the Minister will be mindful of the Member's comments.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That concludes topical questions to the Minister. I thank Members and the Minister for their cooperation throughout. Members should take their ease as we move to the next item of business.

3.30 pm

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Question for Urgent Oral Answer

### Education

#### Coronavirus Advice to Schools

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Chris Lyttle has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Education. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the advice he has provided to schools in relation to coronavirus.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Although, primarily, tackling coronavirus is a health issue, my Department is leading on the issue of relevant and appropriate advice and guidance to schools and education partners provided by the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA).

The Department of Education advises parents and schools to keep up to date with the Public Health Agency guidance on COVID-19. Information is available on the PHA website, and we have been including that link in any contact that we have with schools. If a school has any concerns about suspected or confirmed cases of coronavirus, it should, in the first instance, contact the NHS 111 helpline.

More specifically, on 27 February, I wrote to all school principals and education sector partners enclosing the link to the PHA website, which is updated as the situation develops, and emphasised the importance of monitoring the

website regularly. I have encouraged schools to follow the guidance, in particular the need to practise good hand hygiene amongst staff and pupils. I reiterated that the PHA is available to speak to individual schools, which it has offered to do, that may have specific concerns about COVID-19; indeed, it has also offered advice on levels of risk assessment. Included in my email was the updated Chief Medical Officer's advice and a link to the UK Government's latest advice and guidance. I also had the opportunity to speak to the Chief Medical Officer when the first issue arose.

My Department continues to communicate with our education sector partners, schools and education settings using existing communication links and has issued PHA school advice leaflets and self-isolation advice leaflets to the education sector groups. I have also ensured that a link to the PHA website is prominently placed on the Department of Education website.

Earlier today, given the change in position that was outlined last night by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my Department issued an update to all schools highlighting the change in the advice on travel to areas of northern Italy. For those who have not seen that advice, it is that, unless travel is essential, people should not go to the areas in northern Italy that have been quarantined.

The welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff are paramount. Departmental officials and I, in collaboration with the Department of Health and the PHA, will continue to monitor the evolving situation. We will update schools and education settings where appropriate and as soon as practically possible when there is any change to the situation.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for providing an update to the Assembly on his advice to schools on coronavirus containment. Does he accept that there are school leaders across Northern Ireland who feel that they have been passed from pillar to post to get clear guidance, particularly regarding pupil travel to areas affected by coronavirus? Will he assure the Assembly that schools will have direct contact with an appropriate person to seek up-to-date advice on any and all pupil travel of that nature? Will he also advise the Assembly what contingency planning is taking place to maintain education provision should it be necessary to consider school closures?

**Mr Weir:** We are working with officials on contingency planning to see what is appropriate. This is a moving situation. As part

of that, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), for instance, is developing its work should school exams be hit.

The Member mentioned clear guidance. I know that at least one school had an issue with the PHA on day one. He mentioned a single point, and it is vital that there is a single point of information. That is what has happened with the advice. We have said that the PHA is the single point for health advice, and that is where we advise people to go. It is not my or the Department's place to give an interpretation of other people's advice or, indeed, to provide contradictory advice, which could be worse. We have also made it very clear that schools should get travel advice directly from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which is a single point of advice. Getting conflicting advice on travel or hygiene would be irresponsible and dangerous. It is also the case that, while there is the direct advice of the NHS helpline, the PHA has made that very publicly clear. The Chief Medical Officer has also made contact with a number of schools where that has happened and, indeed, has held a conference call with school principals so that that single point of advice was there and he was able to answer questions directly. As we move ahead, the responsible action must be to maintain a single piece of advice and a single point of advice so that there is no confusion or contradictory positions out there.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for his answer on the serious issue of coronavirus. Will he outline what engagement he has had with his colleagues and counterparts at a national level across the UK following on, of course, from the First Minister's meeting this morning with COBRA?

**Mr Weir:** There are a number of points. First, where COBRA has operated and will continue to operate will involve not simply the national Government but all the regional Administrations, including the Executive as a whole. From working with colleagues in the Executive Office and the Health Department, I know that they have been directly involved in those COBRA discussions. I have spoken specifically to the Health Minister and the Executive Office through the First Minister to highlight where, we feel, there are emerging issues. I know that Northern Ireland has made particular and specific contributions to the discussions on school trips. It was important that an overall, central UK-wide decision was taken and that, again, there was consistency of information. There has also been a range of discussions between officials at a level directly

below COBRA. Those have taken place on a nationwide basis with the relevant officials also taking part, and that has involved not just Health officials but Education officials. Some of those were discussions of the communication side of things.

**Ms Mullan:** I thank you, Minister, for your speedy response last week to my colleague Caoimhe Archibald. I know that a number of schools were very anxious, so I thank you for that response.

Minister, we will, hopefully, welcome you to the Committee on 18 March to discuss special educational needs issues and, of course, a response to the coronavirus. The Committee has written to your Department to seek clarity on trips and deep cleans, so I thank you for your updates today. England, Scotland and Wales have established an education working group specifically on coronavirus under the leadership of EdTech UK and Independent Schools Council (ISC) digital group. It is specific to schools, in order to give emerging advice in practice. Department of Education (DE) England has also produced excellent guidance, alongside a specific helpline for schools. Will the Minister establish a similar group here to update school leaders with emerging advice and practice and to provide advice on preparation for GCSE and A-level examinations?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for her comments. I will meet officials directly after this Question Time to be updated on progress on coronavirus. I am keen to ensure that there are single points of contact for advice. For departmental plug-ins as regards schools, I will look to see whether the best route on that is to coordinate with other jurisdictions so that we have a consistent message or whether there needs to be something bespoke for Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that whatever advice is given is, as much as possible, accurate and up to date as regards schools.

**Mr McCrossan:** I will follow on from a point made earlier. Principals have been telling me that they feel isolated, for want of a better description. They say that EA has been unhelpful, there has been no clear guidance or policy and they are under huge pressure to make the right decision in the interests of their children and staff. What happens, Minister, if a principal makes the decision to go ahead with a trip and a child is contaminated? Who is liable in that case?

**Mr Weir:** In those circumstances, if they make a decision that goes against Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice — the advice is to follow the expertise. I know that, over the last few years, there have been question marks at times over whether we listen to experts or not: it strikes me as a no-brainer. We should go to the best sources of information, which, for travel, is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and, for health, is the PHA.

There may well have been an issue that, on day 1, there was some level of confusion. However, there has been very clear guidance given to schools that the PHA advice is the advice to follow on the health side, but we have not simply been saying, "Go and look at the PHA advice"; we have been giving the direct links to the PHA advice. We have been acting similarly with regard to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice.

As with the public as a whole, the Public Health Agency can give advice to schools and individuals. Whether individuals choose to follow that advice lies beyond the power of any public health body or, indeed, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I would say that people would be very well advised to follow the specific advice. That means that we take the issue seriously but are approaching it in a measured manner.

Unfortunately, in other aspects of this, not in the school system, we have seen irresponsible panic set in and, in some cases, criminal behaviour has happened, particularly around the issue of sanitisers. That is not acceptable. The reality is that, if we keep a single message and single points of contact for advice, that is the critical aspect. People will ultimately have to make their own decisions, but I strongly urge them to follow the expert advice.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for coming in at short notice on such an important issue. You spoke about the PHA being the port of call for that expert advice. I want to ask your opinion with regard to special schools where pupils have severe and moderate learning disabilities. Are they perhaps more at risk in this instance? If that is the case, is it not your responsibility to be their advocate and to give that advice, as opposed to the Department of Health?

**Mr Weir:** We will continue to raise issues nationally, but, again, it is not my place to second-guess the quality of the advice that comes from the PHA. If they feel that there is specific advice needed for particular schools — it may be that particular circumstances have arisen in a school or because of the nature of

the school — they will give that advice. We will certainly make sure that PHA is aware of the issue. However, I am not a clinician, nor, indeed, are any of the excellent staff in my Department.

We have to follow the direct advice of medical professionals, and the PHA is the most appropriate route for us to do so.

**3.45 pm**

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Minister for his update on the ongoing work with his UK counterparts. Can he give us an update on what work he is doing with his counterparts across this island, given that our schoolchildren will be moving around this land mass rather than travelling abroad?

**Mr Weir:** We have a seamless border, so we will be keeping in touch on all aspects. Specifically, however, there is a national response, which is why we are plugging into COBRA and associated bodies.

On movement, there are cases throughout the world and there are cases in different parts of the island. Nobody is at any greater or lesser risk from travelling cross-border than they are from travelling within Northern Ireland or within the Republic of Ireland. If there is specific advice to the contrary, we will make sure that it is brought to people's attention. We are happy to work with any providers of information.

There is no doubt about the sheer volume of what is here at present and what is coming towards us. We need to make sure that we have appropriate responses ready for each potential stage.

**Mr Allister:** As the Minister will be aware, we are about two months out from the key exam time in our schools for our school-leavers and our GCSE pupils. If there should be any necessary disruption to the programme of exams, whose decision is it to act on that? Is it the decision of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the Education Authority or the Minister, and what thought has been given to the matter?

**Mr Weir:** I know that CCEA has been working on contingency plans. I want to meet CCEA to determine where the exact points of demarcation lie should interventions be needed for exams and what action can then be taken. Again, we are in a fairly fluid situation, and we will need to drill down to the detail with particular bodies as time moves on.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for his statement thus far and for the seriousness with which he has taken the issue. Coronavirus continues to cause widespread disruption across the world, but there is a lot of concern locally from teachers, staff and parents on the potential impact if coronavirus does indeed spread throughout our school population. With that in mind, and given the fluidity of the situation, will the Minister outline what legislative powers are in place if it does come to a point at which we have to close schools?

**Mr Weir:** There has been some discussion throughout the Executive but particularly with the Department of Health about the overall legislative position. The UK Government are considering, and this was outlined by the Prime Minister, introducing emergency legislation to respond to a coronavirus pandemic. Any emergency legislation is likely to include powers for the Department of Education and the Department of Health that may, if we reach that particular point, lead to the direct closure of schools and childcare provision.

From a Northern Ireland perspective, the Department of Education has indicated that it wants to ensure that the maximum number of powers is available. As with a lot of these things, all of us hope and pray that those powers do not have to be initiated, but I do not want to be in the situation of finding that something needs to be done yet there is no legal power to do it. It is better to be in a situation in which, to use an expression, we have all the clubs in our bag to be able to use when necessary than to find that we are short of clubs that we need to be able to do something. Such powers will be requested in very extreme circumstances. Indeed, any action taken will be taken on the basis of a coordinated Executive response.

Wearing my hat from an hour ago, I will say that there will be questions for the Department for the Economy about further and higher education colleges. The Executive as a whole will ensure that the legislation as it applies to Northern Ireland is in place. Legislative consent may need to be granted by us or some other action taken. The Health Minister will be speaking soon to outline some of those things.

We will make sure that we have all the powers to be able to deal with whatever situation emerges. In many ways, we are trying to hold back a tide. As I understand it, the UK is still in a containment phase, but that might change, and our responses in individual circumstances may then have to meet the circumstances of that moment.

**Mr Gildernew:** I thank the Minister for work that I know he did in conjunction with the PHA last week on schools. Will he commit to his Department, along with the Public Health Agency, assisting boards of governors and school leaders in dealing with concerns that will arise when schools run into difficulties?

**Mr Weir:** There may well be specific actions. I acknowledge what has been said. The clarity and speed of advice are critical, but, depending on individual circumstances, the PHA may give specific advice to a particular school. That might be around points of temporary closure or contacting people, for example. I hope that there will be that level of cooperation; in fact, I am sure that there will. The PHA may have to be involved in interventions, such as the deep clean of a school. It is important that whatever is there is measured and that we do not create undue panic for people. We must ensure that there is not an overreaction or an under-reaction.

**Mr McNulty:** Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. The measured advice does not cut it. School principals are pulling their hair out with the worry of having to make the decision about whether they should travel to Italy. Directing them to the Public Health Agency website or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website is not sufficient. They need robust, definitive guidance on whether they should travel to Italy. In the context of 7,375 live cases of coronavirus in Italy and 366 deaths, and if we are in the containment phase, surely it would be prudent not to send school trips to Italy and for the Minister to give robust guidance to our school leaders now.

**Mr Weir:** Frankly, it is time for robust guidance. That is what has been given, in line with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Member mentioned a measured response. This is a time for calm heads and for people not to grandstand or create undue panic or problems. Consequently, we need to follow the professional health advice, which, in respect of travel, comes from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Maybe the Member was not listening earlier: the advice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office changed last night. Before lunchtime today, we made sure that all schools had been notified of that change of advice about not going to northern Italy and, specifically, the identified regions comprising the 16 million people who have been quarantined, unless it is absolutely essential for people to be there. That is clear-cut advice. Showboating or grandstanding from anyone —

**Mr McNulty:** It is not showboating.

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Weir:** — is not helpful to the situation. We have got to do this in a calm, measured way to try to ensure that the most accurate and professional advice is given, and to urge people to follow that.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for his statement on this serious issue. What powers does a school principal have if there are concerns of a danger of an outbreak in their school?

**Mr Weir:** School principals have the opportunity to make operational decisions in line with whatever advice they get from the PHA, for example. That may be for the temporary closure of a school. School principals will want to liaise with school governors, but I cannot imagine any set of school governors standing in the way of a school principal taking a view, in line with PHA advice, that action needs to be taken. School principals, therefore, have that opportunity. Wider powers will be looked at from the point of view of the Department of Education and the Department of Health as the legislation moves through, and they should address those circumstances.

**Ms S Bradley:** I appreciate that most patients who are unfortunate enough to contract COVID-19 will suffer only a mild illness. Unfortunately, however, there is a vulnerable group of people who will be fearful of contracting something much more sinister. Given that that cohort exists in the school environment, be it children who are more vulnerable or staff, will the Minister acknowledge that the PHA advice is quite generic? I appreciate that he does not have a clinician's voice to add to the situation, but those people will look to him, as the Minister of Education, to be heard.

In addition, will he also give an assurance that there is enough soap in schools for children and staff to wash their hands at regular intervals and that the schools are resourced?

**Mr Weir:** In answer to the latter question, I have asked the Department to contact the EA today to make sure that that is the case. It has not been helpful, as we have seen, that a number of people have been panic buying. In some cases, there have been thefts of soap. We will make sure that there are sufficient resources to ensure that hygiene is maintained, and that will be a key priority.

It is important that the PHA takes individual circumstances into account, where that can be done, and give that level of advice. Again, it is not my role to second-guess that advice, but that is certainly something that the PHA will be cognisant of. We may be in a moving situation, again, as the weeks develop.

**Mr Durkan:** I appreciate, as the Minister has outlined and underlined, that the role to advise lies with the PHA. However, as a supplementary to my colleague's question, we have heard a lot from schools and principals about the difficulties that they have had with resources over a number of years — sometimes, they cannot afford soap. What practical and financial support can the Minister's Department provide to schools? Buying materials is one thing, but if teachers are going to take time off, bringing in substitutes eats into school budgets too.

**Mr Weir:** We will look to develop whatever level of support is needed as time moves on, and I will want to look at the detail of that. Ensuring hygiene in schools is a key priority and I will liaise with officials to see whether further action needs to be taken and what assurances can be directly given. As I said, it is not my position to second-guess health advice.

There are challenging positions in the overall budget situation. The change in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's advice and, allied to that, as I understand it, the decision that was taken over the weekend in Italy to close access to a number of ski resorts will, in many cases, make some trips, even if there was a desire to go ahead with them, null and void because people cannot physically go there and use the resort. Under those circumstances, the level of insurance that can be provided will give a very strong route for schools to be able to claim that. We should remember that the cost of most trips will be borne by parents. Again, however, there will be an opportunity to do that. People have to follow the expert health advice as we move ahead.

## Ministerial Statement

### Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to make this urgent oral statement. I apologise to Members for the late notice and delivery of the statement. I wanted to make sure that it contained the most up-to-date advice that we have.

Further to my oral statement on Monday 2 March on COVID-19, I wish to give Members a further update on recent local developments. First, I can confirm that, as of 9:00 am today, 9 March, 222 tests have been completed in Northern Ireland. While the vast majority have been negative, we now have 12 positive cases in Northern Ireland.

I can update the House and the general public regarding the five presumptive positive cases that were announced yesterday evening. The Public Health Agency advises that two of those cases were travel-related, involving individuals who had recently been in northern Italy.

The remaining three cases can be traced to previously reported cases that involved recent travel to northern Italy.

#### 4.00 pm

One of the three is a young person who attends a school that is co-located with a primary school. Both schools have been given advice by Public Health Agency health protection consultants. The PHA is content that there is no public health risk to anyone attending either school. However, it understands that, as a precautionary measure, both schools will close today to undertake an enhanced clean.

I reassure the House that contact tracing for all five cases is at an advanced stage. All individuals who tested positive are receiving appropriate specialist healthcare in keeping with expert advice and agreed procedures. The Public Health Agency has put in place robust infection control measures to help to prevent further spread. Contact tracing of those who had come into close contact with the individuals was undertaken immediately. Those requiring appropriate advice will be provided with it.

In light of the increasing number of cases, and wanting to keep the House and the public fully informed of what is an evolving situation, the Department will move to daily reporting of cases, as happens in England. The intention is to release the figures each afternoon.

As I outlined previously, the increase in positive cases is not unexpected, and I advise the public not to be unduly alarmed by these developments. I cannot discuss individual cases, but I am fully aware of press reports linking one case to football teams. I assure Members and everyone listening that all appropriate actions are being taken in relation to all confirmed cases.

The overall risk to individuals in Northern Ireland has not changed at this stage. That is based on the advice of the UK Chief Medical Officers. The risk to the UK remains at moderate, but that will be kept under review. I echo the call of the Prime Minister and advise people against any panic buying of food or other products from supermarkets.

At this point, we remain focused on the containment phase, which is aimed at preventing the disease from taking hold in the United Kingdom. We have been clear that we will communicate any move to the delay phase. However, I remind Members that it will not be a sharp transition, and we will continue with many of the actions in the containment phase.

This morning, the First Minister, deputy First Minister and I were in discussion with our counterparts across the UK at a COBRA ministerial meeting to consider the scientific evidence that will guide us to flatten the peak of the outbreak in the UK; to delay and spread the impact on our health service; to push the peak away from this time of year; and to protect those most at risk.

Members will be aware of the rise in cases in the Republic of Ireland. The number stands at 21 and includes two cases of community transmission. Urgent contact tracing for the latest cases is under way. There are no known implications for Northern Ireland at this stage. The relevant public health bodies remain in close contact.

Although the situation is serious, I reassure Members that detailed plans are in place in the event of an outbreak with sustained community transmission spreading across the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. Our health service is used to managing infections, and we are well prepared to deal with this.

I reassure members of the public that we are taking all necessary measures to minimise the risk to them. We continue to plan and will be ready for all eventualities. Extensive work has been undertaken to ensure that all trusts have COVID-19 pods in place. These will enable patients suspected of having COVID-19 to be assessed and treated away from the routine hospital work. We continue to review the best use of testing and clinical pathways so that individuals receive the appropriate care, recognising that many patients will have a mild illness.

My Department has established a new directorate dedicated to surge planning. At operational level, a regional surge planning subgroup has been established by the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board to ensure that there is an appropriate and proportionate level of health and social care preparedness across the sector. Twice-weekly meetings are held. A COVID-19 surge planning workshop was held on 5 March to consider trust surge plans and self-assessment checklists in order to share actions and ensure regional consistency, where possible.

Across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, planning has been stepped up to ensure a coordinated response from all sectors of government. The Executive Office is leading the work on assessing essential services and key sectors' readiness and has convened weekly C3 meetings. C3 means command, control and coordination. The Executive Office led a workshop on 6 March to discuss departmental risks and priorities. I remain in close contact on all recent developments with the other UK Health Ministers, as well as Executive colleagues at the Executive meeting. Twice-weekly COBRA ministerial meetings are now planned to ensure that our joined-up approach to tackling this disease continues. These will be more frequent as required. My Department will continue to work closely with the relevant Departments across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to ensure that Northern Ireland is well-prepared to deal with the situation as events unfold, while the Health and Social Care Board will continue to liaise with its counterparts in the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that, where possible, both jurisdictions can make the best use of our collective resources when responding to COVID-19.

As the situation develops, my Department and the Public Health Agency will continue to provide updated guidance to healthcare professionals and other Departments and their authorities, including schools, as and when

necessary. There were differences in advice on travel to Italy provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Ireland. Following discussion with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their representation to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and in light of decisions taken by the authorities in Italy, I am advised that that variation has now been addressed.

My advice to the public remains the same. I urge members of the public who have symptoms and are concerned that they may have COVID-19 not to turn up at GP clinics or hospital emergency departments. They should instead contact their GP or GP out of hours, from whom they will get advice on next steps, including testing if required. Northern Ireland now has full access to the 111 COVID-19 helpline, which is available 24/7 to provide advice. More general advice about COVID-19 is available at the Public Health Agency website and NI Direct. Those who have been advised to self-isolate at home have a responsibility to follow that advice. We all have a responsibility to take steps to protect each other. In the time ahead, we will also need to consider how best to protect those at most risk. In all this, we will be guided by the evidence of what is most effective.

I remind Members and the public that good personal hygiene is key to helping stop the spread of flu and similar infectious viruses. As such, everyone can help to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other viruses by ensuring that we all take sensible precautions, such as washing our hands thoroughly and often, and to heed the standard advice recommended for similar illnesses, such as cold and flu, by ensuring that, when we sneeze, we catch it, bin it and kill it.

Over the years, my Department, including the health and social care system, has planned extensively for an event like this. Therefore, it is well-prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the public. As Members will be aware, the UK-wide 'Coronavirus: action plan', which was published on 3 March, sets out what the UK as a whole has already done and plans to do to tackle the coronavirus outbreak.

Internationally and in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, we remain in the containment phase of our response as we seek to prevent sustained community transmission. My priority, as Minister, is to ensure that all effective measures continue to be put in place in Northern Ireland. It is vital that we keep taking a

balanced, proportionate approach at all times, with our actions based on the best scientific advice. Our primary focus remains on containment, and then on delay and mitigation.

Let me underline some key points that should offer a level of reassurance. We need to walk a fine line and be alert but not alarmed. The current evidence is that the vast majority of cases appear to be mild and that those affected make a speedy recovery. That is a crucial point that we have to keep reminding people of at every opportunity. Yes, some of our citizens are more vulnerable than others, and we have to work hard to ensure that they get the protection and support that they need not just from the health service but from across society. We are working intensively with public health colleagues in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland to do all that we conceivably can to protect our citizens. The challenges, problems and dilemmas that we are grappling with are mirrored right across these islands. Decisions will be based on the most up-to-date scientific and medical advice. It is at times like these that we really see the value of our National Health Service. It has been preparing for a pandemic. We have some of the top experts in the world advising us on what to do. We have staff across the system working night and day on this. No one who falls sick will have to worry about how much treatment is going to cost.

I also have to be frank with people: this is not going to get any easier any time soon. The indications are that it is likely to get much worse and more challenging before we are through the worst of the situation. We can expect significant ongoing increases in the numbers of people testing positive for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, but the same will be said in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Health systems across the globe are coming under increasing pressure as the virus spreads. Ours will be no different; it is bound to take its toll. Normal business in health and social care may not be possible. Some activities may, unfortunately, have to be scaled back, but such decisions will not be lightly taken.

Let us not sit back passively and wait for the worst to happen. As I have said, guided by the evidence, we will act to delay and push back the peak to lessen the pressures on our health service. We can all make a difference. Washing our hands properly is not a well-meaning or trivial piece of advice; it can really help us to slow the spread of COVID-19. It can help us to even out as much as possible the impact on our health service and push us into a period where flu and other winter illnesses are not around to add to our burdens. That is why containment is

so important. It will not have been a failure if or when we move into the delay phase.

Let us recognise and appreciate the work that our Public Health Agency has been doing. Let us understand the vital importance of the self-isolation and contact-tracing that has been done so far. Without that work, our total today would be much higher. I assure Members that we are in no way being passive or defeatist. It is by no means inevitable that the surge in positive cases in other parts of the world will be replicated here. We all need to rise to the challenge. That includes every single one of us following the simple advice on washing our hands. That is not an optional add-on. We owe it to ourselves and our families to keep doing the right things. We owe to it the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable in our society. We cannot let them down.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I thank the Minister for the urgent briefing that he has given to the Assembly today on an issue that is very fluid and, at times, fast-moving. I also endorse his recognition of the work that is being done, and will be done in the time ahead, by the PHA, medical clinicians and front-line health staff.

A concern that I share with many people is that the North's public services must be given the flexibility to respond to the unique circumstances that we have here on the island. Those circumstances are of benefit in some ways but can bring additional challenges. Will the Minister outline what consideration he has given to how services may move from containment to delay and mitigation, including whether that will be done in consultation with the Southern healthcare authorities?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Chair of the Committee for his support for the work of the professionals in the health and social care system while we get ready for the next move. We are in containment phase because it is working for us here in Northern Ireland, but there is no doubt that, at some point, we will have to move to the delay sequence. That will be advised by the science that we receive at a COBRA level across the United Kingdom.

I am in near-daily contact with Simon Harris, the Health Minister from the Republic of Ireland. Our interactions are guided by what we are both doing. We are in different jurisdictions and we will take different approaches at different times, but you can be assured that the coordination between us in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is

something that I take very seriously, and it has worked to date.

The five Chief Medical Officers from across the jurisdictions will soon hold a conference call to make sure that we have a consistent approach. Our Public Health Agency and the Health Service Executive (HSE) in the South have already been working hand in hand on contact tracing. We are taking a coordinated response across these islands that will help us in how we tackle COVID-19.

**4.15 pm**

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his statement on this important and challenging issue and for all his efforts to date. You certainly have been in the deep end since you came into post, Minister.

Like many MLAs, I have been contacted by constituents and business owners who are concerned about this ever-increasing situation. Has the Department had any discussions with our local airports and ports about travellers coming into Northern Ireland, particularly from hotspot areas such as northern Italy and other highly affected countries? What is being done to reduce the risk from those people coming into Northern Ireland?

**Mr Swann:** The Member's question is well made, because we have people coming into Northern Ireland all the time. We are fortunate that we have never had direct flights from some of the areas that were high on the agenda at the start. The guidance given to our ports and airports is coordinated through Westminster so that we have central advice going to all ports and airports across the United Kingdom. The Public Health Agency has also produced information posters that you will see if you come through City Airport or the International Airport. They are a guide for arriving travellers as to what they should do and the actions that they should take. That guidance is no different from the advice that you or I receive, however. If you think that you have symptoms or are developing symptoms of COVID-19, call the GP or the GP out-of-hours service to see whether tests or further steps are necessary. Do not attend the ED or the GP, but take the appropriate advice.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for his statement and for his efforts to date to stem the spread of coronavirus. I pay tribute to our overburdened and undervalued healthcare workers who will be placed under enormous

pressure in the coming days and weeks, and I wish them well in that challenge.

We have heard today that St Patrick's Day parades have been cancelled in Dublin and in Cork, and there are sporting events being played behind closed doors. What actions does the Minister envisage being necessary here in relation to St Patrick's Day parades and sporting events in the days and weeks ahead?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his comments, but there is one that I want to address: our health service is not undervalued. It is definitely not undervalued by me as Minister, because I realise what it does 365 days of the year, irrespective of COVID-19 or anything else. Our health service is widely valued, and I think that it is valued by everybody else in the House.

On the cancellation of large sporting events or public gatherings, I will be led by the science at this minute in time. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), which is a UK committee of experts, is advising us and those across the United Kingdom that cancelling any large events or sporting activities would not have a serious impact on delaying or containing the spread of COVID-19. I have no intention of giving out advice to my ministerial colleague in the Department for Communities or to sporting coordinators or organisations that they should look to cancel events. I am aware of the steps that have been taken in Dublin and Cork. I also say to the Member that the Republic of Ireland has seen community transfer of COVID-19, which we have not seen in Northern Ireland at this minute in time. It is reassuring that we are possibly not at the same stage as the Republic of Ireland, but we will be guided by the science when it comes to taking such decisions.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for his leadership so far on COVID-19. I also put on record my thanks to the PHA and to the Chief Medical Officer, in particular, who, I know, is burning the midnight oil. Like the rest of the Members here, I thank emergency staff and, indeed, the other emergency services that may be called on in the near future. I also thank the Minister for the nature of his response because, having worked for 20 years in the emergency services, I understand how vital it is to keep a cool head when giving leadership in instances like this. It is the appropriate response.

Does the Minister agree that it is essential that people who have the virus or fear that they may have it are not hit in the pocket for doing the right thing? By staying at home, they will not

only help themselves but help us all by preventing the spread of the virus?

**Mr Swann:** I fully agree with the Member; he is talking about self-isolation. When I made the statement last week, Gerry Carroll, I think, raised the issue of ensuring that people were not hit from that point of view. That issue has been raised, I think, in the House of Commons, and the Prime Minister has made a statement that the Department for Work and Pensions will put something in place to ensure that people are not adversely affected financially by following good and science-based medical advice. The Department for Work and Pensions, I am aware, should be in contact with our Department for Communities on how that social welfare change needs to be made, because it is a devolved issue. If that is the guidance that is coming out of the UK and Westminster, I encourage our Executive and Ministers to replicate it.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I thank the Minister for his statement and for all the work that he is doing along with his departmental officials and staff across the health and social care sector. Before I ask my question, I want to raise a slight concern. The Education Minister was speaking in the House a few minutes ago and said that legislation may be required to exclude children from places of assembly to prevent the spread of infectious disease. On 27 February, the Health Committee amended the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 to bring forward those powers, so I ask the Minister to ensure that his Executive colleagues are aware that coronavirus and COVID-19 have been added to the list of notifiable diseases.

Given that the process of referral to the drive-through testing facility in Antrim has been working well, will the Minister outline his plans to extend that provision to other trust areas?

**Mr Swann:** I am not exactly sure what the Member's first comment is based on, but I will speak to my ministerial colleague in Education. I provide weekly updates to all Executive Ministers, and anyone who has needed additional information has been in contact with the Chief Medical Officer and the Public Health Agency.

The testing pod that we have in place at Antrim Area Hospital has been and is being replicated across a number of our major hospitals. Unfortunately, we will not put them at every hospital because of the speciality involved and the number of staff whom we would expose by doing so. However, I use the opportunity to say

to members of the public, "Don't just turn up at them. It is not a bit of fun to go and see whether you have COVID-19; only go when you have been referred by a GP". Unfortunately, some members of the public have turned up at Antrim just to get tested to see whether they have it. There is a GP referral system, so I thank the Member for drawing attention to the issue. We are putting the pods in place across as many hospitals as possible.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for his statement and pay tribute to his Department and the many health workers who are dealing with the issue. We know that they are doing so in already difficult circumstances, given the pressures on our emergency services and emergency departments.

I congratulate the Minister for presenting clear, calm and consistent advice. That is essential, not only from politicians but from health professionals. One of the confirmed cases that the Minister talked about affects my constituency, and he made reference to it in part. While not talking about the specifics of that case, I have fielded a lot of calls from businesses and sports clubs that have voiced their confusion: with the Public Health Agency and the 111 helpline, some are receiving different advice from others. While I do not know the individual case, they find that concerning, given that they both may have had contact with the individual or individuals, but one is saying to self-isolate and the other is saying not to do so. Will the Minister give some clarity on that or follow it up with the Public Health Agency?

**Mr Speaker:** I call Emma Rogan.

**Ms Rogan:** Thank you. Sorry, there is interference from a phone.

**Mr Speaker:** It is my fault; I was distracted there momentarily. *[Inaudible owing to mobile phone interference.]*

**Mr Swann:** I am more than happy to take them in groups of three if you want, Mr Speaker *[Laughter.]* They are much easier to answer that way.

I would be surprised if there was differing advice coming from the Public Health Agency and NHS 111, because they work from the same script and the same scientific advice. I will take it on board and raise it with both bodies, but I would be very surprised, because I have found that — I said this last week as well — since coronavirus first raised its head in

Northern Ireland from across the world, the level of professionalism in our health service has been second to none at all levels. I would be surprised, but I will take the Member's point on board.

**Ms Rogan:** I thank the Minister for his urgent briefing to the Assembly today. In particular, it can be challenging for our front-line healthcare staff, who work tirelessly to continue to deliver the services. Can the Minister detail what discussions he has had to date with healthcare trade unions on the ever-moving situation?

**Mr Swann:** Work has gone on behind the scenes in preparing for and keeping up to date with the ever-evolving situation that is COVID-19 and coronavirus. My Chief Medical Officer is in regular contact with the trusts and the trade unions, and we will move out to contact faith-based groups and voluntary and community groups to make sure that we have a holistic approach in how we respond to this. Our health unions are a crucial part of our workforce, as is every section of our workforce. They are valued and are a part that I have engaged with often and will continue to engage with, because, without them working with us, the system does not work.

**Mr M Bradley:** Thanks very much to the Minister for his detailed and excellent statement. It was very informative. COVID-19 — the coronavirus — is with us now: there are 319 cases across the UK and 12 in Northern Ireland. The Government are still in containment phase, but the virus is expected to spread. You mentioned a young footballer who tested positive at the weekend but did not know until after the game was over, and both clubs have cooperated fully to try to contain that. What plans are in place for large gatherings like sporting events and events in churches and community halls? I am not being alarmist in any way, but I am a believer in planning, and pre-planning and pre-discussions on what may happen when the time comes is better than saying, "We need to do this". Has the Minister already prepared that?

**Mr Swann:** I point out to the Member that, as I said, I will not comment on any specific case. I assure him that the health service has been planning for situations like this and does so year in, year out. For this specific one, the work that has been put in in the last six to eight weeks is second to none. I do not think that there is an eventuality that should take us by surprise.

Large-scale events were discussed this morning not just in Northern Ireland as preparation for planning but also at a COBRA meeting. We are discussing how we approach large gatherings at a UK level so that the message will be consistent across the United Kingdom and there is not a differential in message that confuses our people when they see something different happening in England, Scotland or Wales. The Member should be reassured about the level of planning. I hope that we never have to use some of the detail that we have prepared for, but the work that is being done is impressive, and I assure him that the work is being done.

**Ms S Bradley:** I, too, thank the Minister and all those who are charged with trying to realise containment on this issue. What safeguarding or protection for the supply of and the health of domiciliary care workers is taking place in the Department? As he rightly pointed out, we owe it to the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable in society, and those workers are often the lifeline to those people. What protections are in place for them?

**Mr Swann:** The Member has touched on the fact that the critical point of our health service is how we support our domiciliary care workers, who will support the most vulnerable in our society, if we have to go to that further stage of self-isolation or further containment. Often, those vulnerable people will be the ones who will be asked to stay in their home and self-isolate.

The support that we give to the domiciliary care worker is as important as that which we give to any other front-line health professional in the system.

The surety that may come from the use of certain protective clothing may not be as scientifically based as it is presentational, as people may come to perceive. We will give those workers the same guidance as we give other health and social care workers: ensure that you wash your hands and take appropriate precautions when you go into people's homes. Those are measures that they should take already when going into a home where someone has flu or any other viral infection. Domiciliary care workers are skilled professionals. Sometimes, what they do is underrated, but they are a valued part of the health and social care system.

4.30 pm

**Mr Beggs:** I, like the Minister, am thankful that, in the UK's National Health Service, we have access to some of the world's experts. We must be really appreciative of that, of all those involved in the planning and preparation of the response, and, indeed, those already working on the front line against coronavirus.

What is the Minister's advice for employers on their responsibilities to their employees, their employees' families and, indeed, the wider community if they employ contractors who come from northern Italy or other hot spots — bearing in mind that, on many occasions, the virus has been linked to northern Italy — so that, ultimately, the community is not endangered? Do the same issues as apply to travellers apply to employees who may come to Northern Ireland to work in essential roles?

**Mr Swann:** The Member almost answered his own question. Anyone who comes into Northern Ireland should treat the virus in the same way. It will not be cognisant of whether you have come from Italy, Iran, Portadown or Portaferry. It will have the same influence and same lack of respect for the healthcare system. If individuals or subcontractors come from elsewhere in the world, they should take the advice of the Public Health Agency: if they think that they have the symptoms of coronavirus, they should contact their GP or out-of-hours service. One message that should be put out there and strengthened is that, because of COVID-19's being a notifiable disease and the structure of our National Health Service in Northern Ireland, they should not be charged for that advice or the support that may also be necessary.

Employers have a duty of care to look after their employees. It is up to them to ensure that all provisions are in place to support their employees in the workplace.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Minister for his statement. In light of panic buying by a small section of the public, which is unfortunate and not required, can the Minister assure the House that there will be enough hand sanitisers for health staff, especially for those who provide care in the community?

**Mr Swann:** The Member makes a valid point about the panic buying that took place over the weekend. Those who do it may think that they are doing it for the right purpose, but it puts a financial burden on those who cannot afford to bulk-buy — people who live week to week — when doing their daily shop. There is a duty and an onus on members of the public not to panic and look for an oversupply — should it be toilet

roll, hand sanitiser, soap, tins of beans or whatever. It might give them reassurance, but it puts somebody else under further pressure. Today, that message has also been laid out by the Retail Consortium.

On supplies for the health service, I assure the Member that we are not looking to any of the large supermarkets to buy hand sanitiser or soap: the National Health Service is supplied with the stocks that it needs of those products.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I acknowledge that he said that healthcare staff are not undervalued. That is great. However, he cannot deny that they are overstretched. We know that there is a shortage of a couple of thousand nurses. Is the Minister confident that there is enough capacity in the health workforce to deal with what could come? Are there contingency plans in place for when healthcare staff inevitably have to take time off?

**Mr Swann:** The Member makes a valid point. I refer him back to what I said in my statement. Normal business in health and social care may not be possible. Some activities may, unfortunately, have to be scaled back, but those are decisions that will not be taken lightly. That applies to the support that we need to give to our staff as well so that they can provide the first-class healthcare that they expect to give and that we expect them to give. There are plans in place, although we have not enacted them yet, to look at how we can bring back retired professionals into the health and social care sector while not putting them in a place where they become vulnerable or open to contagion, because it is the older age group that may be particularly at risk. It is about where we can best place them and best utilise their skills. The Department has already been contacted by GPs and nurses who want to step up because they have been part of that caring profession that we know and recognise. They have a skill, and they have a desire to give, and they know that we will utilise those skills if the point comes where we have to do so.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Health Minister for his very important statement. Can he give an assurance that all hospital staff and other health staff who are treating and in contact with patients with the virus are all supplied with the appropriate clothing? He may have answered that before, but I will ask it again. I commend all the health staff for the terrific work that they do for us all.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member and every Member for their support for our health and

social care staff. I say this to all Members: do not underestimate the value that our words of support and encouragement in here have on a workforce that is under pressure and feeling that pressure. The staff who are coming into face-to-face contact with people who are already positive with COVID-19 have all the appropriate protective clothing that they need, and we, as a health service, ensure that they do.

**Mr Catney:** I am sure that the whole House will agree that the Minister carries a heavy weight on his shoulders, and we would like to be able to give him whatever support possible. I am thinking of the homeless, and that is a cross-cutting issue with the Minister for Communities, who was here earlier. Has the Minister been able to consider the report from the HSE that said that the number of people who could become infected with COVID-19 could conservatively be put at 1.9 million following an outbreak? Does he believe that our health service will be adequately equipped? I do not say that as a form of scaremongering; I am saying that we should plan for the worst and hope for the best.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. I think that he is right. We do plan for the worst and hope for the best, and I think that that is what we have been doing. I am not aware of the report that the Member mentioned, but the figure does not sound right to me, simply because the population of Northern Ireland is between 1.8 million and 1.9 million, so the indication —

**Mr Catney:** The figure is for across the island, Minister. Sorry.

**Mr Swann:** I have not had sight of that report. The scientific advice that we are getting is that we can expect anything from 50% to 80% of the population to be infected by COVID-19. That is for different levels of infection, and it moves to the very worst-case scenario. The Member can do the sums himself: 80% of 1.8 million is quite a bit. I will not get into the mental maths exercises today again.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Sinead McLaughlin

**Ms McLaughlin:** I am sorry, I did not ask to speak.

**Mr Speaker:** We will move on.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Minister for the statement. It is greatly appreciated, and I put on record my respect and admiration for all

healthcare workers, who are taking on extra duties. They must be commended given that we all know that they are working in extremely stressed and under-resourced circumstances. I am interested to hear the Minister's views on the fact that we are hearing reports that Dublin is going to cancel its St Patrick's Day festivities, yet an announcement on that has not been made here. While it is good to hear that you are working well with your counterparts across the UK and in the Republic of Ireland, I want to look at that disparity. We are in a period of containment now, but if we have to move to a delay sequence, how will that be calculated? Who makes that call? Will that be an island-wide response? Will that be a UK-wide response? Will that be a Northern Ireland response? How will we join up the dots if we are talking about 50% to 80% of the population facing contamination here?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her point. The response will be science-based. We will take advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which is based in the United Kingdom, and we will take advice from our Chief Medical Officer. As I said in an earlier response, the reason why the Member may see a difference between our reaction to the St Patrick's Day parade in Northern Ireland and the St Patrick's Day parade in Dublin is that we do not have any evidence of community transmission, so there is no scientific value in cancelling events at this minute in time.

When we move to the delay phase, it may be necessary to cancel public events, but our concern is that if we move too early in taking that step, the public will become used to it, and they will not take it seriously when we actually have to do it. When I mentioned flattening out the curve in my statement, it is about the curve of infection in Northern Ireland. That is about making the right call at the right time. Up until now, I have been guided by the science, and I will continue to do that. That is the guidance that I will take.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister said that the National Health Service is preparing for a pandemic. Of course, all of us hope that that will not happen, but, if it does, do we have enough ventilators at our service in Northern Ireland for the most serious cases? Secondly, I do not want to at all trivialise this, but, as an Assembly, is it not important that we set an example on these public health issues? Therefore, is it a good example that, in this House, we have open trays of unwrapped mints that Members, with hands washed or unwashed, can handle as they help themselves, or should we set an

example and optimise the public health standards that we live to?

**Mr Swann:** I will take the Member's first point. The purchase of additional ventilators, should it be necessary, has been discussed in other places. However, it is not just about going out to buy ventilators. It is about making sure that we have the trained staff to utilise them. We are still in containment phase, and it is important that we stay in that phase as long as possible to make sure that we do not get to the stage where the ventilation of large numbers of patients is necessary.

In regard to your second question — I know that the Member was not being facetious when he asked that question — it is a valid point that maybe the House should look at. If there is anyone to set an example to the general public, it is us in this place. This is where they are looking to for advice and guidance on how to behave. Again, I thank all Members for the support that they have given to those people who work in our National Health Service and for the mature and responsible manner in how they are approaching COVID-19. We have not got to the stage where people are trying to make political gain or outworkings on what is a very serious issue.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he have any plans to ensure that hand sanitisers are installed in all public buildings and spaces to prevent person-to-person transmission? Will he look specifically at public buildings that are more likely to contain people with immunodeficiency disorders, such as personal independence payment assessment centres, including Capita buildings?

**Mr Swann:** It is a relatively new issue that was brought to my attention earlier this morning. It is something that we could potentially look at. Equally disappointing is the number of hand sanitisers that are being stolen from GP surgeries, hospitals and all the rest of it. Not only are we seeing the effect of panic buying, but we are seeing people who are abusing a provision that is put in for those people who are the most vulnerable, and that is the people who are in GP surgeries and hospitals.

I say to those who think that they need hand sanitiser so badly that they are stealing it from our hospitals to catch themselves on. They are putting somebody's life in danger. As for supplying a greater number of hand sanitisers, hot water and soap is just as effective. If sinks

are available in those agencies, they should be made available to the general public to use.

**4.45 pm**

**Mr McCrossan:** Minister, thank you for your address to the House. I also put on record my sincere thanks to and recognition of our hard-working healthcare staff who are on the front line, as well as their families, who, in the context of what we are facing, will be extremely worried about their family members helping those most in need.

Minister, I note that in your statement you said that there is a UK-wide action plan to deal with coronavirus, but we are on one island, and people traverse the island daily. You mentioned that you are also in conversation with Minister Harris in the South. Are there any plans for an all-Ireland action plan to tackle coronavirus? Moreover, flights between Dublin Airport and northern Italy continue. Given that a significant number of people here have contracted the virus from people who have been in northern Italy, have there been any conversations between your respective Departments about stopping those flights?

**Mr Swann:** We need to be careful. I know that the Member is not trying to make this a political issue and is looking at it in the wider sphere.

The interactions that we have had with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland at a Chief Medical Officer level and those between the Public Health Agency and the Health Service Executive have been second to none over the past few months to prepare us for how we react to the situation, which is as people. It is not about us being politicians or looking at political borders but about how we respond to ensure that we provide the best healthcare and support to those who need it.

It is not within my remit to call for flights that come into Dublin to be cancelled. I am, however, aware that some of the airlines that have been flying from Milan to Dublin have cancelled flights in recent weeks.

As to our cooperation on either side of the border, I was in contact with Minister Harris after 10 o'clock last night. Contact and interactions are happening at all levels. We also work at a UK-wide level with COBRA, but the information that we get there is shared and utilised in the interactions between us and the Republic of Ireland to make sure that a consistent approach is taken. That is why I was able to say earlier that, because of the

representations that were made to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the travel advice on ski trips and other travel has been brought into line with the advice given by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. There is a consistent approach. We are looking not at the situation from the position of different countries with political boundaries but at how we can address it as a people.

**Mr Harvey:** Minister, as a means of containment, will you consider the possibility of testing those who arrive from highly infectious areas?

**Mr Swann:** I think that the Member is referring to taking people's temperature as they come in. The unfortunate thing with COVID-19, compared with SARS, is that symptoms can take up to seven to 10 days to develop. You therefore do not get a temperature there and then, whereas with SARS the temperature spike was immediate. Taking people's temperatures as they arrive in airports means that people can be missed. Unfortunately, it is not an accurate way of pinpointing someone with the virus.

**Mr O'Toole:** I thank the Minister for his statement and for taking questions. Like everyone else, I want to put on record my gratitude and respect for health service workers who have been working extremely hard and will be putting themselves through even more in the weeks and months ahead.

I want to follow up on the specific question of the all-island complexion. I respect what the Minister has said about how closely he is working with authorities in the Republic, but, given that the St Patrick's Day festivities have been cancelled in Dublin and Cork, there seems to be a clear public health emphasis on large numbers of people not being too proximate to one another, as within a metre or two. Given that he has said that it is too early to start cancelling large-scale sporting events or festivities in the North, will he give specific guidance to members of the public on their proximity to others at large-scale events, or is there no new advice from his Department?

**Mr Swann:** At the minute, there is no new advice on large-scale events or public gatherings. The scientific evidence and advice that we are getting from SAGE and the Chief Medical Officer is that cancelling those events will not delay or help us in delaying the spread of COVID-19. There may be a point where that is necessary, but if you use all the tools in the toolbox too early, they become ineffective.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Minister for his statement and answers thus far on a very fluid and complex situation. Members have asked similar questions, and there can be a lot of overlap. You have already addressed the issue of staffing and skills. Will the Minister outline what additional capacity that has or will be commissioned to address the rise in demand of assessment pods, bed space and ward space, as areas in the South of Ireland have commissioned some intensive care beds?

**Mr Swann:** The Member refers to the surge planning that we are undertaking across health trusts and the Health and Social Care Board. We will see the number of cases ramping up — there is no point in trying to deny it — and that work is already under way. It is being done by trusts and the Health and Social Care Board.

We will react at different levels and at different points, as the number of cases increases. At specific points, we will utilise members of the voluntary and community sector, engage with faith-based groups and supply the additional support to people who need it in the community, because family members are elsewhere, tied up or may be self-isolating. All that work is being done. We are looking at how we use different facilities, and we may have to be proportionate between different areas and hospitals. This is how we will manage COVID-19.

**Miss Woods:** Thank you, Minister, for your statement, and thanks to those working at the front line, tackling COVID-19. Given that the advice from professionals is to self-isolate if required, how does this work for those who live in hostels, shelters or refuges — for instance, victims who have left a violent domestic situation — or who live in other shared accommodation or, indeed, in our prisons? Will the Minister ensure that consideration is given to those who cannot self-isolate due to the nature of where they live and, should that be required, will he ensure that shared accommodation, shelters and refuges are equipped to deal with this?

**Mr Swann:** The Member makes a valid point. This is about how we look after the most vulnerable in our society. When advice and guidance has to be given for people who find themselves in a situation where they have to self-isolate, help and support should be there and should be available to everybody. In our society, it should not be available for one and not for another. The Member's point is well made, and I take it on board.

**Ms Dillon:** Has the Minister had any conversations with the Minister for Communities on the point that Mr Carroll raised, that people with immunodeficiencies who have to go to assessment centres should possibly not have to attend those centres and either be assessed at home or have assessment delayed until the scare around coronavirus is over?

**Mr Swann:** It is not a conversation that I have had. I am sure that the Member's ministerial colleague will be listening in and maybe we will have the conversation. I am happy enough to have it to make sure that those who need that help and support are not put in a situation or in areas where the risk of infection may be greater because of the need to attend an assessment centre.

**Ms C Kelly:** What advice are health and social care workers being given on their return to work from affected areas, such as China and northern Italy? I am aware of one case where a health worker returned from northern Italy and was advised to return to work unless they were showing symptoms.

**Mr Swann:** I cannot comment on individual cases of those coming back from northern Italy. The advice that should have been taken comes from NHS 111 or the PHA. I am not sure of the date that the Member is referring to, so it may have been a date that preceded the advice being given.

If the Member has specific concerns that they want to share with me or the Public Health Agency, it is something that I will take on outside this Chamber.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Minister, thank you for your statement. You have been very clear in telling people to be sensible and not alarmist. You will be aware that the Chief Constable called for powers to be introduced here, similar to those being looked at by Westminster, for detaining people who are unwilling to go into quarantine. Are you considering, with the Public Health Agency, to add COVID-19 as one of those infectious diseases that would give the police additional powers following medical assessment?

**Mr Swann:** Paula Bradshaw referred to it earlier, and the Chair can back me up on the date, but on 27 February the Health Committee actually made COVID-19 a notifiable disease, and that order came into effect on 29 February. That important mechanism was requested by my Department and supported by the Health

Committee, and the additional powers are in place.

## Matter of the Day

### Flybe: Administration

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Andrew Muir has been given leave to make a statement on the collapse of Flybe that fulfils the criteria as set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate that by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that, as normal, I will not take any points of order on this, or any other matter, until the item of business has been finished.

**Mr Muir:** You will all now be aware that Flybe went into administration last Thursday, 5 March, resulting in the redundancy of staff and leaving many travellers struggling to make it back home.

Starting as Jersey European Airways on 1 November 1979, Flybe came to Northern Ireland in July 1985. Since then, it has grown to account for 25% of Northern Ireland's air connectivity and 80% of Belfast City Airport's scheduled flights.

The focus, following the closure of Flybe, must, first and foremost, be with the staff and providing appropriate support as they seek alternative employment. It is incumbent upon government, especially the Department for the Economy, to deploy the full range of support measures available. Staff have already been in contact with me, as they have been struggling to obtain assistance in the hunt for jobs and benefits. More must be done.

The unique circumstances of Northern Ireland must also be addressed by the UK Government as we seek to re-establish our air connectivity to the level prior to Flybe's collapse. A one-size-fits-all approach across the entire UK does not work. Northern Ireland does not have the road and rail links to the rest of the UK in the same way that Great Britain has, and thus needs good air connectivity to maintain external links, particularly in a post-Brexit world.

Last week, I spoke to the management of Belfast City Airport. I know that they are confident that replacement providers will be secured to cover many of the routes, such was the demand that was previously experienced and the quality experience that is on offer at

George Best Belfast City Airport. However, I am aware that the staff are very conscious of the risk of redundancies, and that is an ever-present worry for them.

The issue of air passenger duty for internal domestic flights between Northern Ireland and Great Britain must be addressed by the Chancellor on Wednesday. The status quo cannot pertain. In the context of the downturn being experienced as a result of the coronavirus, more action must be taken in the wake of Flybe's collapse.

**Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Matter of the Day, raised by Andrew Muir, on the collapse of Flybe. First and foremost my thoughts, as I am sure are the thoughts of other Members, are with the Flybe staff and their families, who now face uncertainty about their futures.

The majority of flights in and out of Belfast City Airport, as we know, were operated by Flybe, and were used daily for business travel as well as by students and families for travel to Britain and beyond. Therefore, the airline's entry into administration is a real blow to the local economy. It will also be a big inconvenience to those who have booked flights and who may now face a loss of money as well as inconvenience. The Consumer Council has issued advice, and I encourage people to check the advice and seek further information if required.

### 5.00 pm

It is important to stress that the Flybe routes were profitable and busy and will be attractive to other airline operators. Certainly, Belfast City Airport is working to secure other providers for those routes, with a provider already having been secured for some of them.

Last Thursday, I spoke to the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, about the immediate response. I also received a briefing from Department for the Economy officials on its role. I hope to meet the chief executive of Belfast City Airport later this week. The primary responsibilities for civil aviation are reserved and sit mostly with the British Treasury and Department for Transport (DfT). When the bailout for Flybe was put forward in January, it was agreed that there would be reviews of air passenger duty (APD) by the Treasury and of regional air connectivity by DfT in Britain. Those reviews have yet to be carried out, but the Department for the Economy is liaising with the Department for Transport in Britain on the terms

of reference for the regional air connectivity review.

Over the weekend, I was contacted by businesses that relied on Flybe routes and are keen that they be secured into the future. It is important that we now demonstrate that we continue to be open for business and that we support industry partners in their attempts to secure alternative providers. I understand that the Finance Minister discussed APD with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers last week. Together, they agreed to put it on the agenda for discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury tomorrow morning. As already outlined, it was due to be reviewed by the Treasury. In the context of the climate emergency, it is important that strategic policies are in place, including the statutory duty, primarily on big polluters, to reduce their omissions, as well as it being the responsibility of individuals. However, for environmental purposes, APD is a badly designed tax, and we need to look at alternative, more effective measures. In the time ahead, the Economy Committee, my party and I will continue to support the work of our Executive Ministers and local businesses as they recover from the collapse of Flybe and try to secure other providers.

**Mr Newton:** I am grateful to the Member who tabled this Matter of the Day. We all know the value of George Best Belfast City Airport to the economy of east Belfast, Belfast and, indeed, Northern Ireland — it is that crucial. It is a sad day when the collapse of budget airline Flybe causes not exactly a crisis but, certainly, a serious situation. Belfast City Airport, at this stage in the process, deserves and needs the support of the business community, the wider community and the political community so that it can work through the project of securing airlines to fill the gaps in routes. It was mentioned that Flybe had 80% of flights going out of George Best Belfast City Airport. It is a hammer blow to the business community, the travelling community and to the tourism community, given that Northern Ireland has, in the past number of years, upped its game to become a place attractive to tourists.

I was more than impressed by the actions of Mr Brian Ambrose, the chief executive, and his staff. In a difficult situation, he took a very positive attitude. He was able to announce, first, additional flights to Scotland and, now, additional flights to Teesside International Airport with Eastern Airways. He was upfront with the TV crews and the media, portraying what could only be described as steely determination to get the airport up and running

again. Politicians and representatives of all shades not only from east Belfast but from all of Northern Ireland need to step up to the plate. We need to support the efforts that the staff have been making in Belfast City Airport and encourage them in the difficult task that they have ahead. Politicians have a role to play in the issue of air passenger duty.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Flybe entering administration is a huge blow to our local economy. Flybe's flights were critical to regional connectivity and for people studying and working in GB. They also provided critical routes for our tourism industry and for people visiting Northern Ireland.

I call on the UK Government to end air passenger duty on flights between Northern Ireland and Great Britain to ensure the viability of Belfast City Airport and the continuation of links from Northern Ireland to regional airports in Great Britain in the wake of the Flybe collapse. The principle of air passenger duty on internal flights in Great Britain makes absolute sense to encourage passengers to travel by train and to reduce carbon emissions, but the logic does not apply in Northern Ireland. We are reliant on air links to get to Great Britain. For us, APD is an extra tax that makes it more expensive to fly and puts strain on our regional airports, both Belfast City Airport and the City of Derry Airport.

To protect our regional connectivity, we need APD to end on flights between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The Highlands and islands of Scotland are recognised as being reliant on air connections, so APD is not levied on their flights. Exactly the same situation applies to Northern Ireland, yet we are treated differently. That is discriminatory against Northern Ireland and demonstrates that the UK Government are less concerned about us than they are about the north of Scotland. That discrimination has to end. We want to protect Belfast City Airport and the City of Derry Airport.

One risk is that a new airline or new airlines brought in for regional connections between Belfast City Airport and GB regional airports will offer fewer destinations than Flybe provided. Removing APD from those flights would be likely to make more routes more attractive to more airlines and keep Northern Ireland's vital regional connectivity open. We need to be open for business. Our industries — our tourism industry in particular — are under immense pressure and challenges. This is another challenge to add to the long list.

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Member for North Down for bringing this forward and you, Mr Speaker, for accepting it. This is a body blow to the economy of Northern Ireland. My thoughts, as are those of so many who have spoken, are with the staff affected directly and indirectly by this. My sister was cabin crew for seven years. She found out, at half past midnight on the night that the company went bust that she had lost her job, along with 3,000 others. It came as a body blow to them all. They were being called into work that week and that day not knowing that anything was wrong. They had been going above and beyond the call of duty in recent years, knowing that there were financial difficulties; in fact, staff were being brought on to the company as recently as last week, so it came as a real shock. As an Assembly working with local government through the Executive, we need to do all that we can to support the staff in seeking retraining and job opportunities, especially as so many of them came from Thomas Cook and had already been through the process. That is very concerning.

Members touched on air passenger duty. I echo what has been said. The Conservative Party manifesto pledged to put UK connectivity at its centre. As we are an integral part of the UK, it flies in the face of that pledge to see APD in place. It needs to be abolished. We need to incentivise people to be able to fly freely throughout the United Kingdom.

Some 80% of the flights that went out of Belfast City Airport were provided by Flybe. They went to places that were not always profitable but provided key links for tourism, students and business in parts of the UK and Europe that maybe were not normally appealing.

I am pleased to hear from the Chairperson of the Economy Committee that the Finance Minister is working on the call for APD to be abolished. We also need to look at an air route development fund in order to try to incentivise some of the less profitable routes and try to keep that connectivity. I know that Reg Empey raised that with the Minister for Transport at Westminster last week.

Like Robin Newton, I commend Brian Ambrose, who has done a fantastic job in the past few days trying to replace some of the routes.

However, it is my fear that the most profitable routes will be snapped up and those that provide essential and additional connectivity will be lost.

It is incumbent on all of us to support the Flybe staff and try to give as much opportunity to new airlines to come in.

**Mr Allister:** The quite disturbing news about Flybe came off the back of other airport-related news that also has the potential to have an adverse effect on Northern Ireland. Last week's ruling that put the Heathrow extension in doubt increases the possibility of a severe loss of potential jobs to Northern Ireland. We were very hopeful, particularly in my constituency, of gaining considerable advancement through the Heathrow hub, and I trust that something there can be still be salvaged.

Off that, then, we had the loss of Flybe, which is a huge economic blow because of the connectivity that it provided, which, of course, is fundamental to any prospect that we have of economic success. The connectivity throughout the world, which starts in regional airports and advances through different hubs, is key to a place like Northern Ireland.

It is quite clear that one of the issues that finally brought down Flybe — not the only issue, but a key one — was air passenger duty. I remind the House that air passenger duty was one of those green taxes that was introduced by those who were hysterical about issues like CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, telling us that it had to be done if we were going to save the planet. Of course, we have seen that one of the outworkings of that hysteria around that duty is the collapse of connectivity for Northern Ireland. In future, those who jump on the green bandwagon need to think twice about the ultimate negative effect that they are imposing on the economy.

Belfast City Airport still has a future, as Robin Newton said. Mr Ambrose has been out very quickly, showing positivity, and I am sure that others will be glad to take up many of the routes. At some point, perhaps, Northern Ireland, which is a small country, seeking to sustain three airports, maybe needs to look at where the future growth for our economy is its capability to do that. We know that the airport at Eglinton already costs a substantial amount of public money, and now we have Belfast City Airport in trouble. An overview is needed at some point — maybe it should have happened before now — as to the future of our airport strategy. I see a vital role for Belfast City Airport, and I wish Mr Ambrose and his colleagues well in retrieving a bad situation.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member who brought this important matter of the day to the Chamber this afternoon. First and foremost, like others, I want to put on record my thoughts for the Flybe

staff and all the staff at George Best Belfast City Airport. No doubt the news will have come as a shock to them, and they will be deeply concerned. We need to reach out and ensure that they have the necessary support.

Thousands of jobs across the UK and 80% of the flights in and out of Belfast City Airport were affected. I agree with my colleague that, while this is a big issue for east Belfast and, indeed, Belfast, it affects Northern Ireland as a whole. It affects businesses, students and tourism, and it is something that will no doubt alarm many people across the country.

I recognise, however, that aviation is not a devolved matter, but I know from conversations that we have had with our colleague, the Economy Minister, that it is being taken very seriously indeed. As stated recently by my colleague Gavin Robinson, the MP for East Belfast, the UK Government have large ambitions for improving regional connectivity. However, to date, those have been very light on detail. The affected flights are vital, particularly for our business community. As has been mentioned, the airport in Londonderry is in a similar position where some of the routes, whilst they may not be the most profitable, are vital in their impact on our local economy. The routes are vital to Northern Ireland's access to its GB markets and for tourists.

### 5.15 pm

I urge the UK Government to take steps in several areas. We need support for the routes that are without an operator. I thank Loganair for stepping in to take on some of them. We need to see action taken on the others as soon as possible. We need delivery on improving regional connectivity. We have committed to that, as have the Governments in New Decade, New Approach. We need further support for public service obligations. Those are vital for our airports, particularly the City of Derry Airport in my constituency. There is also the issue of air passenger duty. For years, our tourism and business leaders have raised concerns about what they see as the very damaging impact of that tax. The Government need to address APD as soon as possible.

All of us recognise the serious concerns and issues that have arisen from Flybe's collapse. We need to do all that we can to address them.

**Mr O'Toole:** I echo what many colleagues have said about the seriousness of the situation. Like Robin Newton, I am a Member for a Belfast constituency. I am deeply concerned about its

impact on the whole of Northern Ireland, yes, but I am also concerned for our city.

Belfast City Airport is a key gateway, particularly for business and tourist travellers. Nearly 60% of tourists come through Belfast City Airport. We know the quality of the service there and the importance of the connectivity to our business community. Being someone who, not that long ago, returned to Northern Ireland after a long time on the island immediately to our east, I can testify to the efficiency of the service at Belfast City Airport and the importance of the Flybe routes. This is bad news, and it has come at a bad time, given the relative vulnerability of our economy and the coronavirus.

That having been said, there are a couple of specific points that I want to make. First, Flybe has been in financial difficulty for some time. Although it is a tragedy, particularly for members of staff — John Stewart spoke about his sister and the other diligent, talented and able members of staff who worked for Flybe — there were, unfortunately, issues with the airline. Like others, however, I share the optimism about the future of the airport. Its management has got out in front of this and have been marketing the airport and its terrific offer, and Belfast's terrific offer. Hopefully, that will lead to the announcement of new routes and to airlines replacing Flybe.

Furthermore, any response to the situation has to involve a long-term look at Northern Ireland's economy and connectivity. It is all well and good talking about NI/GB air connectivity, which is vital, and I will talk a little about that presently, but we also have to think about our medium- to long-term economic strategy for Northern Ireland. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document said that the Assembly would be delivering an economic strategy. That is vital, and we await it with interest.

We are on an island. We are also next to a bigger economy and a key market for us, and that is Great Britain. We need to be connected to both. Whatever your constitutional preference, our economy needs to grow in an ambidextrous way. We need to be completely joined up across this island, and we need connectivity to reflect that.

We know that we do not have the all-island public transport infrastructure to help our economy grow or to deal with the climate emergency. We have to grow, so our long-term transport infrastructure thinking has to reflect that. We also know that the internal UK market is going to be critical for Northern Ireland. We

cannot pretend otherwise, so we need air connectivity to reflect that. We therefore need a joined-up, long-term, strategic look at that to be taken by the Executive. It cannot just be about protecting individual routes, important though those routes are.

That brings me on to air passenger duty. My colleague spoke passionately and correctly about how we need to look at Northern Ireland's unique position and at how that tax is levied. When we bring forward our proposals, it is important that we do so in as targeted a way as possible. I gently say that, when we ask the Treasury for action on air passenger duty, it will have an ask from the block grant, so we need to consider that. In the first part of this decade, we had long-haul APD reduced to protect long-haul flights out of Belfast International. We do not have any long-haul flights out of Belfast International at the minute. We need to think about exactly how we target that help, although I agree that we do need action on APD.

The key point is to reiterate what everyone said about the importance of Belfast City Airport and the quality of the staff and the routes there. We also need to think seriously about the long-term connectivity that we need both across this island and with Britain.

**Mr Dunne:** I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I thank my North Down colleague, Andrew Muir, for securing it. Belfast City Airport is a key asset for Northern Ireland's connectivity. It is crucial for our economy and tourism sector. Flybe has been a central part of the airport's success for many years. It has been the anchor airline, carrying over 1.6 million passengers every year and providing 80% of the flights to and from the airport.

The airport is very convenient with direct and quick access to Belfast city centre and, of course, important areas like north Down. That makes it a very attractive service for all involved. As was mentioned, the airport is also a very valuable employer of hundreds of local staff, from airline staff, ground staff and fire service crew right through to those in the airport hospitality services. I noticed when driving past last night that there were about eight taxis there when, usually on a Sunday night, there would be about 28. This is already having an impact on employment.

We all rightly commend the work of the chief executive, Mr Brian Ambrose, who has overseen the airport's success, including the £15 million upgrade to the facility that was opened in late 2018 and made it a very modern,

convenient and quick service airport for us all. I have been in contact with the chief executive, and I know that he is making every effort to attract new routes to carry passengers in future. He has two carriers announced already, which is a positive development.

Air passenger duty was mentioned. It is one area in which action must be taken to ensure that connectivity is maintained and enhanced. I know that our Minister, Diane Dodds, is continuing to work on that, as are DUP MPs at Westminster. We must continue to focus on this important issue in order to support our economy and to develop our connectivity with the rest of the UK and beyond. We must ensure that Flybe is replaced with new airlines and new routes to and from Belfast City Airport.

*Adjourned at 5.23 pm.*

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