



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Official Report (Hansard)

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Dunne, Gordon (North Down)  
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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)  
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Hilditch, David (East Antrim)  
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Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)  
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Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)  
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
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Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)  
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O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)  
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Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)  
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Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)  
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Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)  
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Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Weir, Peter (Strangford)  
Wells, Jim (South Down)  
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 November 2020

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** I advise the House that I have received a letter of resignation from Ms Catherine Kelly as a Member for the West Tyrone constituency. Her resignation took effect from 3 November 2020. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

## Matter of the Day

### US Presidential Election

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this Matter of the Day. There are very few of us who were not witness to the unfolding presidential race across the Atlantic last week and its culmination at the weekend when Joe R Biden was formally announced as the forty-sixth president of the United States of America. I extend my warm congratulations to the president-elect and to the history-making vice president-elect, Kamala Harris, as they prepare to take up their office on 20 January 2021.

We are inextricably linked with the US through our history and by family and economic links. We are connected by our transatlantic relationships in the field of trade, investment and technological development and in our enjoyment of cultural, educational and other opportunities. Indeed, the oldest US consulate in the world is located in Belfast.

The president-elect is no stranger to this island — quite the opposite. He is a friend to Ireland and proudly celebrates his Irish-American roots, both North and South. Joe Biden is a key supporter of our precious peace process and has shown ongoing commitment, in particular, to the institutions established here in the North under the Good Friday Agreement. He comes into office at a time of great threat from the British Government with Brexit and the refusal to honour agreements that are looming large. The draft Internal Market Bill has been opposed by the majority of Assembly Members, who

voted to reject it on the basis that it constitutes a serious violation of the protocol, which is specifically designed to protect the agreement and the achievements of the peace process, including avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland.

In addressing the grievous threat that we face from a looming Brexit, Joe Biden has signalled his intent to defend the interests of Ireland and to ensure that the progress made under the Good Friday Agreement is not undermined. Indeed, Joe Biden is on record as saying:

*"any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the agreement and preventing the return of a hard border".*

Sinn Féin will continue to defend the foundation stones of the peace process, including the Good Friday Agreement, and will work with all those who share that priority wherever they may be — in this case, the White House. I look forward to working with the new president and his Administration to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement is protected and that its transformative potential is fully realised.

Our focus will also be on international collaboration as we deal with a global pandemic that has caused untold loss and pain right across the world. I look forward to the possibility of welcoming Joe Biden to the North in the future, as the president of the US, where we can assure him of the warmest of welcomes.

It would be remiss of me not to make specific mention of the historic achievement of the vice president-elect, Kamala Harris. She is breaking new ground not only as the first female to take up the second-highest office in the United States but as the first black woman and, indeed, the first Asian American to take this office. Her achievements will act as a catalyst to inspire many women, not only in the US but closer to home, with their ambitions and dreams of joining us in public life. Ádh mór ar Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Thank you for allowing this Matter of the Day.

**Mr Stalford:** It was encouraging to hear the deputy First Minister say that she will extend an invitation and looks forward to welcoming the new president. I can recall an occasion when a previous president, George W Bush, visited Northern Ireland, and, as her predecessor was welcoming him to Stormont Castle, Sinn Féin activists were protesting on the streets about his presence on this estate, such is the double-faced standard that exists.

Regardless of who holds the office of president of the United States, relations between Northern Ireland and the United States of America are important. Unlike other Members, I do not stand on platforms and denounce America as a force for evil in the world, because I do not believe that it is. I believe that America is a force for good in the world. It is important that we recognise that this is an internal matter for the people of the United States of America. While it is true that they have made their choice, it is our responsibility to work closely with whoever is in office because Northern Ireland benefits from our relationship with the United States. Indeed, a quarter of the people who have held the office of president can trace their family directly back to Ulster and this part of the island. That relationship is welcome because it allows us, a country of a mere 1.8 million people, to punch way above our weight with regard to influence on Capitol Hill.

President-elect Biden secured the greatest number of votes cast for any candidate in history. The candidate whom he defeated, outgoing President Trump, secured the second-greatest number of votes cast for any candidate in US history. Traditional barriers have been broken down in the election, and it is a welcome development that someone of Indian and African heritage is to be elected vice president of the United States. The cruel racism of the 1950s and 1960s that was apparent on the streets, particularly on the streets of southern America, is slowly but surely being confined to the past, and that is a welcome development. I welcome the progress that the world's strongest democracy is making, as we all should.

I have said that good relations are important. We have special linkages, and this has been an immense democratic exercise in terms of turnout and the levels of support that both main candidates, from the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, have secured. We have always had influence and relations, and it is important to build on that. That will be achieved if we all work to adopt a positive working relationship, regardless of who holds the office of president. It is no good being pro-American simply because your favourite candidate has prevailed.

**Ms Mallon:** On behalf of the SDLP, I offer warm congratulations to President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. Our party, perhaps more than most, nailed its colours to the mast over the last four years in calling out what it saw as an interminable march towards politics that was defined by division, fear and resentment and which led to children

being separated from their families, travel bans on religious minorities and an emboldened racist movement. It is not difficult, therefore, to empathise with the people of the United States and across the world who feel like the cloud is starting to break. This was a historic event, for a number of reasons: the nature of the campaign, the volume of votes and the election of a woman of colour to the office of vice president for the first time.

Today, we stand with a friend of Ireland and Northern Ireland who is preparing to enter the White House. This president-elect does not just understand the complexities of this place but is invested in our progress. President-elect Biden once wrote:

*"Northeast Pennsylvania will be written on my heart. But Ireland will be written on my soul."*

This should, therefore, be a moment of relief, but it should also be a moment of reflection. It should be a moment for Prime Minister Boris Johnson and others to reflect on a strategy that has brought them to the brink of breaking international law in the pursuit of a narrow, hard Brexit. President-elect Biden, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and senior figures from across the aisle in Congress have made clear that any arrangement that harms our agreement will jeopardise a trade deal with the United States. That is avoidable, and I am sure that every Member will use their influence to maximise the outcome for all our people. We also need to reflect on an environment, not restricted to the United States, where people feel so marginalised, left behind and left out that they are taken in by the politics of resentment and fear. We all have a job of work to dispel that.

I wish the president-elect and vice president-elect the very best as they begin to bring in and bring together a new Administration. We will all work with them on issues of mutual concern in the weeks and months ahead.

**Dr Aiken:** The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the election of President-elect Biden and Kamala Harris. I need to start with a declaration of interest: 50% of my family are particularly happy that this result has come to the fore after three or four quite nervous days leading up to it.

This is a significant time for us in the Assembly as we look to a change of Administration in the United States. One thing that we know about the new president-elect is that he has at least read the Belfast Agreement. One of the most appropriate things is that he understands that not only do we not want a North/South border

but we do not want an east-west border, which would undermine the Belfast Agreement just as much.

When Joe Biden takes over the presidency in January, he will have to lead a deeply divided nation. The United States has much to do to restore the faith of the international system in where it is coming from. He has significant challenges, and he needs friends in the international system to do that. Given the issues in Turkey, Armenia, Iran, Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Venezuela and Cuba, one of the most significant issues that he will have to deal with is that of security — even before he has to deal with Russia and China. He needs friends in the international system. He needs friends who bring real, hard power to the equation. We have to realise that the United States has a massive security challenge. What we, particularly in the United Kingdom, want to see is the United States renewing its commitment to NATO and renewing its commitment to security across the international system.

We welcome the fact that, when the president-elect takes up his position, the United States will sign up to the Paris Accord again. Dealing with climate change is significant.

We also believe that he needs to take strong leadership on COVID. Getting to the point where we are able to deal with COVID from an international perspective is one of the massive challenges and problems that the president-elect will have to deal with.

Finally, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and, I hope, all Members, we wish the new president-elect the best. We are very pleased to see the new vice president-elect coming into position. Hopefully, she truly has managed to break through the glass ceiling, because it is well beyond time that that happened in the United States.

**12.15 pm**

**Mr Lyttle:** The United States and Northern Ireland have close ties that bind our people together. The US has been a close friend to the peace process and to the social and economic well-being of our region. Alliance Party members have played key roles in developing and maintaining that special relationship, so we congratulate President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, who, as the first woman and first woman of colour to be elected vice president in the history of the

United States, will inspire people across the world.

President-elect Joe Biden quoted Ecclesiastes 3 in recognising the work that he and the vice president-elect have to do to unite the United States of America. He said that it was "a time to heal". I believe that the Alliance Party and the people of Northern Ireland will get fully behind that task and will continue to work closely with the people of the United States to ensure that it is a time for healing, a time for peace and a time for progress for both our peoples.

**Mr Allister:** There is a supreme irony that the House this afternoon is celebrating the fact that the people of the United States, by a democratic process, are changing their Government. The irony is that this House is the epitome of the very opposite. This House stands for the principle that you cannot change your Government and you cannot vote a party out of government. What we witnessed in the United States was the people of the United States deciding, in their democratic fashion and as is their right, to change their Government. What a contrast with this place, where, because of the iniquity of mandatory coalition, you can never change your Government. You can never vote a party out of government so long as that party holds on to a handful of MLAs. It is a supreme irony that, without the least blush of embarrassment, the House rises to celebrate the fact that others can do what those who have spoken to date determine we should never be able to do, namely change our Government.

The absurdity of our system of Government is further illustrated by the fact that, if the United States of America had the system that we have, we would have joint Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump. How absurd would that be? How dysfunctional would that be? As dysfunctional as Stormont, of course. Yet that is the system —.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member resume his seat for a moment? I remind the Member that the Matter of the Day was agreed to address the US presidential election. Could you stick to the subject, please?

**Mr Allister:** I thought that I was. I was drawing the contrast between the people of the United States being given the fundamental democratic right to change their Government while we are denied it. I was pointing out that the people of the United States will have a new powerful president rather than a joint president. We are denied that. The point is exactly on point that the democratic exercise that many are

celebrating in the House is the very thing that is denied to the House and to the people of Northern Ireland.

As for Joe Biden, I hope that he will come to the realisation that he needs to temper his overt nationalist empathy if he ever hopes to have any positive influence in Northern Ireland, and he needs to recognise and accept that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom because of the will of its people. The American people have expressed their will. Now it is time for their president —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** — to acknowledge our rights in that matter.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up. Thank you.

**Mr Carroll:** I congratulate the working class and all minorities in the US on their sacking of the racist, bigoted, homophobic champion of the rich and wealthy, Donald Trump. Trump embodies everything that is wrong with modern capitalism. He is oppressive, reactionary and corrupt and fully committed to increasing the riches of the wealthy, against the interests of ordinary people. He has, for the past four years, encouraged and emboldened a dangerous rise of the far right in the US and across the world. This election was, in my opinion, about giving Trump the boot. We should celebrate that, and democracy must be upheld against Trump's attempts to overturn it. I call on the Executive to immediately demand that the current president cease his efforts to overturn the democratic process. If he refuses to do this, we should break all diplomatic ties. Trump is acting like a spoilt child, throwing his toys out of the pram. So many millions rejected him, and he should do what is expected of him and step aside. Trump claimed to stand up for working-class Americans but did nothing to improve their lives. He actually made them far worse.

As I have said, the election was all about putting Trump out. For me, it was never about putting Biden in. There is not much good to be said about Biden, except for the fact that he is not Donald Trump. He is, in my opinion, an uninspiring champion of the status quo. The fact that he only just ousted a president whose coronavirus policy resulted in over 200,000 deaths speaks volumes to the limitations of the unimaginative, uninspiring, centrist approach of the Democratic establishment. Joe Biden has been part of the US establishment for years. That establishment has eviscerated working-



class communities across the US. Biden has cheered on the US war machine in the Middle East for decades, time and again. He has declared himself an opponent of the Black Lives Matter movement, and he was the candidate wheeled out to stop the progressive radical Bernie Sanders from breaking with the big-business interests of billionaires in the US. Those who think that Biden is a progressive or a friend of working-class people in Ireland are, frankly, living in fantasy land.

I hope for real change in the US, and real change in the US lives of those who are celebrating and demonstrating on the streets: those who have demanded that Black Lives Matter, healthcare for all and raising taxes for the super-rich. There is hope in those who voted for socialist candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others in the US, the rest of her squad and Bernie Sanders. Let us enjoy Trump's demise and double down on our efforts for international solidarity and fundamental change in America, in Ireland and across the world.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for taking this Matter of the Day, and thank you to the deputy First Minister for requesting it.

Lots of people who heard the Member from North Antrim excoriate people here for welcoming the defeat of Donald Trump will be astonished. It is the case that there is hope and delight, frankly, around the world that someone who has been an appalling influence on democratic norms, the civilised world and how we go about politics across the world has been removed from office.

Let us focus on the positives. Joe Biden cares about Northern Ireland; he cares about the entire island of Ireland. I would go so far as to say that he cares about stability and good government across these islands and across the continent of Europe. He is, in that sense, good news for everyone across these islands. It has been said that Joe Biden is a friend to Ireland, and particularly to this part of Ireland. That is correct. His great-great-grandfather left the Cooley peninsula to travel to Newry to get the boat to North America about 150 years ago. It would be great if President-elect Biden were able to return to see what we hope to be the developing Narrow Water bridge at some point in the future.

However, let us be absolutely clear. We have had a horrible few years of coarsening discourse and increased divisiveness, not just in North America but around the world. Anybody who thinks, as some have reflected,

that who leads the United States is not our concern but an internal matter for them has not been paying attention to the awful increase in divisiveness and horrible rhetoric that has gone along with the Trump presidency. That is why people across the world are pleased and relieved to see Joe Biden take office. They are also pleased to see the transformational and historic election of Kamala Harris to the vice presidency. She is the first woman, and the first woman of colour, to be elected to that office.

Thomas Jefferson said that every man — sadly, he was saying "men" in those days — had two countries; their own and France.

These days, many of us have two countries: our own and the United States. The United States inspires and sometimes depresses us all, but the weekend was inspiring for those of us who look to the United States. What the United States has done in relation to Northern Ireland has been critical. Let us hope that the influence of the new president will be felt not just on this island but across these islands in the months and years to come.

**Mr McCrossan:** I echo the words of Members across the House in congratulating President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. This is a great moment of hope in dark times. Across the world, we have seen how Trump's influence has caused considerable issues, particularly for the Irish-American relationships that exist. He was a reckless leader in a challenging time.

In listening to contributions in the House, I find interesting the remarks by Sinn Féin and the DUP. It was the one campaign that I have seen them united on, when you consider that President Trump attended Sinn Féin fundraising dinners in America and you see the pictures of DUP MPs holding Trump's flag. They are on the one page on that issue.

I am delighted to see Trump vacate the presidency. It will be an interesting few months ahead to see how this all works out, but one thing is clear: it is the right time for the leadership of Kamala Harris and Joe Biden. Joe Biden sends out a powerful message: "Never give up". He has stood for election as president three times and, on the third occasion, has managed to succeed. All of us were glued to our screens the past number of days. I know that I certainly was. I found it fascinating to see how the vote evolved across the states. America is a deeply divided country, but I believe that President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris will do all that they can to

unite it. They will send out that powerful message.

It also heartened me very much to hear President-elect Biden cite the words of Seamus Heaney. He has put it on record on many occasions that, if elected president, he will do everything that he can to protect the Good Friday Agreement and to prevent, as Colum Eastwood said,

*"violence to the Good Friday agreement".*

It is clear that the DUP were supporting Trump to use him as a vehicle to get the outcome that they as Brexiteers so desire.

I am very happy and hopeful for the future with a president and vice president of the calibre, standard and discipline of Biden and Harris. I congratulate both and look forward to them visiting the island of Ireland, North and South.

**Mr McNulty:** Congratulations, President-elect Joe Biden. His election is a victory for persistence, inclusiveness, enduring decency, democracy and, most importantly, hope in these dark times. In Ireland, we are all excited about the implications for our island, for the Good Friday Agreement, for Ballina and for the Cooley peninsula. When we get through the pandemic, there will be some craic in Lily Finnegan's on the opening night, celebrating the success of President-elect Joe Biden: a Cooley man and a Ballina man. My father is especially thrilled that Philadelphia got him over the line. My grandfather met my grandmother in Philadelphia, so, on a personal note, my family is thrilled. Congratulations, President-elect Joe Biden.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, that concludes the item of business. I ask you to take your ease for a moment or two. I remind Members that asking you to take your ease between each item of business is not just about preparing the Chamber but about making sure that Members can enter and exit the Chamber within the social-distancing regulations.

**12.30 pm**

**Mr Givan:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have learnt from reports on Twitter that the Justice Minister is having to self-isolate because she has a tickly cough. Of course, I wish her a speedy recovery. Hopefully, it is not the second time that the Minister has had the virus. Our thoughts and prayers are with her at this time.

With regard to Assembly business, I still have not been notified formally, as Chair of the Justice Committee, of the Minister's decision to self-isolate. We are due to have the Consideration Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill tomorrow and, indeed, the Second Stage of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill next week. What are the implications for those items of business proceeding through the Assembly? Is there any provision whereby one of the Minister's very capable Executive colleagues could represent the Department of Justice's position in order to ensure that we do not have slippage on that critical legislation?

**Mr Speaker:** First, I want to echo the Member's remarks and wish the Minister well. I received a letter from the Minister not long before I came into the Chamber and have not had time to consult others on it. The Member heard about it on Twitter: I had not heard about it on Twitter, so I was not following it this morning. As I said, I received a letter from the Minister shortly before I came into the Chamber. The Minister outlines in her letter that she has symptoms. As I said, we wish her well and a speedy return to good health and safety.

There will be implications for both those Bills, according to the Minister, because, at this moment in time, she has been unable to get another Minister to take the domestic abuse legislation through the House tomorrow. Having had to consider that Bill recently, I have to say that it is complex and complicated, and the Member is well aware of that. I do not think that it would be that easy to expect another Minister to have enough command of the Bill to take it through the House tomorrow at such short notice. We will have to take it to the Business Committee, which will decide how to proceed in the next week or two, during which time Minister Long has to self-isolate. Again, the Business Committee will address that tomorrow afternoon.

**Mr Givan:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I appreciate your explanation, but can you advise whether, if one of the Minister's Executive colleagues were in a position to take on that role tomorrow, business would proceed?

**Mr Speaker:** I think that, in the first instance, you would have to expect the Minister to address that with her Executive colleagues. At the moment, all that I am aware of is that, as the Minister has advised me and, therefore, the House, she has been unable to get a colleague

at this point. We will have to see whether that changes.

I have received — they are not here yet. I am getting ahead of myself.

## Ministerial Statement

### North/South Ministerial Council: Education Sectoral Format

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Education that he wishes to make statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has, of course, been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called but can do that by rising in their place. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question — this is not an opportunity for debate per se — and not to engage in long introductions.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on behalf of Minister Ní Chuilín and me on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in education sectoral format that was held on Friday 6 November 2020. Due to the current COVID-19 restrictions, the meeting was conducted via videoconference. I attended the meeting with Minister Foley TD, Minister for Education, and Minister Ní Chuilín as accompanying Minister.

The meeting was cordial and productive. Progress was made on a number of key issues, including the implications of UK withdrawal from the EU; the response to COVID-19; the review of the work programme; the update on EU funding; educational underachievement; special educational needs; school, youth and teacher exchanges; teacher qualifications; and cooperation between the inspectorates.

I will address each of those items in turn.

The Council noted the current assessment of the likely implications for the education sector of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and welcomed the commitments made to take all necessary measures to ensure that the agreed common travel area rights and privileges were protected. Ministers also welcomed the commitments

made to the future PEACE PLUS programme and the work that is under way to develop that programme. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to continued cooperation on education issues following the conclusion of the transition period.

On COVID-19, Ministers welcomed the commitment of all teaching staff in both jurisdictions to deliver remote learning to pupils. They noted the importance and context of the successful reopening of schools — a core policy objective in both jurisdictions — in accordance with hygiene and public health protocols. The Council noted the heightened concern of Education Ministers for pupils with complex and additional learning needs and acknowledged the efforts of teachers and other critical support staff to maintain students' relationships and connections with schools. The agreement of the Education Ministers and their officials to continue sharing information and advance notice of key decisions, where practicable, was also welcomed. The Council expressed its appreciation to all staff engaged in the delivery of education in these exceptional times. It also welcomed the fact that Education Ministers will convene a meeting of senior departmental officials, along with agencies and bodies that have responsibility in vital support areas, and report findings to the next NSMC meeting in the sector.

The NSMC noted the commitment to review the work programme and the plan to convene a meeting of senior officials from relevant Departments, co-chaired by the secretary general and the permanent secretary of the Education Departments, to make recommendations for the future work programme. That meeting will be .

Ministers noted the impact that COVID-19 has had on Peace IV-funded shared education projects. They also noted that, to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the use of online technologies to promote the objectives of shared education was being explored. The high-level engagement that has taken place between Departments on PEACE PLUS, the draft proposals for PEACE PLUS in relation to the theme of youth and the potential for ambitious and innovative proposals under PEACE PLUS to promote respect and understanding on a cross-border and cross-community basis were noted by the Council.

The NSMC noted the lessons learned and the recommendations from the final evaluation report on the North/South underachievement practitioners' engagement project, which was published by Co-operation Ireland in July 2017.

The NSMC noted the appointment by me of the expert panel, under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and to draw up an action plan for change that will ensure that all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life. That was noted by Ministers.

Research on the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme has been provided as part of the evidence base to the panel. The panel will produce an interim report and draft action plan by 31 March 2021 and a final action plan including implementation costs and timescales by 31 May 2020.

On special educational needs, the Ministers welcomed the progress being made by the two Education Departments and Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) to facilitate and maintain the delivery of the centre's range of services since the previous meeting in 2016. The Council welcomed the efforts of Middletown Centre for Autism management and staff to remain operational and the continued delivery of elements of their service throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. The proposed delivery plan for the centre, which takes account of the impacts of COVID-19 and the delay in making board appointments, was noted. The NSMC noted that MCA has been considering the potential implications of the UK withdrawal from the EU. The Council also noted recent developments in the delivery of special educational needs programmes in both jurisdictions.

On school, youth and teacher exchanges, the Council noted North/South exchanges in the area of youth work practices and the ongoing activities of the North/South education and training standards committee for youth work.

On teacher qualifications, the NSMC noted the procedures being explored to facilitate the reciprocal recognition of teacher qualifications in the context of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. It also noted the update on the agreement between the Marino Institute of Education and St Mary's University College regarding the delivery of the SCG.

The Council was advised that the eighteenth annual conference of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) on the theme of "Teacher Education in the COVID Moment" took place online on 21 October 2020.

Ministers welcomed the continuing collaboration of the education inspectorates, which covers capacity-building for the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) inspection of new Irish-medium education; the ongoing programme of inspection exchanges and joint working on inspections; the collaborative support in carrying out independent evaluations on projects; and the cooperation between the management of both inspectorates.

My officials and I look forward to working with Minister Foley and her Department as we meet the challenges of responding to the current health crisis and the future challenges and opportunities that will be presented as the UK leaves the European Union.

**Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** I note the concern for pupils with complex needs that the Education Minister has expressed in the statement. However, the families of children with complex needs in Northern Ireland, who feel abandoned by him during COVID-19, need action, leadership and support rather than concern. I ask the Education Minister this: why did the £11.3 million Engage programme funding for school restart not include special schools when it was launched in September?

**Mr Speaker:** Sorry, Minister. I suggest that the Member's question does not entirely relate to the statement. I will leave the matter of whether he wishes to answer to the Minister's discretion.

**Mr Weir:** Well, just —.

**Mr Speaker:** Sorry, Minister. I make the point and remind the Minister that, if Members ask questions that are not relevant to the statement, it is entirely down the Minister whether to accept the question.

**Mr Weir:** I appreciate that it does not directly relate to the statement. However, we have given instructions to the Education Authority (EA) to work in the area of special educational needs. First, we should remember that the Engage programme runs across schools. Therefore, for the vast majority of children who are statemented, for instance, they will be operating through mainstream schools, which will enable that.

On the issue of direct intervention for children who are in special schools, there is a need for something that is more bespoke and individually exercised. We have asked the EA, which has overall responsibility for special educational needs, to work with those schools

and the individuals in them to make sure that any level of academic catch-up takes place for them.

**Mr Newton:** I will go to the same item, Minister, on special educational needs. In the discussions, have you noted any radical differences between the approach being used in Northern Ireland, on the basis of addressing the needs of our young pupils, and the approach being used by the Minister in the Republic of Ireland?

**Mr Weir:** I think that there was a realisation in the discussion on special educational needs that took place during the NSMC meeting. That discussion principally focused on the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is obviously the one area that is of direct common concern. However, I think that there has been an acceptance that there is a need and, indeed, that there was probably a limited level of supply of supports in terms of schools being open during the early parts of the pandemic across the board. There was, in particular, probably limited support for special educational needs. There is a strong imperative, particularly on special schools, to be open. Last week, I was able to visit Arvalee in Omagh. It provides a considerable service that goes beyond simply the educational provision there. It is critical from the point of view of the development of children and from a social point of view. I think that, North/South, there is a common determination to see that schools are kept open as much as possible and prioritised. There is nowhere that that is more important than for children with special educational needs.

**Ms Mullan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. In relation to ongoing and future cooperation, what is the Minister's assessment of the impact that COVID has had on cross-border shared education projects? Minister, I ask that you restore the funding to ScoTens and that your officials meet the Committee to discuss that.

**12.45 pm**

**Mr Weir:** I will take those in reverse order. I am due to meet representatives from SCoTENS at, I think, the end of this month, so we will be able to discuss that level of support then. Obviously, I cannot prejudge the outcome until I have the meeting.

On shared education, last week, I think, Mr Murphy gave a report on the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), which leads to some of the Peace funding. It is the case that

all projects have been able to move ahead. However, the projects, particularly those on shared education, have been reoriented. It has therefore been about shared learning at this stage, and a lot of that has been done online.

One of the many difficulties that has arisen from COVID is with the provision of shared education, which everyone would manifestly accept is of benefit. The overriding driver in shared education is the direct shared experience of people meeting face to face. We are trying to ensure that, in terms of health protections, there is as little mixing between schools as possible and as little mixing within schools, so quite often classes have to form a bubble. That creates a direct face-to-face barrier, which then acts in a counter-intuitive way to what we want to happen with shared education. However, shared education is being taken forward, and the projects have been able to continue. From that point of view, nothing has been abandoned, but a lot of the sharing has had to shift much more to an online experience. There was a shared indication from everyone that the sooner we can move back to a point at which it is safe to have direct interaction, between students in particular and teachers, on a shared education basis, the better we can get the richest harvest from that investment.

**Mr McCrossan:** Minister, thank you for visiting Arvalee school in Omagh, which is in my constituency. It is a fantastic school, and I am sure that your visit was very much welcomed.

I commend you — both Ministers, in fact — for your commitment to collaborate and cooperate on the range of matters outlined in the statement. I am alarmed, however, to note that those conversations are at such an early stage, given that we are so far on in the transition period, which is due to end in January. You said that procedures are:

*"being explored to facilitate reciprocal recognition of teacher qualifications"*

North/South in light of Brexit. Should that not have been completed sooner, Minister? How advanced are those explorations? Can you give a date or a time? Furthermore, is there an issue with the ETI in relation to the Irish-medium sector?

**Mr Weir:** I am not aware of any particular problems that the ETI has with the Irish-medium sector directly. Obviously, the ETI has been restricted in what it has been able to do throughout the pandemic. Indeed, like others,

the ETI has, at least on a temporary basis, had to reorient itself. The work that the ETI and the EA have done in providing link officers for schools has been very useful, but, on the level of inspection and input — there is a strong case that inspections should operate on a more thematic basis anyway — there has clearly been some change.

We are giving a report on where we are at present. We had an opportunity to discuss the issues when the NSMC met at Dublin Castle during the summer, although the meeting was not formally in education sectoral format. Arising out of that, Minister Foley — at that stage, she was relatively new in post — and I had a direct informal one-to-one meeting that touched on a number of those issues.

As regards mutual recognition, the position is that that has previously been facilitated through the EU. Good work is being done on that. It may well be that, as part of the overall settlement that arises — if it arises — between the UK and the EU, there is a level of acceptance on the mutual recognition of qualifications. As I said, work is ongoing to see what can be done on a bilateral basis. It is noticeable — this fits in neatly with that level of recognition — that, in the Internal Market Bill that is passing through the UK Parliament, there are those mutual recognitions between the various jurisdictions in the United Kingdom. As the Member will be aware, teaching councils, for instance, operate in different formats in different parts of not just the United Kingdom but the Republic of Ireland. One of the things that the pandemic has shown is that there is a need for mutual recognition of qualifications, because, particularly with teaching, we do not know at what stage in different jurisdictions people will seek to go beyond their own boundaries — this is not just in regard to education — to be able draw and seek, if you like, experience and help from outside their jurisdiction. There is a broader critical element in dealing with the mutual recognition of qualifications. That is ongoing in an attempt to create, at least, a bilateral arrangement between the UK and the Republic of Ireland on teaching qualifications.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far.

I want to probe a little more into teaching qualifications. As you know, in Northern Ireland, teachers go through Stranmillis or St Mary's, and we also have teachers with postgraduate qualifications. First, what work is being done to look at those qualifications on both sides of the border? Secondly, what talks have been going

on with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) and its equivalent in the Republic of Ireland to make sure that qualifications are recognised on either side of the border?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for her questions. She will be aware that the GTCNI will look after it from a Northern Ireland perspective; the Teaching Council of Ireland (TCI), the equivalent registration body in the South, will look after it there. Then, it is about ensuring that those who have, for instance, a UK BEd or PGCE qualification are able to obtain registration with the TCI and, similarly, that TCI-registered teachers can be recognised by the GTCNI.

Elements of the current mutual recognition arrangements are based on the EU mutual recognition of professional qualifications directive. That will cease at the end of the EU period. Applicants from outside that will also need to be assessed. The UK Government, which will handle some of the qualifications, are keen to have professional mobility and keen to see that reflected in the common travel area. We were aiming for a seamless internal UK labour market for professionals, with a bilateral agreement that could comprehensively address and sort out any future teacher recognition arrangements.

**Mr M Bradley:** The Minister's statement noted that both Education Ministers had considerable concern for pupils with complex and special educational needs. Does he agree that the benefit that those children get from being able to attend school is significant and that that is a further reason to ensure that schools remain open as we face the challenges that lie ahead in dealing with COVID-19?

**Mr Weir:** That is similar to a previous question. Ensuring that schools remain open is paramount for all pupils, but the particular focus on those with special educational needs is shared on both sides of the border. It is noticeable that the Republic of Ireland, which has different levels of COVID restrictions, when moving to level 5, did so on the basis of protecting educational institutions, particularly schools.

Any experience of meeting children with special educational needs indicates the particular importance of keeping those schools open, not only to allow face-to-face learning but from a broader social point of view. In sending out any signal, there has to be recognition of every child across the system.

While the principal focus in special educational needs was on the specifics of Middletown, in my discussions with Minister Foley, the importance of schools being open, particularly for special educational needs pupils, was recognised on both sides of the border and, indeed, beyond. What has happened in Great Britain has shown that the desire to ensure that schools are kept open is a priority, and the Executive share that desire.

**Ms Dolan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Is the proposed review of the forward work programme due to the consequences of COVID? Will he comment on the extent of the impact that COVID has had on the work programme?

**Mr Weir:** There is a good opportunity, with the Executive having resumed this year and with a new Government in the Republic, for a stocktake and to see what can happen in the forward work programme.

At a certain level, all these things are work in progress. There is no doubt that COVID has had an impact across a number of sectors in education, here and in other jurisdictions. To some extent, in the Department of Education here and in that in the Republic of Ireland, there has been a shift to fight the immediate issues of COVID with whatever staff are available. That happens on a range of issues; for example, there has been a shift away from area planning to what has to happen immediately.

Similarly, in any engagement on future work programmes, there is no doubt that some time delay has been created. However, if we can take some positive element from COVID, it is how we apply some of the lessons of COVID to see whether there are better ways. A lot of that will be on sharing information, sharing best practice and sharing knowledge. Are there ways that we can learn from COVID to provide better ways for our young people and capture some of the accidental successes that have occurred because of it and apply them across the education system?

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. You mentioned the expert panel to examine educational underachievement. I understand that that panel is to report in the spring of next year. That is a hugely significant issue in north Belfast and greater Shankill. Can the Minister update the House on the progress that the panel has made to date?

**Mr Weir:** There are a couple of aspects to that. There has been engagement prior to the NSMC meeting with experts sharing their experience of underachievement. That will be fed in. The work of the delivering equality of opportunity in schools system can also feed into that. The panel started in September, and it is my understanding that, up until the middle of October, there were 401 direct responses to the online consultation. I understand that, over the period up to January 2021, at least 20 oral sessions will be established by the education panel, with, as indicated, the aim of having a completed report by May 2021.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I welcome the Minister's statement. Following on from the point about educational underachievement, could you expand on similar initiatives, what we have learnt and the opportunities to enhance cooperation with your Southern counterparts? You mentioned the final evaluation report. What lessons have you learnt from that?

**Mr Weir:** The information from the evaluation report has been fed into the expert panel and has been provided to it along with a wide range of other pieces of evidence. One of the advantages for the expert panel is that there is a bank of knowledge on and good experience of underachievement. Whether it is happening in the Republic of Ireland, in parts of Northern Ireland, or indeed, England, Scotland, Wales or internationally, that information can feed into it.

None of us should be conceited enough to believe that we always have all the answers. We can learn from experience, and how things are tackled across the board will be fed into the expert panel. That is not simply about copying things that have worked successfully; at times, it may also be about people saying, "Here is something that was tried but did not work so should be avoided". It is about getting all that rich experience and having it feeding in from different points to the panel.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, a young woman is fighting for her life in a hospital not far from here after a domestic violence issue at the weekend. I am sure that the Minister will join me in wishing her well and will recognise the important role that education has in teaching our young people about respect. I know that that is not connected to the statement.

I commend those who have continued to work throughout the pandemic in order to provide support for children. I want to focus on special

educational needs and the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is in my constituency. We are all too aware of the constant battles being fought by parents of children with additional needs. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be a significant focus on policy and resources in order to tackle the lag in providing support and services once a diagnosis has been confirmed from the statement of need to the provision of therapies? Furthermore, should there be a focus on the sudden drop-off of services when a child hits his or her nineteenth birthday? Will the Minister undertake to ask the Middletown Centre for Autism to carry out an urgent review of those two areas of work and to make recommendations for action and change across this island?

**1.00 pm**

**Mr Weir:** First, while it is not part of the statement, I join the Member in wishing a speedy recovery to the lady that he mentioned. I am not aware of the individual case, but domestic abuse is always completely wrong, and it is right that there is legislative focus on it in the Assembly.

COVID has caused some level of disruption to the Middletown Centre, but its work has been able to continue. It has been able, particularly in its online work, to provide a level of support to parents. I am sure that the Member has been down — I would recommend to any Member that they go down — to Middletown to see the good work that is being done there. Interestingly, what probably was plan A for the centre going back six, seven, eight years or however long it was actually was not realised, but plan B turned out to be a better vehicle.

In the context of support for facilities, obviously part of the idea of the SEN regulations which are out to consultation is to have earlier interventions that can feed through to better solutions at a later stage. Ultimately, as regards the precise operational detail of what Middletown does, it has to have some room for manoeuvre. I do not particularly want to direct the centre towards that, but I will be keen to work with it. While this has not really stopped the operational side of things, as a consequence of the election in the Republic and the period before the Government was formed there are a number of vacancies at management level that need to be filled on the Republic side. The Minister gave an assurance that that will happen fairly rapidly. That will give additional opportunity to have strategic governance within the Middletown Centre. I look forward to its continuing to deliver for parents and young people with autism. I look

forward to the centre using its expert skills and, as the Member suggests, considering whatever future direction of travel it needs to take to be able to enhance those services.

**Mr Butler:** We will stay on the topic of special educational needs and the Middletown Centre, if that is OK, Minister. I echo your call for any Member who has not been to Middletown to take a trip down there to see the wonderful work that the centre does. Minister, you will be aware that there are around 40,000 pupils in Northern Ireland who have ADHD. It is one of those things that is not often talked about and is sometimes overlooked. Will you make a commitment to bring it up as a topic? Will you also update the House on any work that is being done in that area, please?

**Mr Weir:** We want to make sure that there is provision for special educational needs across the board. Some areas of training have been held up by COVID. We need to see what is the best way to deliver that. The Member mentions bringing it up as a topic at NSMC, which obviously tends to focus on cross-border jurisdictional aspects. I am not sure whether there is a very specific cross-border element to this. However, if the Member has any further information, I will be happy to explore that.

**Ms Ennis:** There has been considerable focus today on the Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA), and rightly so. Can the Minister advise on the extent of cross-border movement of children and young people with special educational needs accessing services like those at Middletown Centre for Autism? What, if any, impact will the onset of Brexit have on those young people's accessing those services?

**Mr Weir:** The Member will be aware that, at a broader level, with the common travel area, there should not be any particular obstruction to children moving North/South or South/North. While there will be a need for Middletown to fit into whatever overall jigsaw is there in terms of the EU situation, I do not think that that should lead to particular disruption. I am confident that that will be the case for the Middletown Centre.

As regards COVID very specifically, yes, lockdown has changed what the Middletown Centre has been able to provide for children with complex needs. It is part of a wider problem for shared education in the short term. Unfortunately, we have had to insulate against physically bringing children long distances to mix with children from completely different areas and schools. I know that in the Republic



of Ireland, for instance, there has also been specific guidance, if not regulation, on how far any individual can move on that basis.

There has been a continuation of services, however. Even between March and June of this year, the MCA ran a range of webinars via Zoom for pupils. There has also been online support, and events are now beginning that will directly involve schools and the MCA. It is about trying to balance the health considerations while providing that service. I am confident that the MCA has adapted and will continue to adapt, but all of us will hope for a situation in the relatively near future in which any level of restriction on mixing can be lifted and we can resume living as close to normal as possible.

**Mr Gildernew:** I, too, acknowledge the brilliant work done by Middletown. I have had the opportunity to visit it and meet the people involved.

Minister, there have been significant failings in special educational needs provision here in recent years, and, as a consequence, thousands of our young people have been seriously let down. Given that SEN provision was discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, can the Minister tell us what difficulties exist in that area in the South and what can be learned from its response to those difficulties?

**Mr Weir:** I will be honest with the Member: although SEN was discussed, the principal area of detail was Middletown, so there was not too much detail on issues that have happened down South. No jurisdiction has got this entirely correct. Arising out of a number of the reports undertaken, the Department has established a wider governance group with the EA to make sure that issues are all drawn together and that we are not pulling in different directions. It is also the case, certainly here, that there is a level of importance attached to the SEN regulations and code of practice. Comparing precisely what has happened in the North with what has happened in the South was not gone into in great detail at the NSMC meeting, but we may touch on that at a later stage.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Minister for his statement. It refers to draft proposals for PEACE PLUS on the theme of youth and also states that you:

*"noted North/South exchanges in the area of youth work practices".*

Was there any sense that initiatives or plans might be developed to enhance North/South exchanges for young people, especially in youth services, in a post-COVID world? Preparations that are made in the coming period will help to deliver those, perhaps from next summertime onwards. Will Brexit have an impact on any initiatives that might take place?

**Mr Weir:** Again, that common-sense cooperation should not be impacted on adversely by Brexit. There is a direct working relationship on the youth side between the Education Authority and the National Youth Council of Ireland. There is therefore that ongoing dialogue. Direct exchanges among young people, either on the youth side or the school side, have been, on a personal basis and at least in the short term, impacted on in an educational sense by COVID.

As the Member will be aware, although there have been some adjustments made to the Peace IV programme, there is support within it to scope out a range of proposals for PEACE PLUS, and those proposals would look towards continuation. At this stage, an ambitious set of proposals has been sent to DOF and the SEUPB for consideration. The four aspects that have been identified are continuation of shared education; the North/South school exchange programme, focusing particularly on 15- and 16-year-olds; educational underachievement; and supporting learning through technology in education. A fifth proposal on integrated education is being finalised. As indicated, specific work will be done that will focus on the youth sector side. The detail of that will come from the National Youth Council and the Education Authority.

**Mr Nesbitt:** The Minister's statement referred to Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, an initiative in the Republic that began in 2005. I would be grateful if the Minister would list his sense of the achievements of DEIS over the last 15 years.

**Mr Weir:** I will not comment on the individual elements, because that report has gone to the educational underachievement group. It will work through it and take advice.

As I said, it is about learning. It is also the case that, while good work has been done through DEIS, from a practical point of view, we have to ask whether there are still problems with educational underachievement in any jurisdiction. The answer is yes, there are, and it is about the mutual learning that can take place.

**Mr Speaker:** Matthew O'Toole is not in his seat.

**Mr Allister:** On the matter of teacher qualifications, in Northern Ireland, of course, the most appalling issue is the discrimination that arises from the Catholic certificate. Has that been addressed yet? Is there a cross-border element to that, in respect of teachers from here who want to teach in the Republic?

**Mr Weir:** It is about the mutual recognition of qualifications, and I want to see that addressed. As that particularly relates to Northern Ireland, it is an internal matter for Northern Ireland. Consequently, we have to be very careful that we do not bring into a cross-jurisdictional basis something that should be in the purview of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Carroll:** Minister, was there any discussion at the meeting about the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland's (ASTI) recent vote for strike action over safety concerns in education in the South? There is concern among teaching staff about schools and the spread of the virus in them. People want to know what both jurisdictions and Ministers are doing to tackle those concerns.

**Mr Weir:** From the point of view of respecting the individual position of jurisdictions, the potential strike action is being taken by a union that does not operate in Northern Ireland. Consequently, any strike action would be a matter for the Republic of Ireland. It is not my role to interfere in the internal affairs of the Republic of Ireland.

A range of mitigations has been put in place. Indeed, a recent report by the Office for National Statistics suggests that the incidence of COVID-19 among education staff is no different from the population as a whole. There is no reason to suggest that there is any particular driver in schools that, in any way, places them at a higher level than anywhere else. That has not just been the experience of the Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom. Similar studies conducted by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control indicate that the levels of COVID among education staff are no different from the rest of the population.

A union, even if it is in another jurisdiction, will want to look after its members; that is the role of a trade union. My role is somewhat wider: to ensure that the education of our young people, in particular, is protected. Undoubtedly, the best place for the future of our young children, for their education, their mental health and

socialisation is to be directly in schools. I will fight to defend schools remaining open while always examining and taking public health advice so that mitigating measures to protect everyone in schools can be taken.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, at the end of your statement, you said that you had discussed with Minister Foley:

*"the ... challenges and opportunities that will be presented as the UK leaves the EU."*

Given what you have said about the difficulties with mutual recognition of teaching qualifications and various North/South exchange projects being prevented by Brexit, will you please enlighten us as to what the opportunities are for young people?

**Mr Weir:** On the wider point of Brexit, my point was that we are working through any issues on mutual recognition, which has to be done on UK-wide and bilateral bases. It is also the case that steps have been taken on reaching an early agreement on some issues.

One of the false concerns raised by some early on — I appreciate that Member did not raise it — was that Brexit would prevent cross-border access. At a very early stage, the common travel area was recognised and accepted by all. On the practical implications, a number of children and staff here work on one side of the border and live on the other. As a result of the recognition of the common travel area, that issue was, largely speaking, sorted out quite a long time ago. Similarly, the positive advantages of PEACE PLUS have been recognised.

Some of the positive aspects of Brexit are having a sovereign nation again and ensuring that, as a country, we can establish our own laws. Children here can also grow up with the confidence of knowing that they live in a sovereign nation and not one that will be dictated to by bureaucrats in Brussels.

**1.15 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two. Please do so while maintaining full compliance with the social-distancing regulations.

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

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget (No. 3) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Agus anois iarraim ar Chonchúr Ó Murchú, Aire Airgeadais, an Bille a chur chun tosaigh. I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

*Moved.* — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 3) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members should take their ease for a moment.

### Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The next item of business is motions to approve four statutory rules (SRs), all of which relate to the health protection regulations. As before, there will be a single debate on all four motions. I will call on the Minister to move the first motion. The Minister will then commence the debate on all of the motions as listed on the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will 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. That process will be continued and repeated for each of the remaining statutory rules. If that is clear, we will proceed.

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

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8)*

*Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.*

*The following motions stood in the Order Paper:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.* — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.* — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.* — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

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

**Mr Lyons:** This afternoon, I ask the Assembly to confirm four sets of regulations that have been made in recent weeks.

The amendment (No. 8) regulations were made on 5 October and came into force at midnight that night. They placed a number of restrictions on the Londonderry city and Strabane district in an effort to slow a significant rise in cases in the area that led to its having one of the highest levels of infection in Europe. Specifically, the regulations placed restrictions on indoor gatherings of more than one household, except in specified instances. The regulations also placed restrictions on the hospitality industry so that only deliveries, takeaways, drive-throughs and outdoor service would be permitted. There were restrictions on hotels and guest houses so that they could serve food and drink only to residents and at wedding receptions and wakes. The regulations closed specified indoor facilities, including libraries where there is provision for the library to operate an order-and-collect service. Finally, there is a general restriction on outdoor gatherings of over 15 people, with exceptions for sports events without spectators and for emergencies. The restrictions were in place from 5 October and have been repealed by the next set of regulations before the Chamber today.

I note the context in which the restrictions were put in place. Levels of coronavirus in that district at the time were such that they had reached an incidence of 635 new cases per 100,000 population by 5 October. If allowed to continue, that would inevitably have led to an increase in hospital admissions and deaths that, the Executive knew, they had to try to minimise. The Executive's decision to introduce restrictions in the area was also informed by the proximity to Donegal, where additional restrictions had been in place since 28 September. The effectiveness of the restrictions may be seen in the most recent report that the district has seen a fall to an incidence of 300 per 100,000 population.

The amendment (No. 9) regulations were made on 16 October. They introduced restrictions across Northern Ireland for a four-week period and are substantially the restrictions under which we currently live. The regulations replaced both the Londonderry and Strabane restrictions and those put in place by the amendment (No. 4) regulations, which were determined by postcode, initially in Belfast and then parts of Lisburn and Ballymena and subsequently across Northern Ireland. Three subsequent amendment regulations have been made to address points of detail in the amendment (No. 9) regulations. The amendment (No. 10) regulations are before the Chamber today, and I will address those together with the amendment (No. 9) regulations.

The regulations place restrictions in a number of areas. They restrict overnight stays anywhere other than at home or in the home of a linked household; that is to say, in their bubble. An individual may be able to give a reasonable excuse for an overnight stay in other circumstances. The regulations restrict gatherings in the home or in a private garden. There are to be no indoor gatherings involving members of more than one household and no outdoor gatherings of more than six, not including children under 12, from no more than two households. It is worth noting that the definition of "home" in this case is not just a private dwelling but includes self-contained holiday accommodation, including caravans and self-catering cottages.

The regulations place restrictions on sporting events so that there are to be no sporting events except elite events, indoor one-to-one coaching without contact and outdoor non-contact sport with 15 or fewer participants. The amendment (No. 10) regulations additionally ensure that dance is included in the definition of sport for the purpose of the regulations.

The regulations close a number of specific businesses and services, including close-contact services such as hairdressing and driving instructing; campsites and caravan parks for touring caravans; museums and galleries; and a wide range of indoor leisure and entertainment facilities. Hotels and other serviced accommodations were closed, except for specific categories of resident: those already resident, those resident for work purposes, vulnerable people and anyone not able to return to their own home due to an emergency.

The regulations place restrictions on the hospitality sector to the effect that businesses cannot serve food or drink to be consumed on the premises but can sell to order off the premises before 11.00 pm. Takeaways can sell for consumption off premises to 11.00 pm. Off-sales from an off-licence but not from a pub or bar may carry on until 8.00 pm.

Face coverings are to be worn in places of worship except when at a seat and with an exemption for the couple at a wedding or civil partnership. There are new restrictions on weddings and funerals limiting numbers to 25. Libraries are able to operate a collection service and to admit people to use internet facilities.

I now come to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The regulations add to the two previous Executive decisions about face coverings being worn on public transport and in retail settings. The regulations also require face coverings to be worn by customers in hospitality settings except when they are seated. They must be worn in an airport and when travelling by plane, and they must be worn by staff in retail or hospitality settings unless they are separated from the public by a screen or partition or unless they are in an area that is not open to the public and are able to maintain social distance. In addition, face coverings must be worn by customers of banks and similar financial institutions and those travelling by private bus, coach or taxi. Drivers of buses, coaches and taxis must also wear a face covering unless they are separated from the passengers by a screen or partition. A face covering must be worn in the parts of a building used by a Northern Ireland Department that members of the public enter to access services. Finally, driving instructors, examiners and their students must wear a face covering. It is important to point out that staff can ask customers to remove their face coverings temporarily if it is necessary to prove their identity. The reasonable excuses for not wearing a face covering are unchanged.

I know that many Members will have questions and comments that they want to put on the record during the debate. I look forward to the debate and to making a winding-up speech.

**Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):**

Statutory responsibility for scrutinising the regulations lies with the Committee for Health, of which I am also a member. I look forward to hearing about its deliberations later in the debate from its Chair.

The Committee for the Executive Office has delivered a consistent message throughout the pandemic that has centred firmly on urging compliance with the restrictions that are in place. Our ability to reduce the levels of COVID-19 largely depends on the public's support for and understanding of the restrictions. The Executive's communications strategy is key to achieving that. Information campaigns need to be relevant, informative and impactful. I welcome the updated campaign, which includes personal testimonies to communicate the absolutely devastating human cost of COVID-19 and the undeniable value of complying with the restrictions, which are designed to protect people and save lives.

I will now say a few words in my capacity as an SDLP MLA. Once again, I begin by highlighting how many of the announcements made by the Executive have been trailed on TV. We saw that yesterday. It is unacceptable, and it has to stop. Today, many people in the close contact and hospitality sector are very unhappy about elements of the announcement made on TV yesterday. It has caused uncertainty and stress, and the decisions have not even been taken yet. That is irresponsible government, and it needs to be knocked on the head. It is grandstanding and trying to curry favour with the public by being seen to be inside the loop and able to provide little nuggets of information, and it is unhelpful.

The Executive should be allowed to make their decision; the decision should be relayed to the House; and a properly informed campaign to update those affected should follow. The Executive Office should at least endeavour to get right what is within its power, and that includes not leaking like a sieve, briefing the media ahead of meetings and slipping information to the public without the full details in place. Remarks such as, "Restaurants will be able to open without selling alcohol" show that the lead parties of the Executive are detached from reality. Such a policy will not work. If medical science says that sectors should close, sectors must close.

However, it is up to the Executive to make sure that those family businesses, those employers and those working in the hospitality sector are compensated for such an enforced closure. Leaving the hospitality sector high and dry would be totally unacceptable. Is that what will happen? We do not know, because the information has been leaked and drip-fed without any substance behind it.

**1.30 pm**

Throughout the first wave of the pandemic, everyone, in a sense, knew where they stood. We were all in it together. As the numbers gradually came down over the summer months, Members cautioned the Executive not to take their foot off the brake completely but to be conscious of the need for a step-by-step approach. Yet, as the restrictions eased and a greater sense of pre-COVID normality returned to our lives, we have seen, week on week and day on day, an increase in the numbers of those testing positive, those admitted to hospital and, sadly, those losing their life to this awful disease. Clearly, something is not working.

The palpable tension among many sectors in the North has been amplified as a result of these restrictions and televised announcements. We hear those in the hospitality industry saying that they cannot decide whether some in the Executive simply do not understand their plight or whether they just do not care. We hear those in the hairdressing and beauty sector asking why the one-size-fits-all approach should apply to them as well. The level of contact in a hairdressing salon is substantially different from that in a bar. Why can we have only 25 people at a funeral or wedding but, at the same church, upwards of 150 people present at other services on the same day?

Many in these sectors in the North tell us that they feel isolated and alone. I hear, very clearly, from them a sense of, "Yes, have a lockdown if we need to, but give us the real and lasting support that we need to get through this so that we do not have colossal job losses". We have to acknowledge this while being fully aware that this is what is happening in the South and in GB. Perhaps, what worked so well in the first wave of the pandemic and helped to bring numbers down was the cohesive approach taken by the North, the South and GB. On 21 October, the South moved up to its highest level of restriction — level 5. This was replicated in GB when it was announced at Halloween that it, too, was heading for a further lockdown. This disease does not recognise

borders. It does not recognise gender, age, sexuality, constitutional identity, job or class. Those who feel isolated and alone at the minute have to know that we are, all of us, in this together.

On 23 March, the deputy First Minister spoke to the House and used the strongest language possible when she said that the actions of some over the preceding weekend had put more and more lives at risk. She said:

*"We, collectively as the Executive and Assembly, need to send out the strongest possible message: you are killing people by doing those things. It is time not for soft language but for us to be very straight with people."*

To those in our community who continue to flout the restrictions and treat this as one big conspiracy theory, let me reiterate the deputy First Minister's words:

*"you are killing people by doing those things." [Official Report (Hansard), 23 March 2020, p15, col 2].*

There remains some concern about the process of how these health amendments are made. I welcome the fact that the Health Committee agreed to my proposal last week to write to the Executive and ask whether there was another way to present regulations to the House. Today, for example, we are being asked to approve amendment No 10, which is a series of components that rescinds or changes the decisions in amendment No 9, which is also being taken today. Many of these are required, but it seems silly that, seconds after approving amendment No 9, we will change the regulations by approving amendment No 10. It is silly. There was a justifiable reason to use this method at the beginning of the pandemic. However, now that the changes are more focused, and, at times, amend previous decisions, making such amendments and then waiting 28 days before discussing them here is futile. There needs to be greater accountability and transparency, and given that we hear much from our TVs, radios and papers rather than in the Chamber, a fresh approach might be most welcome and appropriate.

Many will be unhappy with the decisions that have been taken to manage the pandemic. Many will have been directly impacted financially by the decisions and in their business productivity, and that is difficult for them. They will wonder why they have to be the fall guys for managing the pandemic. The bottom line is that there is direct evidence that

certain sectors and certain behaviours are directly leading to a rise in the number of cases, and we all accept that a rise in the number of cases leads to more hospital admissions, more ICU beds being needed and, invariably, more people dying. Therefore, it has been necessary to reduce person-to-person contact, which is more prevalent in certain places and trades than others. Even the mere way that people go about retail shopping versus spending an evening in a bar is different, and one can result in more close contacts than the other.

I urge the Executive to continue to follow the medical advice that is provided. We need to endorse and follow the advice of Michael McBride, Tom Black and others in the sector. They are at the coalface. They see the harsh reality and have to sit down and explain to families why their loved ones have died, and they potentially have to choose who will and will not get a hospital bed.

Coronavirus is complicated. Its impact and —

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

**Mr McGrath:** — spread is complex. I am sure that the Member can, and will, contribute after. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to all sectors. If the Executive are asking businesses not to open, operate and make money, appropriate compensation must be made available to those businesses. We cannot enforce closure and not provide support.

I conclude by, as ever, supporting the amendments, but I have to say that my patience is wearing thin on supporting the method for making these decisions. The Executive need to get their finger out and start developing a more coherent strategy for managing the people who are impacted by the decisions and for the longer-term exit strategy from the pandemic that we will need. They need to deliver for the sectors that they are forcing to close.

We are now three weeks into a four-week lockdown, and nobody has received any payments from the schemes that are there to help them. That is leaving people in a very frightening position in the mouth of Christmas and is leaving businesses that have to make a number of costs and outlays unable to do so because the payment scheme has not begun. Staff are getting paid, but employers are not. They are being left to struggle, and that is unforgivable.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I will begin by, first of all, acknowledging that we have crossed a very sad milestone, as the statistics agency records on COVID-19 have now gone beyond 1,000 deaths. That is a very sobering milestone to have reached, and it sets the context for our discussion today.

I will raise a number of points on the process by which these regulations are made and the impact that that has on scrutiny before I turn to the detail of the regulations. As usual, due to the pandemic, these rules have been made and come into effect subject to post hoc scrutiny. As I outlined before, the absence of engagement on policy development, stakeholder responses to consultation or impact assessment means that the Committee's scrutiny after the regulations are made is both more difficult and more important.

As I previously advised the House, the Committee has raised with the Minister of Health and health officials on a series of occasions now the challenge of conducting post hoc scrutiny in the absence of supporting documentation that informs the Minister's recommendations and the Executive's decisions on whether to agree the regulations. Under the current process, the Committee considers it reasonable to expect clear information on the advice supporting the consideration of regulations, including models of their anticipated impact, and it has requested that papers be supplied for such regulations as a matter of course. The 28-day period for scrutiny is designed to compensate somewhat for the urgent process, creating a little breathing space for the Committee to observe the regulations in action, and to question officials on the early weeks of their operation, before coming to a view. That space has allowed stakeholders to contact members with queries and comments that have informed scrutiny and, on several occasions, resulted in subsequent regulations being made to address flaws and issues identified.

Members discussed the challenge, particularly in public understanding, of debating regulations a number of weeks after they have come into effect and, sometimes, after they have been superseded. The provision of appropriate supporting documentation is one important step that would assist the Committee in conducting its scrutiny more quickly. The Committee agreed to write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to request a review of the process of dealing with pandemic-related regulations. The Committee is keen to work in a constructive and timely fashion, but also to

perform its scrutiny in a meaningful way. The use of a ministerial statement to announce the restrictions created an opportunity for preliminary discussion and enabled questions to be asked from a range of perspectives beyond health.

I turn to the detail of the regulations. The Committee asked a number of questions on Thursday that could not be answered by officials but which have since been addressed in correspondence received on Friday evening. Noting that amendment No. 8 has largely been revoked, the Committee sought to explore the impact to date of amendments No. 9 and No. 10. Officials were not able to provide detail, and the subsequent letter referred the Committee back to the update of 27 October, by which point the R number in new cases was estimated to have fallen below 1, though it was acknowledged that this was likely to have resulted not just from the first 10 days of the North-wide restrictions but from the earlier restrictions in the Derry and Strabane council area. The junior Minister may be able to provide a more up-to-date picture for us in relation to that today, and we would welcome it.

Members also considered the further requirements to wear a face covering and made a number of enquiries. We asked whether it might be beneficial to adopt a more straightforward approach, requiring face coverings in indoor settings more generally; whether any analysis had been undertaken of the impact of improper use of face coverings; and whether there had been consideration of providing face coverings free of charge. Written advice received after the meeting asserted:

*“when there is very prolonged close contact between individuals cloth face coverings will not offer effective protections, and therefore extending the regulation to require blanket wearing of coverings would not be justified.”*

There appear to be a range of circumstances between requiring masks in indoor settings generally and "very prolonged close contact" situations, so I am not sure that this fully addresses the point raised, but I leave it to other Committee members to elaborate on.

We are advised that the face coverings working group has considered, but not recommended, free provision of face coverings. The Minister's letter also restates that evidence overall suggests that the use of face coverings reduces transmission of the virus, but cautions that improper use diminishes or eliminates their benefits, alluding also to limited evidence of harm through individuals paying less attention

to other mitigations. Members challenged the inconsistency in junior pupils having to wear face coverings on school transport but not in retail settings. The Minister advised that this will be reviewed by the face coverings working group, but noted that prolonged close contact is more likely on a school bus than in a retail situation.

A further issue that came to the attention of the Committee was the current loss of close contact services, such as massage, for those suffering from a range of conditions. Officials advised that, where such services are ancillary to health and social care treatment, they remain permitted. However, written advice supplied after the meeting confirmed that this is confined to services commissioned by health and social care. The Committee further enquired about enforcement, and awaits a reply on this matter.

**Mrs Cameron:** My thoughts are also with those families that have been bereaved throughout this pandemic, whether by COVID or non-COVID conditions. It is certainly a very trying time for families dealing with grief in different ways.

#### 1.45 pm

We meet again in the Assembly to approve regulations after they have been put into effect. By now, we are more than familiar with the process, but that in no way takes away the pain of the impact of the regulations before us. We are in a difficult, unprecedented and dangerous situation as a society, in which the threat to life is real. Let me be clear that the threat to life that I speak of today comes from COVID-19, but it is not the only threat. The threat to life also comes from undiagnosed cancers, untreated cancers and heart disease, to name but a few conditions. It also comes from a mental health crisis that we should be in no doubt will only get worse and will cost lives, with the disease of despair that comes with losing a job and not having the money to support those whom you love. I worry for Northern Ireland and for its people, its economy and the fabric of our society.

In that context, as we look at the restrictions that the Executive have brought in and that will fall on Thursday night — let me make it clear that they do fall on Thursday night — I will largely focus my remarks on the amendment (No. 9) regulations. The restrictions are not aimed at making the situation worse. They are motivated by and designed to steady the ship and to make things perhaps a bit better. They are certainly about giving our healthcare system

the space in which to help those in need and to survive the pressures that the health service is facing today.

I recognise the sacrifice that we are asking people to make. With reference to paragraphs 7 and 8 of the new schedule 2, I have friends and family who work in our hospitality industry and in close-contact businesses such as hairdressers. My heart goes out to everyone whose job and whose dream has been thrown into doubt because of COVID-19. I commend my colleague the Economy Minister for her response. She had led on these restrictions and in supporting jobs and livelihoods, giving hope where people thought that there was none.

There are issues in those regulations that money does not fix, however. I look at paragraph 10 of schedule 2 and think about couples who want to get married. All young couples want to be surrounded by friends and family and to celebrate that time together. It is in such cases that we need to ensure clarity on timescales. You cannot plan a wedding in a day, any more than you can plan to reopen a restaurant in a day. I urge timely notice of how we make decisions and of how we inform those who are impacted on. I know that the First Minister shares my view.

I want to touch on our health service. It is creaking under the pressure that it faces right now, but it is buoyed up by the incredible staff whom we have and their commitment. I know that we can see this through. Our student nurses are playing their part, and today I call on the Minister of Health to ensure in particular that those student nurses are paid for putting their shoulder to the wheel, just as they did in the first wave.

I also urge the Minister to look at what can be done for those in hospital settings getting bad news, possibly not COVID-related, and who are being left to receive that news on their own. Across our constituencies, we have heard of many instances of those who are suffering through loss and through pain. I also think of those who have a deep desire for spiritual guidance in those situations but whose minister of religion is not allowed into the hospital setting. I urge the Minister to look at those issues and see how they can be addressed. We need to find our compassion again.

In conclusion, there is a need to give people hope. That is where I welcome the words of the First Minister about learning to live with COVID-19. We need to devise very quickly a strategy that allows our economy to continue and that breaks the cycle of lockdowns. We need to find



a way in which schools and hospitality can be open, not have a pick-and-choose approach.

We also need more help in Northern Ireland. Let us take whatever assistance is available to us from the army. Surely there are many roles it could be assisting with, as it does across the rest of the UK. Testing is just one example, but there is track and trace, helping with infection control, and dealing with the logistics for our health service and of the vaccination programme to come. I welcome today's news about the very positive results from the vaccination programme.

I finish by again appealing to all to abide by the restrictions no matter how unfair they may feel. We need to play our part. I firmly believe that, by following the most basic advice in a long-term way — handwashing, covering our mouth and nose where appropriate, and keeping our distance from one another — we can avoid those draconian restrictions. Those measures will keep hospitals from being overwhelmed. Do not listen to me; listen to anyone who works on a COVID-19 ward or in ICU. Ask them whether coronavirus is real or a hoax. I look forward to hearing the Executive's latest decisions, hopefully, later today, and to debating them in the House in due course.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I can now call Mr Steve Aiken. Mr Aiken, bear with me: I may have to interrupt you to suspend the debate for Question Time, depending on how much time you take.

**Dr Aiken:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I intend to finish by 2.00 pm, so you should not have that problem whatsoever.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Or slightly before it.

**Dr Aiken:** Normally, I am accused of a degree of verbosity, but not on this occasion.

Right now, we have a serious situation in which more than 1,000 deaths from COVID-19 have been recorded in Northern Ireland. That is not a statistic; it is a tragedy. It is a tragedy for all those in Northern Ireland who have been affected by it. Often, we have been concerned about a lack of hope. However, with the results from the Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine trials showing an effectiveness of, potentially, up to 90%, I do hope, as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee said, that we have now reached a turning point. Equally, when we look at AstraZeneca and the other companies that are working on it, I hope that we can now begin to

see light at the end of the tunnel. I think that all Members would wish to welcome the opportunities that have come from the biotech industry and, in particular, our own pharmaceutical and universities, which have been involved in many of those trials. We wish to support them fully so that they can succeed as quickly as possible.

The key issue about the regulations is that they are decided by the Executive. I am glad that the junior Minister is here, because it is up to all members of the Executive, collectively, to come together and make the best case that we can to defeat the virus. Despite the fact that there may be a vaccine on the way, we need to be in a position to defeat the virus and make that clear.

Nobody wants to see regulations coming before the Assembly that have already been passed. Everybody wants to have at least 28 days to consider them. Indeed, as Chairperson of the Finance Committee, I can say that we would be delighted to get the information that comes to us ahead of time. Most of the Committee Chairpersons here would be delighted if we managed to get that information, did not have to push through with accelerated passage, and had a timely flow of information. For once, however, particularly in this area and in the rapidly changing environment, the Department of Health and the Executive have an excuse. We did not expect to have a second wave, even though we knew that, if we did not follow all the precautions, it could come back. Regrettably, it has.

Here we are, being asked on behalf of the Executive — it is an Executive decision by all the Ministers round that table — for these rules and regulations to be brought in, even though most of them will be superseded fairly shortly. I would also like the junior Minister to update us — indeed, I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office — because, due to the flow of messaging and information, we seem to find out more about it in the media. We have not quite got to the point where we hear about everything on Twitter, but, at the moment, as a Member, I would like to get information in the Assembly first. I would also like the leaks to stop, because it seems a bit strange that I find out more from the BBC about what is going on in the Executive and what is likely to come out than from Ministers or, indeed, from our own processes. I would like the junior Minister to address that. To ensure that people are aware of it, I want to point out that I have also raised the matter at the party leaders' forum, because we must be able to have effective government.

The decisions are for the entire Executive. Some issues need to be addressed, particularly for the excluded and businesses. They must feel that they are being supported and that people are listening to them. Last week, we received Barnett consequential of another £400 million. If we add that to the potential projections that the Finance Minister has already looked at, it is half a billion of support from our country — from our Treasury — that we have to spend by the end of the financial year. What is our Economy Minister doing about that? We have already seen the Communities and Finance Departments make efforts to do something, but here we are, after close on eight months, and some of our excluded companies still have not had any financial support, even though it is there. What are we doing about it?

That is something that we need to address, because one of the things that we must do for all of the people in Northern Ireland, if we are to have an effective health message and an effective message for dealing with COVID, is to realise that we all need to be in it together. That means that we should not be going to funerals that we should not be at, and our MPs should not be mouthing out behind the scenes and putting out falsehoods. We must get behind the advice of our Chief Scientific Officer, our Chief Medical Officer and our Health Minister, as well as the advice of the whole Executive. Things are not helped by poor messaging and leaking. Let us work closely together to sort this issue out and to make it happen.

Finally, but not least, I want to talk about our NHS. South Antrim has one of the best hospitals in Northern Ireland, and some of my constituents have been making sterling efforts to ensure that we are able to fight our way through the COVID pandemic. If anybody doubts that COVID is real or doubts the impact that it is having, they should try to get into A & E or try to talk to the 30 or 40, maybe more, people who are waiting to be admitted to wards. This is not a normal circumstance; this is not a normal situation. When we look at and talk about the regulations and about how we are trying to get them agreed, we listen to concerns about them not being laid in time, our having to wait for 28 days before we get them and all the rest of it. Let us take ourselves out of here and look at what is happening with the healthcare professionals and listen to them. Whatever we do, we must do it to help defeat COVID.

Mr Deputy Speaker, that takes me to 1.58 pm and one second.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Thank you very much indeed.

*The debate stood suspended.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Givan:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Further to the point of order that I raised this morning with the Speaker, I have received further correspondence from the Justice Minister outlining her reasons for not being able to be here. That correspondence highlights that the Justice Minister will be available to meet the Committee on Thursday, albeit remotely. She intends to reintroduce the Domestic Abuse Bill's Consideration Stage on 17 November, which is eight days away. Given the fact that the Justice Minister has announced that she is self-isolating, I am sure the Assembly will take advice on whether that complies with the 14-day rule. Further to that, a Minister has written formally to the Justice Committee offering to take through the Domestic Abuse Bill tomorrow. Given that a Minister is able to take forward the Department of Justice's business at Consideration Stage, what standing does the Assembly have in reaching a view as to whether the business can be conducted next Tuesday? I would welcome the Speaker's advice in that regard.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I believe that the Speaker outlined the complexity and detail of the Bill, which you will be more than aware of, earlier. I have been advised that, in those instances, with the offer of another Minister, it is for the Minister who is charged with the responsibility for the introduction of the Bill to work out the alternative arrangement with the other Minister, if it is needed. Therefore it is not as if one Minister can assume that responsibility. It is for the other Minister to agree to it and work it through. We can seek further clarity if that is the case, but that is my understanding.

**Mrs Cameron:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, on a different matter. The UK has, rightly, made the tough decision to close our borders, temporarily, to Denmark. Health authorities have reported widespread outbreaks of coronavirus on mink farms, which have spread to some local communities.

I understand that County Donegal has mink farms but Northern Ireland does not. It is important and necessary that we take steps to protect our population from any potential threat from the new strain of COVID-19. In the

absence of a debate in the Chamber, can you advise how the Assembly can urge the Republic of Ireland's Government to also take that precautionary and responsible step?

**2.00 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I suggest that that is perhaps not a point of order but that it is for the Member or her party to decide how or in what way they raise it, particularly, perhaps, with the aforementioned Minister who has responsibility for some of those matters at DAERA. That could be by way of a question for urgent oral answer on those issues.

**Mr Buckley:** Further to that point of order, I would like you to pass to the Speaker's office the fact that I submitted a question for urgent oral answer on this very topic. I thought that it was of notable concern, given that it is now spreading through animals and given the potential impact on Northern Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Just to clarify, Mr Buckley: was that question for urgent oral answer on this topic?

**Mr Buckley:** Yes.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Yes. Perhaps you could raise that matter with the Speaker's office, but we can relay it through, OK?

Thank you both for raising the importance of that.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Economy

#### Travel Agents: Grant Scheme

1. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will introduce a grant scheme to support travel agents. (AQO 1023/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):**

Thank you for the question. I have met representatives from the Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents, and I understand the extent to which the sector has been impacted, locally and on a global scale, by the pandemic. I have also met one of our foremost local travel agents, Mr Mukesh Sharma.

Travel agents have been able to avail themselves of support provided by the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive throughout this period, including the three business support schemes introduced by my Department. Travel agencies would have been eligible for assistance through the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employment income support scheme, the rates relief packages and the business interruption loans.

With ongoing restrictions in travel and a lack of confidence among the public, I believe that there is a strong case for specific financial support for the sector. To that end, I am aware that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, accompanied by the Finance Minister, met representatives from the Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents just last week. I await their recommendations from that engagement and any follow-up Executive decision in relation to that.

**Ms Rogan:** Minister, your tourism recovery steering group, along with NILGA, has acknowledged that, despite the decline in our tourism sector, all-Ireland tourism has increased and that has helped to ensure that our hotels and B&Bs can stay in business. You touched on this, but will you bring forward a specific proposal to ensure that there is growth in the sector and to compensate for the loss of tourism from overseas?

**Mrs Dodds:** First, may I comment on the preamble to your question? Tourism from the

Republic of Ireland has increased very significantly over the past number of months, given the promotion of staycations and the fact that people were unwilling to travel abroad. We in Northern Ireland have benefited from having significant numbers of visitors from the Republic of Ireland. That is a good thing, and we hope that it will continue. We think that we can expand that market.

Of course, as I said in answer to your original question, I understand and recognise the grave difficulties that travel agents in particular face and the impact that the travel restrictions etc have had on those who visit overseas. I believe that there is a case for intervention from the Executive. I understand that they have met the Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive will take a further decision when there is a proposal.

**Mr Buckley:** I have met various representatives of the travel industry and know acutely, as, I know, the Minister does, the pain that they face at this time. It is about how we ensure that the industry rebounds from what has undoubtedly been a very difficult period. Does the Minister agree that we should look at giving a rates holiday to those businesses, given the length of the tail of recovery that is expected?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question. We will maybe need to look at an immediate intervention and a longer-term intervention, such as rates relief for the next year. Those businesses have a good future, but the tail of recovery from COVID is long for them, and the road to that recovery is perilous, so I would like to see them being supported.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister says that she is sympathetic and supportive — all those encouraging words — but the situation has been known about for months. It is certainly some weeks, if not months, since I wrote to her, as, I know, other MLAs did, about that very subject. My fundamental question is this: why is there no package as yet? Why has that not happened? Travel agents work on a peculiar system that has an impact on their cash flow: when holidays are cancelled, money that they have already taken has to be repaid, as does the commission, so they lose on all sides. That has been known for months, so why the delay?

**Mrs Dodds:** Again, I thank the Member for his question. He will recall that I have said many times in the House that I put forward a list of the people who still required help, and, of course, travel agents were among those on that long list. These are whole-Executive decisions,

taken with the money that is available through the Finance Department. Having had further allocations from the money that was originally allocated to the Finance Department in July by the Chancellor in his economic statement, we are clear that financial help should be forthcoming, and I hope that it will be in the near future.

## Onshore Drilling

2. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for the Economy when the results of the departmental research into the economic, environmental and societal impacts of onshore drilling for oil and gas will be available. (AQO 1024/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department is undertaking a review of the petroleum licensing regime. To inform that review, the Department has commissioned independent research to provide a detailed assessment of the economic, environmental and social impacts of onshore oil and gas exploration and development in Northern Ireland. That will be a detailed piece of work, covering a wide range of complex issues. The researchers have been asked to consider the policy context of UK climate commitments; petroleum policy elsewhere in the UK, as well as in the Republic of Ireland and Europe; and the implications of Northern Ireland's developing energy strategy. It is anticipated that the research will take up to six months to complete. Similar regionally specific research has shaped petroleum policy in Scotland, Wales, England and the Republic of Ireland. The research will provide a solid regional evidence base on the impacts of petroleum licensing in Northern Ireland. The Department will use the information gathered to consider options and develop, through stakeholder engagement and consultation, evidence-based petroleum policy proposals. Those will include the need or otherwise for a petroleum licensing regime.

**Mr McGuigan:** Given the negative environmental and societal impacts of onshore drilling for oil and gas, there is an obvious need for action. Minister, given what you said about the countless other studies on these islands and further afield that have shown that the practices are deeply damaging to the environment and to the health and well-being of the population, will you commit to ending fracking and conventional exploration for fossil fuels?

**Mrs Dodds:** I have commissioned the research so that we will have a solid way forward for policy on the issue. I do not wish to pre-empt

the proposals or the research or, indeed, any further proposals or the consultation by the Department. Clearly, it is a contentious, cross-cutting issue, and the final decision will be taken by the Executive as a whole.

**Mr Dickson:** Minister, how do you see the future of fossil fuel exploration aligning with your desire to bring Northern Ireland to net zero carbon and to tackle climate change?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for that very important question. As the Member is aware, I recently published 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. One of the four pillars in it is the need for a clean, green recovery for Northern Ireland. I see that as having huge potential for the way forward. The sector already provides a significant number of jobs and contributes significantly to the economy in Northern Ireland. That is where the future for energy lies. However, we have to make solid policy proposals that are based on evidence and research. That is what we are doing and will continue to do.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for her answers. The Minister will be aware that one of the things that the Conference of Parties (COP) 26 later this month will look closely at is the move towards decarbonisation. What conversations has she had with the Welsh and Scottish Governments? This could be a great opportunity for all regional Governments in the United Kingdom to come together to ban fracking.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you for that topical question. Just last week, I engaged with Michael Gove and my counterparts in Scotland and Wales on a variety of the issues. The overall topic was economic recovery. It was interesting to note that each constituent part of the UK saw a clean, green recovery as essential to the future and a decarbonisation policy as an essential part of economic recovery. Every part of the United Kingdom saw the opportunity for economic recovery through focusing on clean energy. I want us to get to that stage in Northern Ireland. I look forward to bringing forward my energy strategy early next year and, in the meantime, to continuing to work with the sector on that trajectory.

## **Brexit Transition: Business Support Scheme**

3. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether any work has commenced on a scheme to prepare and financially assist

businesses following the end of the Brexit transition period in December 2020. (AQO 1025/17-22)

**2.15 pm**

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for her question. At the outset, I will say that I continue to oppose frictions in trade in any direction between Northern Ireland and its greatest market in Great Britain and the resulting costs to businesses that arise from the implementation of the protocol. Those in the House who, over and over again, call for the full implementation of the protocol should be aware of the conversations that were reported in the news last week from Sainsbury's and a number of other companies, which raised very significant fears about the cost to and choice for consumers and the cost to business in Northern Ireland as a result of our particular situation.

However, to specifically answer the question, the Executive have made it clear that the UK Government should provide funding and support to Northern Ireland businesses if they are in any way impacted at the end of the transition period. Work has been ongoing for some time to help businesses to prepare. Invest NI offers a range of support services to companies, and InterTradeIreland's Brexit advisory services provide financial and professional support. I continue to urge businesses to take up that support. The Trader Support Service portal is live and will provide guidance and support to Northern Ireland businesses and organisations that receive goods from GB or the rest of the world. I welcome that the United Kingdom Government are funding that service, and I encourage businesses to register. While we recognise the need for support, businesses tell us that what they most need is clear information to enable them to prepare. I will continue to press the Government to take on board the concerns of businesses and to provide them with urgent clarity and guidance on these matters.

**Ms Sheerin:** Minister, thank you for your answer. You referenced the transition period, and you will be aware that the clock is ticking towards the end of that period and that, for a lot of businesses, time is running out. Do you accept that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, we will not get the clarity that we need and that, therefore, plans must be put in place as a matter of urgency?

**Mrs Dodds:** I am not as pessimistic as the Member. I think that the European Union and our own Government are committed to getting a

deal. That is in the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, of French farmers and fishermen and many people and communities from across mainland Europe. I will continue to advocate for Northern Ireland businesses on this issue. However, we need to get a sense of what unfettered access is, what a Northern Ireland qualifying good will be, how we will instigate anti-avoidance measures to stop Northern Ireland being a back door into the United Kingdom and, very importantly, whether the European Union will commit to exempting large portions of trade between GB and Northern Ireland from the health certificates that they currently require. Those certificates cost significant amounts of money, and significant bureaucracy is involved. If, as he often said to me in many conversations, Michel Barnier wanted to be imaginative and innovative in the way that he implemented the protocol, this is one step that the EU could take right now.

**Mr O'Toole:** It is worth being clear that if anyone in the Assembly is able to talk about costs to business from Brexit, be they from North/South data flows or implementation of the protocol, it is no one from the Democratic Unionist Party, which brought these problems on the people and businesses of Northern Ireland. Let us be absolutely clear about that.

I agree with much of what the Minister said on qualifying goods and several other questions that are outstanding. Since the Minister is in front of us, I will ask her this: when will she come to the Assembly and give a fulsome update to businesses and households in Northern Ireland about what the Department and Executive are doing? Will she support calls for Northern Ireland businesses specifically to be included in European Union free trade agreements? There is enormous benefit to Northern Ireland businesses in that, and if it can be agreed with Brussels and London, we could genuinely get some of the benefits of both markets.

**Mrs Dodds:** I will start my answer by reminding the Member that this is a matter of democracy. The United Kingdom as a whole voted to leave the European Union. We are part of that United Kingdom, and therefore we will be leaving the European Union. We now have to ensure that Northern Ireland leaves on the very best terms. I, of course, do not see the protocol as the very best terms for Northern Ireland leaving the European Union. As we now know, there are costs and bureaucracy involved in that protocol. I call on the European Union to instigate measures immediately that will help Northern Ireland to navigate the protocol, so that retail coming from GB to Northern Ireland, for

example, will be exempt from checks. It would help the people of Northern Ireland significantly if the European Union was minded to do that.

Everyone accepts that the protocol involves significant costs to businesses. As preparation for this part of Question Time, I looked at what the Department is already doing in relation to that. We have the EU exit resilience tool, the Brexit preparation grant, the advice and webinars, the information and support on the Invest NI website, the InterTradeIreland Brexit advisory service, the Brexit planning voucher etc. However, the most important thing is clear information. I do not think that we will see that until we actually see the shape of a deal. I accept that businesses find that incredibly frustrating, as do I.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister has referred to how, already, some supermarkets are indicating that they may withdraw from aspects of the Northern Ireland food retailing market, but this goes much wider than that. Our garden centres are indicating difficulties in supplies. We have also learned of potato producers having difficulty in accessing seed potatoes, which come mainly from Scotland. Of course, this will affect virtually every aspect of movement of goods across the Irish Sea unless reasonable accommodation is made. What are the Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister actually doing to minimise disruption to our economy?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question. What he outlines is obviously absolutely true. When I had the opportunity, as a Member of the European Parliament, to vote on this, I did not, because of the implications of the protocol for Northern Ireland businesses. It is something that I have warned this House about over and over and over again. I have outlined the practical measures that are in place. We need clear information on these matters. I advise the House that I speak many times during the week to members of Her Majesty's Government on issues in relation to the protocol: the supply of goods for the manufacturing chain from GB to Northern Ireland; how Northern Ireland milk products will be treated, should some of them be processed in the Republic of Ireland; our parcels, which will simply arrive in Northern Ireland from GB. There is much that the Joint Committee can do to make these things easier to bear for the people of Northern Ireland. I appeal for the European Union, in this last round of negotiations, to get serious about doing that, if it is serious about protecting Northern Ireland and its consumers.

## Students: COVID-19 Safety Advice

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy what advice her Department has given to students in relation to COVID-19 safety. (AQO 1026/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question. Following discussions with the National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), we have developed advice for students across a range of issues relating to the impact of COVID-19. This advice has been published on the nidirect website. It covers everything from safety in travel, finance and support, and health and welfare to exams, placements and graduation. For further education, it refers to all of the above and gives advice on apprenticeships.

In addition, my ministerial colleagues in the Executive Office, along with the Chief Medical Officer, the Public Health Agency and officials from my Department, have convened meetings with the universities, the main purpose of which has been to ensure the safety of students on campus. The universities have been working closely with the Public Health Agency to ensure that they are providing advice to students that is fully in line with the agency's guidelines. That advice includes information on what support is available to students, including for those students who are self-isolating, as well as on the expected behaviour from students.

Further education colleges have been provided with a framework for recommencing on-site educational provision. The document provides practical guidance on how students and staff should prioritise their own and others' safety around COVID-19. In addition, my Department requires the colleges to provide students with an extended induction process to ensure that they understand the policies and procedures in place to protect their safety.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that students have had a particularly difficult year, particularly first-year students, who were awaiting their A-level results and then had to deal with the mix-up around those. They are now seeing their studies disrupted. They are facing financial hardship, because many who had part-time jobs no longer have those jobs, plus they have the worries of living with and dealing with COVID. On Friday, the Scottish Government awarded £1.32 million to assist with students' mental health and well-being. They will assign dedicated officials to engage with students and to counsel students on their mental health. Will

the Minister undertake to work with the Health Minister to bring a similar proposal to the Executive to have dedicated funding for our students' mental health and well-being?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for what is an incredibly important question. COVID-19 does not just affect students. It has placed an enormous strain on mental health and well-being right across all our communities, in all age sectors and for all people. Sadly, we will see the impact of that in the years to come. Indeed, many people have indicated that it could be an impact similar to that of 30 years of violence.

The Member is very well aware that I have lobbied very hard for additional funds for students to address hardship. In fact, in this financial year, there is a student hardship fund spread across the universities that totals about £5.6 million. It is the highest amount of hardship funding available to students in any part of the United Kingdom. My officials have also conducted a review of mental health provision in the higher education sector, and we are pleased to note a robust and proactive offering across all the institutions. I am acutely aware, however, of the impact of COVID on our health, and I will commit to having conversations with the Health Minister on that to see whether there is a need to do more to ensure that students, particularly those young students who have come straight to university following their A levels, have the support and protection that they need.

**Mr Nesbitt:** On 29 September, Sammy Wilson MP said:

*"The climate of fear deliberately created by Ministers and their advisers has done untold damage to individuals and to the economy as a whole, and has now hit students and universities".*

He then challenged Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State for Education, asking whether he believed:

*"it is fair that universities still hold on to the money paid by students when they are not offering the student experience that they promised".*

Does the Minister agree with her party colleague?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question. It is very topical, and I am asked a

significant number of questions about that every week.

As the Minister responsible for higher education, I am responsible for policy but not for fee-setting. The responsibility for that lies with the universities themselves. I am clear, however, with the universities that they need to provide a wide-ranging set of teaching methods and an appropriate assessment method for students.

I continue to monitor that and to ensure that our students receive the best education that they can in the very difficult circumstances in which the universities have to operate. If there are indications to the contrary, I will be happy to take action.

### 2.30 pm

**Mr Carroll:** During an era in which students are primarily being taught remotely, does the Minister agree with me that it is unjustified to push students further into debt by making them pay tuition fees when they are abiding by public health measures to stay safe? What plans does she have to ensure that students do not rack up further debts at this time?

**Mrs Dodds:** Tuition fees are probably an issue that we will debate at a future date in the House. I am clear that students in this era of COVID-19 should be safe, should be taught via a variety of methods and should receive the best possible teaching in the circumstances. If there are indications to the contrary, I will be happy to take it up with the universities. There is nothing more important to young people than receiving an appropriate education. The future of our economy and the stability and prosperity of Northern Ireland relies on it.

**Ms McLaughlin:** My question has been answered, but I will ask another. With the student experience being so diluted at present, I am very concerned about some students who are being held in contracts for accommodation in England, Scotland and Wales. Will the Minister join or commit to joining with the other devolved Governments to push for students to be released from contracts for accommodation so that they can return home and study remotely, instead of being tied into contracts and isolated in places where they have no backup or support?

**Mrs Dodds:** Of course, much of that will vary from university to university. In Northern Ireland, I understand that Queen's University has offered students in halls of residence a

holiday payment for this term because of the difficulties that some have experienced from having to self-isolate during this very difficult period. Many students have private accommodation, which offers other difficulties, with the contracts between landlords and tenants. That is why I moved during the year to provide additional funds to our university hardship funds. Should it be indicated that we need to be more proactive again in lobbying for more funds, I will not hesitate to include a bid for that in the January monitoring round.

**Mr Speaker:** That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

## COVID Closures: Support for Businesses

T1. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that, on 22 October, she announced that support would be available for businesses impacted by the restrictions — those that were directed to close and those within the supply chain — albeit that only the scheme for those businesses that were directed to close has opened for applications and he is hearing from businesses that are in financial difficulty as a result of that, how quickly she expects payments to be made and when she expects the scheme to open to those businesses that are in the supply chain. (AQT 621/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you. The support package for business is in the form of two particular supports: one led by the Department of Finance and the other led by my Department for the Economy. For those who are instructed to close and who have business premises, the Department of Finance offers a solution. I am looking at those who have no business premises to operate out of and particularly — I do not know — mobile hairdressers, driving instructors etc.

As of 9 November, 2,170 applications had been made, of which 106 have been verified. The first payment run was made last Friday and represented £127,000 in assistance. I will seek to have that progressed as quickly as we can, but we need to do verification checks, which are very important in ensuring that public money is well spent.

Part B of the scheme is around the supply chain. We will, probably, have the final paper to the Executive about that tomorrow.



**Mr Lynch:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Back in October, you were allocated funding for the newly self-employed. Many of those people have received zero support to date. Will you tell them when they can expect, finally, to get much-needed support?

**Mrs Dodds:** There are a number of issues around bringing forward a scheme for the newly self-employed. I recognise the real financial difficulties that they have been in. One of the issues is verification and cooperation from HMRC. That has been a difficult part of the process, but, again, we should have a paper for the Executive to make a final decision on this week.

### **Project Stratum: Update**

T2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on Project Stratum and its implementation, given that many people are working from home, many students are studying from home, many school pupils and teachers are working at home and rural businesses are trying to operate online. (AQT 622/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** We are almost at the end of the legal processes in relation to Project Stratum. I hope to be in a position very soon to make an announcement to the Assembly and Executive about the progress that that has made. That will ensure that many businesses in rural parts of Northern Ireland, which, I think, about 97% of the project covers, will have access to high-speed broadband. That will help not just in a COVID situation but with the competitiveness of our economy and the ability of rural communities to be more competitive and productive.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Obviously, there will be a lead-in time with regard to getting that implemented. Have you had conversations, or are there any ongoing, with providers to boost what we have at the moment to get an initial better speed for some places? That would be an easy, quick win.

**Mrs Dodds:** We have, of course, had a number of conversations. Just last week, I was really glad to announce further progress in that area. Project Stratum is a long-term intervention in the economy, but it is hugely important. It will ensure that Northern Ireland has almost full coverage in all parts. I look forward to that; it is an aspect of delivery that the Executive, the Assembly and we, in the Democratic Unionist

Party, having lobbied for that under the confidence and supply deal, can be proud of.

### **Remembrance Sunday: Queen's University**

T3. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will join with him in thanking the vice chancellor of Queen's University for marking, yesterday, the considerable sacrifice made by many Queen's students in the conflicts in which our nation has been involved. (AQT 623/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I, of course, join with you in that regard. Remembrance is hugely important for all of our society. Remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice is massively important for us as a nation. I was glad to see commemorations going ahead yesterday, even in a pared-back way. It is also hugely important for Queen's University and its vice chancellor to make such remembrance a priority, given the very considerable concerns that there have been in sections of our community around some of the decisions in the university in recent days.

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much indeed, Minister. Will she, as part of the celebrations that will be undertaken next year for our 100th anniversary, encourage the university, as part of its badly needed outreach to the unionist community, to set up an endowed chair for the study of unionism and its contribution to Northern Ireland? It would be particularly apposite if it were named after Edgar Graham.

**Mrs Dodds:** I do indeed think that that is a very laudable suggestion, and it is one that I would be very happy to support in my Department. We are also making preparation for the centenary of Northern Ireland, looking at the economic powerhouse that Northern Ireland was at the beginning in its creation and looking firmly into the future at how we can develop the economy of Northern Ireland in a way that sees it fit for purpose in its second century. These, I think, are exciting events for us all. I know that, in many ways, some in the House will consider it divisive, but a sign of the maturity of this House will be in how it reacts to the commemoration of the centenary of Northern Ireland.

### **COVID Closures: Support for Businesses**

T4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that businesses in Derry and Strabane have been subjected to additional

restrictions and have been closed for the past six weeks, while those elsewhere, including in his constituency, have been closed for four weeks, with employers closing their businesses in good faith, albeit that the vast majority of them have yet to receive a single brass penny of the support that they were promised, when they will be paid what they are owed. (AQT 624/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** As I said in my previous answer on this particular matter, there are two aspects to the business support schemes that are ongoing for this restriction period. One is the scheme that is organised and run by the Department of Finance where, as the Member rightly talks about, businesses that closed their premises have had no support. As someone who has considerable experience of running business support schemes, I recognise that these are not easy things to implement and that they are not easy things to have verification on, particularly when you are trying to have a speed of response on it. Therefore, as I indicated, I am particularly concerned with the scheme that we are running for those businesses that have no premises, and we have already made the first run of payments on that. I hope that, having made the initial run, we will be able to speed up the process, but, again, as the House is quite rightly very concerned with, it is important that the proper processes and verifications are in place so that we can ensure that public money is well spent.

**Mr Catney:** Thank you, Minister. The situation facing these businesses is totally unacceptable. In my view, the Minister has been far too slow to support those who have been asked to close and to support supply chain employers that have been affected by these decisions. Will she apologise to those business owners, who are in despair this afternoon, and commit to providing them with the support that they need now?

**Mrs Dodds:** I am really not sure which businesses the Member is referring to. If he is talking about businesses that have had to physically close their premises, he needs to refer his question and his requirement for an apology to the Minister of Finance, because that is where that particular scheme is being run. I am running a scheme for people who have not been able to carry out their normal business. That is people who do not operate from a premises and people who are mobile in the way that they conduct their business. As I said, we have moved quite quickly to ensure that that scheme is up and running. The first payments are under way, and the rest will follow in due course.

## HMS Caroline

T5. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy, after assuming that there will not be time for his question and a supplementary question, given the time, and stating that he welcomes the latest news regarding the postponement until the end of the year of the redundancies of staff employed on HMS Caroline and the fact that he understands that consultants have been working on a report regarding HMS Caroline, to state whether she can confirm that the consultants' brief contained a direction only to consider relocation sites outside Northern Ireland. (AQT 625/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I am really unsure of the direction of the Member's question. First, I welcome the agreement that we were able to strike with the Royal Navy museum in relation to the people who are employed on HMS Caroline.

I have made it clear on many occasions in the House, and I indicated at the beginning of September, that the Department did not want anyone to be made redundant, and we were quite willing to put in place a process to ensure that those people were paid until the end of December and, indeed, thereafter if necessary.

## 2.45 pm

I am very committed to ensuring that HMS Caroline remains in Northern Ireland and, as an important historical part of the Northern Ireland landscape, that it is open not only for tourism but for the intrinsic value that it represents for people here. Therefore, that is the aim of the work that my Department is undertaking. I am glad that the Royal Navy museum was able to come to an accommodation with the Department. I will continue to work with the Royal Navy museum to ensure that the ship has a full future in Northern Ireland and that those currently employed remain employed.

**Mr Speaker:** Alan Chambers has concluded his questions. I call Colm Gildernew.

## Student Debt

T6. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for the Economy for her view on the following: a report in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last week that stated that, over the past seven years, higher education students in the North saved £1 billion in tuition fees and student debt when compared to students in England; that the saving was due to the Executive's commitment not to follow England and, instead, to keep student fees

affordable; and the fact that Sinn Féin believes that that approach is important in breaking down barriers to education. (AQT 626/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Speaking as someone who has benefited from a university education in Northern Ireland, I think that it is extremely important to ensure that all our young people have access to quality education. I am glad that the Northern Ireland Executive had a collective approach to looking at the issue of student fees and did not follow the automatic £9,000 requirement in the rest of the United Kingdom. I look forward to continuing that approach.

**Mr Speaker:** As there is a minute left, Colm Gildernew can ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Gildernew:** My question has been answered.

**Mr Speaker:** The time is up for this item of business. I thank Members for their contributions and ask them to take their ease for a moment or two while we prepare the Table.

## Education

### Nurture Units: Rural Schools

1. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of nurture units in schools in rural areas. (AQO 1038/17-22)

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** I thank the Member for her question. Members will be aware that there are two definitions of "rural" in education, which we are trying to align. Based on figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), one primary school currently receives funding from the Department for a nurture group, and that is St Oliver Plunkett Primary School in the north-west. The other definition that is sometimes used for sustainability between urban and rural may be a little out of date. Of the original 31 schools, about 22 were deemed as urban. The new group of 15 schools to receive funding for nurture groups has five schools that are Belfast-based, and 10 are based outside Belfast. In addition to the direct funding for nurture groups in schools, as part of this year's funding process, which will be ongoing, all educational settings, including rural primary schools, will have access to a nurture approach in education programme through the Education Authority. The aim is to try to mainstream this across the board.

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he confirm that a full rural-proofing exercise was carried out? I understand what he says about the first definition and the second definition. The second definition can be ruled out, because some Departments consider anything outside Belfast as rural, which is not the case.

I invite the Minister to see an excellent example of a primary school in a rural area. If he were to visit St Mary's Primary School in Pomeroy, we would really appreciate it.

**Mr Weir:** I will deal with a couple of those issues. The position on the most recent announcements is that some of the implementation remains subject to the provision of a business case. As part of that process, a rural needs impact assessment and a quality impact assessment will take place. The criteria used for the previous set of announcements have been in existence for a number of years. It is, effectively, a competition for nurture units, because the funding is not infinite. The system used to produce criteria was developed a number of years ago. That system is ongoing, and schools are therefore ranked against those criteria.

On the urban/rural definitional split, particularly for sustainability issues, anything within the old city council area in the north-west and anything within Belfast was counted as urban; everything else was counted as rural. There is a good argument that that is out of date, and I recently signed off on a proposal to change that to try to align our definitions of urban and rural with those of NISRA so that they are consistent across the board.

I am sure that many schools are providing very good services but, if the school could put an official invitation through the system, I would be happy to come down to Pomeroy to visit it.

**Mr McNulty:** Can the Minister confirm whether there are plans to bolster the existing Irish language nurture units and to open more in the future?

**Mr Weir:** The position is that all groups should be treated on the basis of equality. In the different sections of funding, there were originally 20 nurture units. That moved up to 30 and then 32, one of which dropped out. Recently, another 15 have been put in place, and two of those are in Irish-medium schools. The criteria that have been used from the start are objective. All schools are treated according to the set criteria, and treated equally. Whether

it is a controlled school, a maintained school, an integrated school or an Irish-medium school, decisions are based on how the schools meet the qualifying criteria for a nurture unit. Nobody should feel that they are being superseded or being unfairly leapt over. Objective criteria will continue to apply in establishing any form of ranked order for nurture units. We have seen expansion, and it is widely accepted that nurture units are important. That is why we are trying to mainstream them across all schools. Not only have they been very successful in the short term but they will bring long-term dividends.

As is the case for all Ministers, it is a question of funding constraints. If I had the money to fund another 50 nurture units, I would be happy to do so, as would any Minister. So far, we have been able to progress 15 nurture units. After this, I have a meeting with the Finance Minister to discuss next year's budget. A massive expansion is unlikely, given the other pressures, but any additional units will always be judged on how they rank according to the criteria. It means that, depending on how much money is available, one school will be the final one to be funded. The school below will be next in line.

**Mr Butler:** Given the success of nurture units and early intervention, will the Minister commit to expediting the legislative change that will create flexibility in the age at which children start school, especially for premature children?

**Mr Weir:** I am certainly keen to look at that. As with a lot of things, the focus has been more on COVID than on developing a policy, but I am sympathetic to the situation. Something needs to be done, and we will need to look at whether it is done on a legislative basis or in a different way. We need to do something to allow greater flexibility on the starting age in limited circumstances, because if you were simply to make that very open-ended, it could be very disruptive to the school system. However, there are some tough cases, and there is no flexibility in that at present, so I am happy to look at it.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I declare an interest as a governor at Edenbrooke Primary School, which has a nurture unit, and I thank the Minister for extending that to Glenwood Primary School. The Minister said in an earlier answer that he is working under financial constraints. Will he look at the outcomes of the expert panel that is looking at educational underachievement? Given that early interventions are cheaper and better, perhaps some money can be unlocked

and freed following the publication of such a report.

**Mr Weir:** I cannot prejudge any of the panel's outcomes. I should say that some of the advantages of nurture units are those that do not purely bring direct educational achievement; they also have a very major social impact, particularly on disadvantaged young people. They are a potential win-win. As such, I will want to look at whatever proposals come out of that panel. It is likely that there will be some commitment from any panel to earlier interventions, which may well lead to nurture units.

As the report is due to complete in May, it will then require additional funding from next year's budgetary settlement. It has been accepted from proposals that we have put forward that, although we do not know the exact nature of what will come out of the educational underachievement panel, as it is an NDNA commitment, we would like to see the Executive as a whole back it up with funding. That could lead to additional support, particularly for nurture units and early intervention.

## School Principals: COVID-19 Support

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education what support his Department is providing to school principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1039/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I am on record praising the tremendous efforts of all school leaders and staff not only for their tireless work to support our vulnerable children, the children of key workers and the thousands of pupils who have been educated through remote learning but for the significant planning and preparation that was undertaken to get schools ready for the new term. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to see the results of some of that work at first hand.

On 24 August 2020, I outlined a significant package of funding, with the support of the Executive, to help to support the safe reopening of schools. The funding will help principals to address some of the new pressures arising as a result of COVID and, in doing so, to protect our children and young people as well as those working in educational settings.

The package includes £17.5 million towards the cost of substitute teachers and other school expenditure; £6.4 million for PPE; £5 million for school well-being initiatives; £3.1 million for

additional costs for home-to-school transport; and £1.4 million to support special educational needs. That is principally focused on the first term of the new academic year.

An updated version of the COVID guidance for school and educational settings was published on 29 September, and that is intended to support principals and educational settings. The guidance outlines a range of additional supports that are available to schools, including a named cross-organisational link officer for all schools; a Public Health Agency (PHA) helpline; and a dedicated Education Authority helpline for schools that require advice on COVID where a positive case is identified. A range of information and flow charts are also available on the DE website and C2k Exchange.

In addition, through the monitoring rounds, additional allocations have recently been made to the education sector. Those are very recent; consequently, we need to move them through. About £8 million was made available directly for schools in addition to a range of other issues to cover, for instance, some EA pressures, including SEN.

There is a range of support there, but not all of that has been entirely rolled out.

Sorry, also, as part of that, the figure for schools includes the fact that there has been growth in years 13 and 14. The figure for schools was £10 million that was provided directly for that. There was another £1.8 million for non-statutory preschool settings.

**3.00 pm**

**Mr Beggs:** I declare an interest as a governor of Roddensvale School. I join the Minister in showing my appreciation of the staff and teachers of all our schools in helping our children.

The Chancellor has recently extended the furlough scheme, at least until March 2021. Given that recognition that the challenges of COVID-19 will extend until at least that time, what additional moneys does the Minister see coming to schools to assist with this challenge in keeping children safe and teachers protected as they carry out this vital work?

**Mr Weir:** I indicated that, during the recent monitoring rounds that have just taken place, Education as a whole received £12.8 million of what was bid for in the October monitoring round and then, on the COVID side of it, £49.4 million, of which £10 million was directly related

purely to schools. Other actions were taken. It was also the case that, for PPE equipment, in addition to the £6.4 million that was granted, about another £19 million, I think, roughly speaking, was granted to help to pay for PPE for all schools and settings. There are a range of activities.

The Member rightly indicated that the furlough scheme has been extended. With the exception of very limited circumstances, the furlough scheme does not apply all that much directly to the public sector, albeit that, across the board, people are able to take advantage of it. While it has a major impact on Northern Ireland plc, if I can put it that way, there is no direct Barnett consequential of the furlough being put in place, other than that people in Northern Ireland are able to avail themselves of it. There is not a particular additional block that comes into Education as a result of the extension of the furlough scheme.

**Ms Mullan:** A post-primary school in my constituency had to close after four days of reopening because the principal, the two vice principals, six teachers and all the canteen staff had to self-isolate. It was not safe. Intervention over and above the packages that you have mentioned is needed there. I have highlighted to both you and the Health Minister the burden on principals in relation to tracking and tracing. I asked both your Departments to work together to significantly enhance the PHA's capacity in schools. Can you give us an update on progress?

**Mr Weir:** I will take a couple of those issues. Obviously, there is a wider issue for the Executive. The PHA obviously falls within the remit of the Department of Health. There is a wider opportunity, as we move ahead, to increase the availability of tracking and tracing. In schools, we have seen a situation where we will work with the Department of Health on a pilot scheme to ensure that testing can be turned around at a quicker rate. We have seen examples in England where they do daily testing. That is moving on. Directly speaking, I appreciate that tracing people creates a burden for schools, but where someone has tested positive — particularly a school student — the school is probably in the best position to identify those who have been close and those who have been sitting next to them. That is the role that schools play in providing that level of information.

I am glad that the Member has raised the issue where we have probably seen a bigger problem at times in some areas, and that is where there has been community spread among adults.

That has obviously impacted on staff. Sometimes, the reporting of the media is not entirely accurate. I have heard two conflicting dates mentioned, and on the media there was talk of the school in question closing for a fortnight and of remote learning: that is not the case, and I am glad there is the opportunity to put that right. I understand that, possibly on Thursday of this week, following a deep clean, there will be —. There will always be a knock-on effect on that basis. It is the intention in the way that money is being made available for substitute cover, because you can have a school that is hit quite heavily, that it will be on the basis of drawing down as much as possible, within what is available, on the basis of need, rather than a top-sliced allocation per school. We have seen, for instance, on that basis —.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up, Minister.

**Mr Weir:** In about half the schools, there have been no cases at all, and in others it has been deeper. It is about responding to the need. Apologies.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you.

**Ms S Bradley:** Does the Minister agree that there is a real need to set up a working group, with stakeholders drawn from across the education sector, to help inform you on your decisions in the weeks and months ahead?

**Mr Weir:** I agree, but a stakeholder group has already been set up. From the point of view of providing advice, a stakeholder group of school principals has been meeting regularly. It continues to meet and is informed of a range of issues in order to do that work. In addition, there are discussions at times with trade union representatives. There is a stakeholder group.

A balance has to be struck. In education, as with other things that have happened with COVID, there will be times when there has to be a quick reaction to things. That means that you cannot have everything convened. A balance between consultation and responding quickly has to be struck. The stakeholder group of about 20 school principals encompasses all the sectors, including primary, post-primary selective and non-selective schools and special schools, and acts as a sounding board for discussion. That group is already there.

**Mr Speaker:** I should have said that question 5 has been withdrawn.

## SEN Assessments: Waiting Time

3. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Education how he will reduce the waiting time for the referral of primary-school pupils for special educational needs (SEN) assessments. (AQO 1040/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Give me a second.

The Education Authority has established a special educational needs and disability strategic development programme that will incorporate work to reduce delays in the SEN assessment process. The programme will also address recommendations from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) report 'Too Little, Too Late', the Northern Ireland Audit Office reports on SEN and the EA's own internal audit of practice report.

The Department is consulting on a new SEN framework that will introduce new duties for the EA, schools and the Department of Health that are designed to reduce timescales and bureaucracy in the statutory assessment process. Actions are also ongoing to reduce delays in the statutory assessment process through the EA's improvement plan and the joint Health and Education notification, referral and statutory assessment (NRSA) action plan.

I have established a SEN governance group to provide strategic oversight and coordination of the overall programme of improvements in the EA and the Department. The group will provide an assurance that the Department and the EA are working collaboratively to improve processes and procedures to achieve better outcomes for children with SEN.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You will be aware that there are also long waiting lists for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) assessments. I understand that those are to be completed by the medical profession, but that has a knock-on effect when children are being assessed in school by the school psychologist. Will you commit to working with the Health Minister to reduce that assessment time, for the educational benefit of our young people?

**Mr Weir:** I will be happy to work with him. It is important as part of this. As with a lot of things, if there were simply a single intervention that would make things work more quickly, it would have been made some time ago. It is about trying to reduce bureaucracy.

With statements, while it is still far too long, there has been a reduction in the time taken for assessments, and that is starting to work through the system. Where there are direct individual assessments, COVID has created its own problems, but we are trying to work around those.

I am happy to give that commitment to work with the Health Minister and continue to work between the two Departments to make sure that we improve the lot of anybody with autism or, indeed, wider special educational needs.

**Ms Dolan:** Minister, you touched on this briefly in your previous answer. What is your assessment of the impact of the onset of COVID on referral waiting times for special educational needs assessments for primary-school pupils? What action are you taking to address it?

**Mr Weir:** To be fair, despite COVID, there has been some improvement. For example, between July and September, the percentage of statements completed in time rose by about 11%, so there are some positives. That is across the board. There have been improvements in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, for instance. Indeed, with regard to the unacceptable number of children who were waiting more than 40 weeks, which is 14 outside of that, there has been an 83% improvement. The number has gone down from 265 to 44. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has had an impact on some of the assessments that were there earlier in the year. For all of us, including even those in the medical profession, there was a level of reluctance in trying to assess what was doable on the ground. None of us knew precisely what was coming down the track. We have seen some level of improvement, but we have to push that consistently.

To take another appalling statistic, exactly one year ago 107 children had been waiting over a year and a half for the completion of their statutory assessment: that figure is now down to zero.

**Mr McCrossan:** For some time now, there has been a long, lingering crisis in SEN. Many children and families struggle, and that has been worsened by the pandemic. Does the Minister feel that his Department is doing enough to support those families, particularly in the absence of schools, which have proven to be vital to those children and their development over recent years? Does he feel that it is satisfactory that SEN schools were not included

in the Engage programme for vital funding, which has angered many parents?

**Mr Weir:** I have indicated that, with regard to SEN, I have directed the Education Authority to work directly with those schools and to provide individual interventions where it can provide support. There is an onus on the EA to do that.

As I indicated, some good work has been done. Improvements are being made. Can more be done? Yes. We are not at the endgame. As with anything in public life, there is always the danger of seeing it as an event when, in fact, it is part of a process. We need to ensure that that process continues. That is part of the reason why, from a strategic point of view, we put the SEN regulations out to consultation with the idea that, at the end of that process, new SEN regulations and a code of practice would be put in place. That will be helpful as well. As with everything, though, will there be instantaneous answers or improvements? No. They will not happen instantaneously, but we need to move in the right direction constantly. Ultimately, can more be done? Yes, and more will be done.

### Schools: Self-isolation Levels

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education how many pupils and staff have had to self-isolate due to COVID-19 since schools re-opened in August. (AQO 1041/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Department does not hold daily specific information on the number of pupils and staff who have been or are currently self-isolating. However, we capture pupil attendance data through the school information management system (SIMS) using a reappropriated attendance code that is not solely for COVID-19. Over the first couple of months, that averaged about 2% per week. In the week commencing 12 October, it reached a peak of 5-6%. Those figures were on the basis of where pupils were receiving direct support learning and, indeed, engaging directly with remote learning while self-isolating or shielding.

As regards teachers, again, the overall figures were produced by the Public Health Agency, which monitors them. It had identified that, prior to the Halloween break, just over 2,000 cases were, in some way, connected with schools, with a breakdown of about 1,400 pupils and 600 staff who, over that eight-week period, cumulatively had tested positive for COVID-19. Again, the fluctuation is due largely to the figures in schools reflecting what is going on in the wider community.

As regards staff, the most recent available figures are for 13 October. They show that about 90% of teaching and non-teaching staff were on-site on that day. Of the one in 10 staff who were reported as not working on-site, schools categorised just over one third as having been:

*"Identified by PHA Testing and Tracing to self-isolate".*

That is a little over 3%. It should also be noted that half of the staff who were reported not to be working on-site were reported to be working remotely.

We should also remember and put into context with regard to staff that, on average, the bill for substitute staff in a normal year is around £100 million, which is a little bit shy of 10% of the overall wage figure. We need to put that into context as well.

**3.15 pm**

**Ms Anderson:** As the Minister knows, principals in Derry and across the North are doing their utmost to protect pupils. They have carried the burden of tracking and tracing. I have been listening to the Minister's comments today, but I do not see that dedicated support is being given to the principals in Derry and elsewhere who are carrying that burden on their shoulders. I do not think that what the Minister has outlined today tells them that enough support is being given to them.

**Mr Weir:** Schools can contact a dedicated PHA helpline directly. With regard to tracing, we should remember what is being said about close contacts and that, largely speaking, they are those who are within 2 metres of the affected individual for more than 15 minutes. The people who are in the best position to determine that are the people within the schools. There is, therefore, that level of support. There is support in this area, as there is with everything in relation to the issue; I am not suggesting that education has been treated unfairly with regard to the level of support. If more support was available, could more be done? Yes, it could, as it could in a lot of things, but I am confident that what has been put in place provides the maximum amount of support available, given the level of resources. That is irrespective of where the school is based.

Across the board, the latest figures suggest that roughly half of schools have not had a single case and half have had at least one case. Of those, about half had a single incidence,

involving one individual. Schools will largely reflect what is happening in the community. Schools are a relatively controlled environment. I do not believe that they are somewhere in which the spreading of COVID is a particularly major problem. The problem is a range of the activities that happen alongside schools, and we are seeing that within the wider context. As numbers of COVID cases continue to come down, I hope that we will continue to see reductions in schools, and if they go up, I suspect that schools will reflect that.

**Mr Lyttle:** How many P7 pupils have had to self-isolate since schools reopened in August?

**Mr Weir:** I do not have those figures to hand, but I will get them for the Member. We know the figures for pupils who have tested positive across the board. We will take a look to see what figures are available. I am happy to write to the Member with any information that we have, broken down as much as possible.

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

## **Post-primary Transfer: Contingency Plan**

T1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education, further to the Northern Ireland Assembly's unanimous vote, when he will set out a clear contingency plan for post-primary transfer this year. (AQT 631/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** As I indicated at the time, contingencies need to be put in place. The people who are doing it, legally, are, first, the schools that can set their own criteria and, secondly, the organisations that put the tests in place. We will ensure that everything is put in place with regard to the health and safety of individuals, but, from that point of view, I think that it runs contrary to the law and the right of schools to have academic selection. I appreciate that the Member and I take a different view in relation to that. I support the right of schools to have academic selection. Schools have the opportunity not to use that, if they so desire, but I am not going to try to impose on schools the removal of academic selection.

**Ms Armstrong:** I appreciate that the Minister may not be able to provide me with this information, here, today, but I would appreciate it if he could get it to me. Following on from his response, will he provide a breakdown of how many meetings there have been with the



Association for Quality Education and the Post Primary Transfer Consortium and his Department, his ministerial office and his special adviser, please?

**Mr Weir:** I am happy to get any information on those meetings, and there will have been discussions, too. We want to ensure that children are operating in a safe environment when it comes to the transfer tests, but we should put it in context. As I indicated in the debate, around 10,000 pupils will sit the tests on each Saturday that they are held, and a range of mitigation measures will be put in place, but that is in the context of more than 300,000 children going to school daily. It is about trying to ensure that any health and safety mitigations are put in place. As for the specifics of any discussions on that, I am sure that we will get the details to the Member.

## Holiday Hunger: Funding

T2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education whether Barnett consequentials will be received from the additional £170 million that was recently announced by the Prime Minister to allow local government to support free school meals during holiday periods and tackle the holiday hunger issue and to state whether a commitment exists for ongoing funding in that area in Northern Ireland. (AQT 632/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** We would need considerably more than a Barnett consequential, because the number of children, for instance, who qualify for free school meals is of a greater nature than it is across the water. Again, it seemed that this was a case in which the Westminster Government followed behind the devolved Administrations. As the Member is aware, a proposal had been put to the Executive to ensure that, for instance, as a result of the additional week off, initially, that would be covered. Strictly speaking, time outside term time lies outside the legal remit of the Department of Education. However, what we found, across the spectrum of the Executive, is that there has been a considerable willingness and unanimous support — I do not think that I am breaching any Executive confidentiality. During the recent Halloween break, we agreed to support the payment for across both weeks. That position is similar to what was adopted when schools were effectively, more or less, not meeting face to face during the March-to-June period and to the provision agreed by the Executive for the summer period.

We are scoping out what needs to be done in terms of the cost for the Christmas period and

beyond. I think that, given what has happened in the past, the Executive will step up to the mark and provide that level of support. One of the things that needs to be scoped out is an additional level of weekly cost as it is likely, as time moves on, that the numbers of those on, for instance, universal credit will, sadly, increase. Therefore, there will probably be a higher cost per week, but I think that there is a strong commitment from the Executive to tackle the issue, and, again, I suspect that we will be ahead of the curve in comparison with Westminster.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his answer. There is considerable research in the UK about holiday hunger programmes providing not only food but constructive physical and educational activity for disadvantaged children, particularly during summer and holiday periods. Does the Minister have any plans to continue to develop and provide such constructive activity to raise the educational attainment of disadvantaged young people in Northern Ireland? In particular, in Carrickfergus, in my East Antrim constituency, the YMCA has been involved in providing such a scheme.

**Mr Weir:** A lot of good work has been done on that, particularly by third parties. Tackling the absolute immediate issue will be about the pure issue of holiday hunger and what level of support needs to be provided there. In addition to that, particularly on the academic side, while there has been a focus, for instance, on support for academic catch-up during term time, there was investment, first, in a number of initiatives over the summer this year. Through Youth Services, a range of bespoke interventions have taken place. One area where there has maybe been a little bit of constraint in doing some of the direct help is that there has been a limit on what can be done directly through youth activity during COVID. For instance, while there have been bespoke summer schemes, the ability to have those as wide as they ideally should be has been limited a little bit by COVID. Hopefully, again, we will move to a situation in which we move away from that. However, the work, particularly, of the youth sector in this is critical, and I pay tribute to the hard work that it has done throughout this. Sometimes, it is not as well recognised, perhaps, as what is there in the more formal education system.

## Digital Devices: School Pupils

T3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many digital devices have been provided to pupils and how his Department is dealing with the issue of internet connectivity for

pupils whose families are financially disadvantaged. (AQT 633/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** On the level of support — obviously, we had a three-stage process — as of 31 October, about 8,300 devices had been given out directly. In addition to that, the EA obtained a number of Mi-Fi devices, with built-in data allowances, and we have worked closely with BT on that. There are roughly 3,000 devices in the system that we are able to draw down on, but we have indicated that, if there is a need for further devices this year, we will look to DOF to see whether any additional capital can be drawn down.

The focus has effectively been on a range of groups, particularly those who are at a socio-economic disadvantage. The level of connectivity is also critical. You can have all the devices in the world, but they cannot be used effectively, particularly in some rural areas, until connectivity has been rolled out. That is why my colleague the Economy Minister is rolling out Project Stratum to try to ensure that broadband width is escalated in those areas in order to make sure that we are marrying the two.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for his response. We are aware that additional funding was offered to schools to provide extra assistance to children in catching up on lost school time. Will further funds be available for schools to widen the availability of that extra assistance to enable more pupils to benefit?

**Mr Weir:** As I said, we are constantly exploring what direct digital devices are needed. So far, the Executive have agreed a package of £12 million, which has gone into the programme to allow for catch-up. There was money for a number of smaller initiatives over the summer, but the main one was the Engage programme, for which there was £11.2 million. That will take us up to the end of March next year, and we as a Department will need to bid for around £4 million or £5 million to complete the project by June. That will have positive spin-offs not simply through what is there for pupils but by providing some additional opportunities for, for instance, substitute teachers who are on the list to be able to provide that direct level of intervention. Schools have been given the opportunity to apply that money where they decide that it is best placed. That is on the academic side.

Additional money will shortly be distributed for specific support, in response to COVID, for mental health and well-being, beyond that which would be provided under normal

circumstances. It is about having a healthy mind, from a mental health and an academic point of view. It is about marrying the two.

## **SEN Assessments: Impact of COVID-19**

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education to outline the impact that coronavirus is having on the special educational needs (SEN) assessment process, given that the waiting times for SEN assessments are well documented. (AQT 634/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** As I indicated, the assessment process figures were very big previously, but we have seen a reduction. There has, for example, been an improvement, particularly between June and September, in meeting the statutory assessment period. There is also provision, as I indicated, for those at the far end of the scale who have been waiting for a very long time. Over the period of a year, we have seen that number come down from 107 who were waiting 80 weeks or more down to zero. It is part of an overall process. There is no doubt that there was some disruption to direct assessments, particularly during the spring term. Again, in society as a whole, there were barriers that made people feel uncertain about what could and could not be done. Indeed, the lines of communication probably were not as strong as they would be under normal circumstances.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he attribute any of that to remote working in the education setting? Can he give an assessment of how many people are continuing to work remotely and when he anticipates those people being back in work as normal?

**Mr Weir:** I have given an indication of the number of school staff working remotely. I do not, however, have figures directly to hand for what is happening in the broader process with, for instance, educational psychologists and those working in health. What I will say is that, from my experience of having seen some special schools, there is a critical intervention for face-to-face teaching. That is of benefit throughout the system, but it is particularly pertinent for those with special educational needs.

**3.30 pm**

## Schools: Ventilation

T5. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Education, following his response to a question for written answer about classroom ventilation, in which he said that he was following the evidence and watching how it developed, whether he is setting aside funding for the school estate that can be used as we move in to the winter, when it might not be possible for schools to keep their windows open. (AQT 635/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** There is direct Public Health Agency (PHA) advice on the maximum ventilation that can be provided. Schools have to apply this sensibly. I have been contacted by parents asking why windows are open. They are open to create ventilation, but schools will also have to adapt. For example, they will have to change how they look at school uniforms and consider allowing extra layers of clothing. There have to be common-sense solutions.

The money being made available to schools will meet a range of issues. It is not hypothecated to say, "You need to spend this in a particular way". Schools are given a degree of freedom. There is a concern that high levels of ventilation will have the knock-on effect of additional colds or whatever. As with a lot of things in meeting the challenges of COVID, there is rarely a solution that produces something so virtuous that it does not also create complications.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Paula Bradshaw for a supplementary. We have about a minute and a half left. The Member has relinquished the opportunity.

## Academic Selection

T6. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Education, after commenting on getting in very briefly and the need to be concise, whether, when his expert panel on educational underachievement comes back, if it has found that academic selection is a clear cause of educational underachievement amongst disadvantaged people, he will take action. (AQT 636/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Without wishing to upset others in the House, I will use the expression, "The education panel has not gone away, you know". The panel is continuing to receive submissions on underachievement. The specific issue of transfer from primary to post-primary is focusing largely on the wider review of education. I have signed off on the draft terms of reference going

to the Education Committee. They still have to go through the Executive, which is probably the best place for them to go. On underachievement, there is always a danger that the media will focus on what happens at the age of 11, when, actually, a lot of the lessons are really about what happens much before that.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

## Question for Urgent Oral Answer

### Economy

#### Caterpillar: Job Losses

**Mr Speaker:** Stewart Dickson has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy. If Members wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who asked the original question will be called automatically for a supplementary.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking to avoid the loss of 700 jobs at Caterpillar in Larne and Belfast.

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** The decision by Caterpillar in the US to enter a period of consultation will be a worrying time for many. While the company has explained that that is part of a process for restructuring its electrical power division at Larne, the scale of the potential job losses will be a great shock to the workforce and their families.

I met Caterpillar's Northern Ireland senior management team, along with representatives from Invest NI, on Friday to express my disappointment at the decision. I have asked Invest NI, which has a good working relationship with Caterpillar, to continue to engage with the company throughout the consultation period in order to explore ways to minimise the impact at the Northern Ireland sites, and I know that that is happening today. Tomorrow I am meeting the Unite union to hear its concerns, and I am confident that everyone will be working to ensure that we can support the workforce at this critical time.

Be assured that my Department and Invest NI, alongside other stakeholders, including Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, Manufacturing NI and the Manufacturing and Engineering Growth and Advancement (MEGA) network, are liaising with Caterpillar's senior management to ensure that assistance is available to support workers throughout this process. That will include redundancy clinics, reskilling, job fairs and identification of job opportunities. The company is also working with union and salaried-worker representatives as it enters the 90-day consultation period.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you very much, Minister, for agreeing to come to the House so quickly to answer questions about these potential job losses in Larne. Minister, I am sure that you will agree that there is a movement in manufacturing not only in Northern Ireland but across the world towards a greener and higher-tech economy in the manufacturing sector and that we need to go all out to secure major opportunities for the future. Can you tell us what you are doing to ensure that greener apprenticeships and skills are at the heart of your future economic strategy and that the money that is needed to provide for the future growth of companies such as Caterpillar is there to deliver?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question. As I said to the House this afternoon, in rebuilding a stronger economy, I identified that a clean, green economy is an ambition not just for Northern Ireland's environment but for growth in its economic sectors. I believe that in doing so we can add many thousands of jobs in Northern Ireland and protect our environment for future generations. That is an extremely important part of my economic strategy going forward and has been part of that medium-term plan.

We will work with Invest NI in order to ensure that it opens up opportunities in the clean energy sector to ensure that progress is made. I have also been working with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, other councils in Northern Ireland and through the city deal process to make sure that this is an opportunity that we do not miss in Northern Ireland. As I said, I spoke with colleagues in other parts of the United Kingdom just last week to recognise that this is an important ambition for all parts of the United Kingdom as we go forward with economic recovery.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Minister for her responses so far. Caterpillar indicated that these job losses are not related to COVID or Brexit. As part of the economic recovery strategy, will you look at encouraging the start-up and capacity building of indigenous business and at how we harness the potential of key sectors, meaning not just the more established ones but the developing ones, like green energy, creative industries and digital innovation etc?

**Mrs Dodds:** Yes. Caterpillar indicated very clearly that this is not about Brexit or COVID but is a corporate decision that was taken at its headquarters on how the operation works globally. Unfortunately, that has resulted in

workers and their families in Larne being put into a terrible position. It is a very worrying and difficult time for them. As I said, I met senior management from Caterpillar in Northern Ireland on Friday. I intend to meet the unions to see what we can do, working together, to try to alleviate what is a very difficult situation.

Yes, I do believe that encouraging start-ups and working with indigenous companies is an important element of our economic growth strategies. We have many wonderful and very ambitious globally operating companies that have been born and bred in Northern Ireland and are doing absolutely magnificent things. We intend to work to support them and also those small start-ups where we see significant growth opportunities. There are very innovative start-up companies in Northern Ireland, particularly in the digital sector, and we are working to support them.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. This is an unmitigated disaster for the workers' families and the people of Larne and east Antrim in general. There has been very poor communication from the company. If it had not been for the workers tipping us off as they came off night shift, or even slightly before that, it would have been on the news that morning before the area's elected members knew. That was very bad. It is down to reorganisation of the company but, without dressing it up, it is really about cheap labour. It is going to India and beyond and other places. There is no dressing it up. That drip, drip effect is now with us. Is the Minister confident that Caterpillar has a long-term future in Northern Ireland?

**Mrs Dodds:** Again, I agree with the Member that this is incredibly difficult for the Larne plant workers and their families, who face an uncertain future because of it. Caterpillar has indicated that this is part of its corporate global overview of where the company is operating and how it can be more cost-effective and competitive in that global market. However, Caterpillar will continue to be an important part of the Northern Ireland economy. I hope that, working with Invest NI, we can draw back some of the job loss projections. However, even if job losses are at the maximum, Caterpillar will still have 900 employees in Northern Ireland and be a valued and important contributor to the economy here.

I will expand on that slightly, if I may. On Friday, I also spoke about this issue to the Caterpillar agent who works with government in London. Caterpillar operates on 23 sites right across the United Kingdom. Both Invest NI and I made the

point that it is important that we open up opportunities for supply companies from Northern Ireland into that larger UK family of sites, so that maybe opportunities that are lost in Larne will open up in other parts of the United Kingdom. Invest NI will explore that with the company in the coming days.

**Ms McLaughlin:** The Caterpillar job losses are absolutely devastating for the workers, their families and the communities in both Larne and Belfast. Unfortunately, we are probably at the very beginning of major job losses throughout Northern Ireland in the coming months, which is very sobering to think about. Does the Minister agree that we must urgently reshape the economy for the future, particularly around investing in skills and new green technologies, and accelerate our programmes of change? What is she doing to lead and deliver in this revolution for driving technology within the Northern Ireland economy?

**Mrs Dodds:** I have said in the House before that COVID has been both a disruptor and an accelerator in the way in which the economy operates. The process of digitisation, for example, has progressed at a much higher pace than we might have anticipated.

In the past six to eight months, we have seen that process accelerate throughout Northern Ireland and, indeed, globally. For our digital sector, for example, this has been an opportunity to prove its innovation and resilience, and many of our companies in the sector are winning and gaining work from sister companies in larger corporations.

### 3.45 pm

We need to look very quickly at what the future will look like, not just for manufacturing but for all aspects of our economy. That is why it is important that we brought forward the apprenticeship recovery programme and the apprenticeship challenge fund. Through those, we will be able to create new apprenticeships. It is important that we continue to look at the assured skills academy, because we require that really quick, sharp intervention in the economy where jobs are needed in different sectors. In the next few weeks, I am really looking forward to going to some of the companies that have completed assured skills programmes and in which many young people have gained jobs. I often quote the Microsoft example from just a few months ago. That programme was done completely online, and 23 out of 24 of the young people in that skills academy got jobs.

It is also one of the reasons that we need to bring forward the skills strategy for Northern Ireland. Last week —.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up, Minister.

**Mrs Dodds:** Skills and improving young people's opportunities in Northern Ireland is probably my favourite subject, Mr Speaker. Last week, I looked at how we improve skill levels at levels 3, 4 and 5, because that is where the skills gaps are.

**Mr Beggs:** Some 10 years ago, Caterpillar employed almost 3,000 people in Northern Ireland, but, sadly, that number has declined significantly. We were previously told that the smaller units, which can be mass-produced, were moving to China but that the bespoke larger units were remaining in Larne in Northern Ireland. Given this significant announcement, can the Minister advise what support will be given to those workers who may lose their job? She met the management on Friday, but what commitment has it given to remaining in Northern Ireland, given that previous commitments have already been significantly changed?

**Mrs Dodds:** I am on record in the House as saying that I believe that Caterpillar will remain an important part of the economy of Northern Ireland. Although there are difficult days ahead in Larne, I think that we can work with the company to ensure, for example, that those bespoke solutions that Northern Ireland has been so good at providing in the past will remain. Indeed, the Northern Ireland management team has identified opportunities for growth in those sectors. I am also extremely encouraged by the fact that the company's back-office operations are stable and working well in Northern Ireland, and there are opportunities in that direction as well. Caterpillar is an important company. It is important to Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom, and, given its strategic importance, I will be talking to Minister Zahawi about the issue later in the week.

**Mr Muir:** The announcement by Caterpillar is a body blow to all those affected and to the economy of east Antrim. In 'New Decade, New Approach', there is a commitment to publish an economic industrial strategy. I know that the Minister is very focused on action, but we need an overarching strategy for the time ahead, as we try to safeguard jobs and livelihoods across Northern Ireland. Can the Minister give us an update on where we are at with that?

**Mrs Dodds:** As the Member is aware, my Department has been focusing on bringing forward a number of strategies that will feed into the economy of Northern Ireland. We need an overarching economic strategy, but we need an energy strategy, a skills strategy and other ideas to feed into that in order to build the Northern Ireland economy as a whole. We should not always be focused only on strategies, however. We should be focused on the short-term gains that we can make for the economy that make a real difference to people's lives. That is why with, for instance, the energy strategy, I am engaged on the potential use of hydrogen fuel and setting minimum targets for renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland. Those are important issues on which we can set the direction of travel now while working on the larger time frame of the overall strategy.

**Mr Allister:** Minister, the management told you that it was not about Brexit or COVID-19. Did they tell you what it was about? Was it plain and simple job migration and moving for cheap labour? Was that the case and, if so, can that be spelled out? In that regard, do you agree with me that it is appalling that a senior manager in Caterpillar has, through the offices of the chief executive of the local council, sought to muzzle councillors and MLAs by urging us not to talk about the issue? He said that we should not speak in good or bad terms about Caterpillar. Indeed, it was all the more disappointing that the chief executive of the council thought that it was appropriate to give legs to that message by even sending it out.

**Mrs Dodds:** I am answering questions in the Assembly, so I am unaware of that message.

It is important that we understand the motivation for what has happened in Caterpillar in Larne. When I spoke to the senior management team, they indicated that it was part of the global restructuring of the company and that that is how the company sees the way forward with location to market and cost competitiveness. That is very regrettable. Having said that, however, Caterpillar is an important part of the overall economic outlook for Northern Ireland. It remains an important employer and, at a UK level, contributes about £4.5 billion to the economy. We want to work with Caterpillar to ensure that we can maximise any future opportunities and ensure that the company remains part of our future.

**Mr Carroll:** It is very concerning that manufacturing workers are, once again, facing

the prospect of job losses and life on the less than adequate universal credit. My sympathies go out to them all, including those in my constituency. Does the Minister agree with me that we need to move away from a failed economic model that throws large sums of public money at major corporations, with no guarantees that jobs will be safe or secure, and, instead, move towards a more environmentally friendly and sustainable model of job creation and protection, with the state taking a lead role? That will ensure that people's lives are not thrown up in the air such as has happened with Caterpillar.

**Mrs Dodds:** Much as I am tempted to get into a debate about public- versus private-sector companies, I refuse to do that. What is important is that the Assembly commits to working with those who face an uncertain future in Larne and, indeed, in the Caterpillar family in Northern Ireland as a whole; that we try to minimise the number of jobs that will be affected; and that we work with Caterpillar globally to try to ensure that any opportunities that there are to bring further work to Northern Ireland are maximised. As I have said repeatedly during my answers, Caterpillar remains an important contributor to the Northern Ireland economy and is a very important employer. We want to work with them to secure the future.

**Mr Dunne:** We all feel the pain and loss of another sector of engineering being hit. Will the Minister assure us that Invest NI is doing everything that it can to sustain jobs in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis and that we will not see a recurrence of this, maybe tomorrow or later this week, that affects other such businesses in the Province?

**Mrs Dodds:** Through my Department and, indeed, Invest NI, I will do everything that I can to minimise job losses in Northern Ireland, but I cannot predict the future. We live in an uncertain economic environment. That environment is fed by COVID, particularly for firms here in Northern Ireland. I have said, on the record, many times in the Chamber that that uncertain economic environment could lead to further job losses. We need to learn to live with COVID rather than continue any proposed cycle of lockdowns, such as we have seen thus far. That has been my view consistently throughout this whole process, and it remains my view.

My Department has been doing some modelling of the impact of the four-week lockdown. It is projected to have a £400 million hit to the economy of Northern Ireland. That is not

something that we can sustain over and over again.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Minister for her answers. A Member who spoke previously asked about the support that could be put in place for all the workers who could, potentially, lose their job. The Minister mentioned the upskilling opportunities, which I was really glad to hear about. Will she elaborate a wee bit more on the work and conversations with councils about how they could, potentially, support workers who may be facing unemployment?

**Mrs Dodds:** Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, through its chief executive, is one of the most proactive councils on that matter. The council, along with Invest NI and, of course, the Careers Service in my Department, will do everything that it can to support workers and their families in uncertain and very difficult times.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, with respect, you seem to be quite keen to not rock the boat too much with Caterpillar, which has, in the last few days, sacked hundreds of workers in Northern Ireland with very little explanation other than saying that it is not to do with the two big economic crises of the age. You referred to conversations that Invest NI is having around future plans, and you seemed to imply that that was about possibly protecting some of the job losses that have been announced. Will you say a bit more than that? Will Invest NI promise public money or some kind of assistance to Caterpillar, and have there been specific guarantees or pledges from Caterpillar around protecting those jobs?

**Mrs Dodds:** The Member may want to have a headline out of today's debate and his contribution to it, but I have no desire in the wide earthly world to add to the fear and anxiety that exists among workers in Caterpillar, both those who may be made redundant and those who will remain. I believe that Caterpillar has an important future in Northern Ireland. I will commit the resources of my Department and Invest NI to talking to Caterpillar and exploring with it how we can continue to secure that future. As I said, it is an important company not just for Northern Ireland; it has 23 sites across the rest of the United Kingdom, which contribute about £4.5 billion to the economy of the United Kingdom every year. There is an important opportunity for supply chain companies to be part of that family of Caterpillar in the future.

## Assembly Business

### Extension of Sitting

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notification from the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

**Mr Butler:** I beg to move

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 9 November 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00pm.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 9 November 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00pm.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Assembly may sit until 9.00 pm this evening, if necessary.

Members should take their ease for a moment or two.

**4.00 pm**

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

## Executive Committee Business

### Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

*The following motions stood in the Order Paper:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be*

*approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, junior Minister, for being here today. Yet again, we face the oddity of debating regulations that are, in effect, well out of date. I welcome at least that we are covering a range of amendments today.

The evidence presented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in mid-September was that transmission was largely in households. It appears, not least from the evidence bank now published by the Department, that that evidence was already outdated. The SAGE evidence of 21 September already clearly stated that hospitality and universities were significant drivers. Last week, the Chief Medical Officer confirmed that you cannot have schools and hospitality open and keep transmission declining. For example, in August, there were far more applications per head of population for the Eat Out to Help Out campaign in Northern Ireland than any other region of the UK, and it was exactly at that time that transmission levels rose to the highest in the UK. That may be a false correlation, of course, but, unfortunately, the subsequent evidence such as that from the University of Colorado and the University of Warwick, especially around aerosol transmission, backs up the fact that hospitality was a clear risk area.

One consequence of the test, trace and isolate system not working to maximum efficiency is that we did not have and do not have at present clear evidence about the sources and chains of infection here. To be clear, there was good evidence for the restrictions on household gatherings, although they appear to have made limited, if any, difference to transmission levels in the postcode areas in which they were initially introduced. What have clearly made a difference are the restrictions that were introduced in Derry and Strabane on 6 October and elsewhere 10 days later. We can see that, even in the Castlederg area, where transmission rates were not as high as elsewhere in the council area, those rates



dropped notably to among the lowest levels in Northern Ireland by the beginning of last week.

This presents us with some useful information and knowledge and also with a conundrum. The good news is that, to some extent, we now know what works. The bad news is that, well, we also know what works in the sense that we absolutely do not want to close down an entire economic sector, potentially for a year or more. We should be concerned about that close-down, and we should not be afraid to challenge it. For example, when it came to closing close-contact services, there was genuine confusion. It was only much later, for example, that clarification came that holistic therapies could be offered only upon a referral from the health and social care sector. Why was that not clarified at the outset? It was only after the Health Committee requested that information last week that we received it today, and I know that there are many small, private enterprises that would have appreciated that information a long time ago.

I turn now to face coverings. The challenge was demonstrated at the Committee last week when we found that insignificant consideration of the latest evidence had gone into the development of the regulations on face coverings. If these are to be enforced, there needs to be more straightforward application of the regulations. The evidence is clear that face coverings dramatically reduce transmission in all indoor public spaces. That is the starting point for living with the virus, and that is a phrase that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have used in recent days. There seems to be a profound misunderstanding about what we are trying to do when we introduce such regulations.

At issue is not just the epidemiological evidence but the presentation of the regulations, which must be clear to the public and easily enforced. On the wearing of face coverings on school transport, I have continued to enquire as to why some locations are included and others are not, and why some ages are applicable in some places but not in others. It is confusing and ultimately suggests that the Executive are not entirely serious about the need for face coverings at all. The simple fact is that face coverings should be worn by everyone of post-primary age in all indoor public spaces. There is no doubt that a simple law to that effect will achieve much higher compliance and acceptance.

I will now comment on the test, trace and isolate system. Before we consider taking significant steps out of the current restrictions,

we need at least some of the evidence to be presented. We cannot pull out of a side street unless we have a clear view of the traffic on the road ahead. The test, trace and isolate system has not given us that clear view. The last time that the Assembly discussed the amendment regulations, I warned that we should not waste these four weeks. By mid-November, contact tracing needed to be reformed and resourced to provide us with clearer and more specific information about the origins of the infection, and that is how we can best intervene without closing down entire sectors to break the chains of infection.

The question now arises: what steps have been taken to reform and fix the test, trace and isolate service? Are we going to test, as is happening in the Republic, anyone who has been in contact with a person who has tested positive to identify who must be isolated? Are we going to trace more quickly? Are we going to do more to encourage people to self-isolate? That matters, because without that knowledge, there is no way to see whether the route is clear to reopen at least some aspects of hospitality. I know that the inevitable consequence of a rising transmission rate will once again mean closing down vital health services.

My challenge for the junior Minister is this: what changes are being made to the test, trace and isolate system? Can he update us on the face covering regulations that will enable us to make significant amendments to the restrictions as they have applied to Derry and Strabane since 6 October, and to the whole of Northern Ireland since 16 October? I hope that the junior Minister will address those issues in his response.

**Mr Buckley:** I rise to speak as a newly appointed member of the Health Committee. I will make no bones about it, my view about this specific set of regulations is on the record as being sceptical and critical. I am still as sceptical and critical today as on the day on which the regulations were introduced.

My party's view is also on the record, and Members can reflect on the differing opinions in the Chamber about the approach that should be adopted going forward. I took great interest in listening not only to colleagues from different parties but to the junior Ministers, who are on record as saying that we need to live and coexist with the virus. Indeed, the junior Minister said that we cannot legislate our way through COVID. I very much support that line of thought and, as we have learned to come to terms with the devastating effects that COVID

has had on our society, we have also learned that lockdown is simply not the answer.

Lockdown is simply not a sustainable mechanism and strategy as it is built purely on the premise that a solution via a vaccine is needed. We have heard promising conversations in the media today about a vaccine. However, the premise of a lockdown is based solely on the need for a vaccine. We have to look at long-term sustainable solutions, and society needs to learn to live and adapt to the situation in which we are now.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Member for giving way. He has touched on the issue of a potential vaccine, and that is very exciting and very good news. Will the Member agree that the failure to secure his question for urgent oral answer on the new variant strain COVID outbreak in Denmark is a very serious issue? The UK has temporarily closed the border with Denmark, and the Republic of Ireland really needs to do the same.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. Will the Member take her seat? It is not in order to challenge a decision of the Speaker. I ask the Member to continue, if she wishes to do so, but she must not challenge the Speaker's decision.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Deputy Speaker for that ruling.

Does the Member agree that it is vital that the Republic of Ireland act in a way that will also protect Northern Ireland when we are dealing with a variant of the COVID-19 virus?

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree, and, keeping to the spirit of her language, I think that seeing a mutated strain of COVID-19 in an animal species such as mink is deeply worrying. Northern Ireland does not have any mink farms but the fact that there are mink farms on our periphery, in Donegal etc, is alarming. It would have been preferable to have a Minister here to talk on the issue today but, unfortunately, we are where we are, as outlined by the Speaker.

The regulations need to be targeted, balanced and proportionate. This is what society has been grappling with since the moment that regulations were introduced. It is why many in the Assembly called for targeted data and evidence to show why a particular sector had been targeted with such an approach. We heard those in the hospitality sector crying out for much-needed intervention and asking that we look at different ways in which they, as an

industry, could coexist with the virus. Hopefully, the junior Minister will elaborate on this. I understand that he and his colleagues have done a lot of work, looking at the hospitality industry and how it might, potentially, become COVID compliant. Members will join me in asserting that, although some businesses, sadly, acted irresponsibly, many businesses across the breadth of this country stayed in line and kept to the spirit of the regulations that were introduced. When given the opportunity to reopen, thankfully, they acted in an appropriate way. They were very much in compliance with the basic health messaging of observing good hygiene practices, social distancing and wearing face coverings. I expect that the junior Minister will elaborate on that.

The sectors were not the only ones calling into question a lot of these regulations. As I mentioned in my speech during the debate on the third Budget, a document called 'Protecting Lives, Protecting Livelihoods: Finding a Balance to Protect our Community and our Economy' was released by a number of businesses. Some of its content needs to be repeated here today:

*"The Executive's decision to place large parts of the local economy into another lockdown will, quite simply, result in another round of job losses. Those who have had to shut their doors are deeply concerned by the decision after following the Executive's own guidance and investing money they didn't have in making their businesses safe. They are understandably anxious about the viability of their businesses and the jobs they have created and so too are the many companies who are in their supply chain or rely on them for footfall ... Our economy is an ecosystem and closing down one part isn't a limited intervention – it harms us all."*

This is the crucial element:

*"Pursuing a path of lockdown, release and repeat will undo all of the good work we have done to build a strong and diverse economy and protect workers and their families."*

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. One of the things that he read from his notes was that the economy went into lockdown. It was not just the economy; homes, families and everybody suffered. What does the Member think about the success of the six-week draconian restrictions in the Londonderry and Strabane area, where transmission rates reduced by 70% and, in my humble opinion,

lives were saved. How does that fit into the strategy that he is outlining today?

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for his comments. He refers specifically to the restrictions in Londonderry and Strabane. That was a targeted approach. If the evidence is clear that action must be taken, I support such an approach. I do not support blanket restrictions across an entire sector or industry when we can, in fact, through test, trace and isolate and the data that our scientists etc are collecting, look at more specific, targeted solutions to deal with the COVID outbreak, wherever it may be.

#### 4.15 pm

The Member talked about lives being saved as a result of the Executive's actions, and I have no doubt that that, perhaps, is the case in many of the circumstances that the Member outlined. However, lives have been lost as a result of the restrictions that have been put in place. I know that the Member has taken a strong interest in suicide throughout his time in this place. People are suffering from adverse mental health. There are also those in —

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

**Mr Buckley:** Not just at this time. I will give way at a later point.

There are other issues where people with cancer and other such serious illnesses are missing appointments. Unfortunately, lives will be lost as a result of the lockdown measures that have been put in place. I have said it clearly before, and I will say it again: COVID kills — we have no doubt of that — but lockdown can kill also.

I outlined the concerns that I had about the restrictions that were put in place at the time, as did other Members, and I outlined that people in the business community had concerns for their livelihood. It is also important to note that there are medical professionals who do not agree with the strategy of lockdown. I refer to the note that we all received, and I think that it received some media publicity today. Four clinicians wrote collectively in a letter to us all to say:

*"We believe that the widely publicised calls in the local media to keep the hospitality industry closed are not founded on evidence based medicine and that a measured and mature debate on their implementation is required."*

That goes to the heart of our democracy, and those are the points that I really want to get on to today.

COVID has wreaked havoc on the democratic processes not only in the Assembly but in democracies across the world. We see a need to balance speed of action from Ministers on targeted intervention where it may be required and curtailing public debate on these important issues. We can all agree that any restriction, no matter how vain it may feel to some Members, has a massive impact on day-to-day life. I think that I said at my first Health Committee meeting last week that the public will be as bewildered as I am that, because of the mechanisms in the House, here we are, three weeks in and four days before the regulations come out of force, debating them in the House only now. I would like to see the junior Minister address that today.

I noted at the Health Committee that the Member for South Down Mr McGrath had brought forward a unanimous suggestion that we write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as well as the Executive, to look at alternative ways in which the House can give the regulations the scrutiny that they deserve. Every Member would agree with that, but we cannot have an approach where we have our cake and eat it. I listened to Mr McGrath say, on the one hand, that he was calling for full and proper scrutiny of the regulations — I agree with him 100% on that — but, on the other hand, he was saying that anybody who dares to speak against or disagree with the approach adopted by the Chief Medical Officer or Chief Scientific Adviser is in direct violation of the regulations. That is not true. We heard on the radio this morning and on air waves from across the world that there are scientists and doctors who look at different approaches, and it is only right and proper that we, as Members, give those due consideration. At the Committee, when we were discussing the vital lack of the transparency that allows us to really home in on the regulations, the Clerk informed us that, because they were laid in the way that they were with no consultation and no stakeholder engagement, we, the politicians, had become that stakeholder. It is vital that, whatever direction of travel the Executive take, the Assembly is given its place and the opportunity not only to question but to scrutinise the evidence presented.

There are many questions that come from the data that we receive. I know that I speak for a lot of people who are in close-contact services, and I can think of beauticians and hairdressers who were forced to close their doors. I think that

Members across the Chamber will agree that, if there was anybody that was abiding by the regulations and had invested money and time to put the practices in place to ensure a safe environment, it was those industries. Yet, because of the blanket approach that was applied to the regulations, they were all forced to close. Sadly, the financial assistance promised to them has been slow, and that is through no fault of their own. They were promised support, and it is important that we, as an Executive and an Assembly, stand by our word and support those people in these difficult times.

I also want to refer to the likes of driving tests. In the days since lockdown began, how many young people have contacted us, frustrated that their lives are on hold because of something as basic and fundamental to their freedom as a driving test? There was good news: things had started to get moving again, albeit that there was a backlog in the system. Now, because of the regulations that were passed, those young people still cannot pass their driving test and start to contribute to society and maybe to their household bills etc. They cannot do so at the moment because of the regulations that are in force. I implore the Infrastructure Minister to bring forward a plan to see driving tests resumed across Northern Ireland and ensure that those young people can be dealt with as soon as possible.

I mentioned this at the Committee, and the Chair of the Committee touched on it in his remarks: I was shocked to hear Health officials come to the Committee who could not even answer the most basic of questions about how the regulations affected everyday lives. They were not questions that were off the wall; they had been trawled through the media for weeks. When simple questions were asked, they could not answer. They were simple questions from the Committee, such as the evidence base for the introduction of all the rules or "As we are now two weeks into the four-week period of restrictions, how well does the Department assess the restrictions imposed are working to reduce the spread of transmission?". They were simple questions around compliance and enforcement information. The answers simply were not forthcoming, and it is a damning indictment that, while we curtail parliamentary scrutiny in the House, when it comes to Committees such as the Health Committee, basic questions are asked two weeks in, and there is still no clarity or answer; in fact, the answers were just forthcoming on Friday, before this debate. I do not think that that is acceptable, and I do not think it is a level of scrutiny that anybody can stand over.

There should be scrutiny of the science as well. The regulations were brought into place, but the data and evidence that supported the closure came after calls in the Assembly for the data to be released. It should have been the other way around. It should have been given first, so that people could make an informed decision about why it is affecting their lives in the way that it is. Those are basic principles that the Executive need to take into consideration as we try to fight the virus.

I also want to talk about the exit strategy. Maybe the junior Minister can elaborate on it. If it is the case that it is "lockdown and repeat" until a vaccine comes, I worry for the state of the economy and for the livelihoods of everyday people across the Province and the country. Each time we decide to place restrictions on certain sectors and individuals, we run the risk of those businesses never returning. I had a constituent on the phone to me in deep hysterics on Thursday past: "You have asked me to close my business. You have told me that financial support will be forthcoming. Here I am, two and a half weeks into the regulations, and I do not know how I can pay my mortgage bills. I have four children to feed; I do not know how I am going to feed them". All the talk in the media about restrictions and how they can help bring the R rate down must be looked at through the lens of balance when determining the approach. That is why I said at the Committee and repeat here that, much as I respect the Chief Medical Officer and hold him in high regard, it is not appropriate for him to go on the air waves and talk about how one sector cannot open unless the other sector closes, with those sectors being hospitality and education. Whether intentional or not, that simply sets communities and sectors against each other. That is not a strategy that the House should endorse. We should see the evidence. We should discuss and debate it in this institution and go forward with a cohesive plan.

The issue of non-COVID patients is really starting to come home to a lot of Members across the Chamber and, indeed, the people of Northern Ireland. Every restriction has a consequence, and some consequences are more hidden than others. I ask the Health Minister how the needs are being met of hundreds of non-COVID patients across Northern Ireland who would currently be in hospital but are not, as a result of the pandemic. Since the middle of October, the number of hospital beds occupied by patients with non-COVID illness has dropped dramatically by between 800 and 900 beds. That is according to the Department of Health's own dashboard. I am keen to hear from the

junior Minister or from the Health Minister, who may be listening from another place, an assessment of the scale of the problem and whether patients may be at risk of tragically passing away because inpatient care is not available. Ultimately, nobody should be turned away, regardless of whether a person is coming to hospital urgently or the attendance is planned or whether it is for a COVID or non-COVID service or COVID or non-COVID care. The Minister claims that that is simply not feasible in the current climate, but I again urge him and his officials to explore all options for expanding the health service workforce. We have a duty of care to those people, and the challenge now facing the Department of Health is to demonstrate what has driven that outcome and how the data justifies the restrictions that are put in place and the actions that we take.

Households and businesses have had to make great sacrifices. Their consent and cooperation should never be taken for granted but earned and respected by us, the politicians. That means scaling up the evidence base for every rule and regulation and rationally setting out why they are necessary. In the past three weeks, more scientific evidence has been published indicating transmission risks in various settings. For sectors such as close-contact retail, as I have outlined, those figures alone do not stack up to the need for wholesale closure. Moving forward, the duty is on Ministers to account for that.

**Mr Sheehan:** As has been stated on numerous occasions in the debate, we are talking about regulations that have already been implemented. A number of them deal with the wearing of face coverings, face masks or whatever you want to call them. I am sure that the junior Minister will recall that I have raised the issue on a number of occasions in previous debates in the Chamber. The evidence about face masks has been compelling for some time; indeed, when the Chief Scientific Adviser was at the Health Committee a couple of months ago, before the introduction of the regulations, he said that he was concerned to discover that, whenever he went into a shop, he was the only one wearing a face mask. He appeared on 'Good Morning Ulster' a few days after that and stated that there was considerable evidence that wearing a face mask significantly reduced the transmission of the virus.

#### 4.30 pm

One thing that I have noticed about the countries that have been most successful in suppressing the virus is that they are the

countries that moved quickly and did not wait for absolute, 100%, solid, concrete evidence. They moved quickly. It is the countries that have a culture of wearing face masks that, in the main, have been most successful in dealing with the virus. They did not wait for 100%, solid, concrete evidence before they did that. However, there was evidence — and it was compelling evidence — that the wearing of masks reduced transmission of the virus. We waited, and we waited longer than we should have. We should have moved more quickly. That should be a lesson to us when we come to make other decisions about what will be useful in the fight against the virus.

Like most of the regulations introduced over the past months, the regulations are draconian. Of course, under normal circumstances, we would not introduce legislation like that. The question that people ask is this: why do we need those restrictions? Quite simply, we need them because if we did not have them, the health and social care system would be overrun. I heard Jonathan Buckley say that COVID-19 kills but that lockdown can also kill. It is not the lockdown that kills but the fact that the health service does not have the capacity. It did not have the capacity in the first place to deal with all the diseases and conditions that exist out there. Waiting lists were already far too long. On top of that, we have a pandemic that is killing people, leading people into serious illness and leaving others with long-term conditions as a result of the disease. How have we ended up in that situation? Why does our health and social care system not have the capacity to deal with what is coming at us in the pandemic? It is because the health system has been underfunded for years. There is a direct causal connection between that lack of investment and underfunding and the lack of capacity in the health and social care system to deal with the pandemic. It is not rocket science; we do not have the capacity.

We need to introduce measures, draconian though they may be, to ensure that the system is not completely overrun. I agree that there are people who are dying from cardiovascular disease, cancer and other diseases who cannot get the proper and requisite treatment as a result of what is happening with the virus and the fact that the health service is being overrun. The fact is that if people are seriously ill with COVID-19, they have to be hospitalised. If people are seriously ill with cancer, cardiovascular disease or whatever, they also have to be hospitalised. The capacity is not there.

Some argue that we should have built up capacity in the hospital system, but that cannot be done overnight. We are in the position that we are in because of years of underinvestment, and we will not be able to fix that overnight. We need an alternative. What the restrictions do is give us a breathing space. They ensure that the health and social care system does not collapse on us, that the most seriously ill can still get treated and that the transmission of the virus is reduced in society and our communities.

I have some sympathy for those who oppose the lockdowns, but I have suspicions, too, because among them are the science deniers, the crackpots and so on. None of us wants any sort of lockdown. None of us wants to live under the conditions that we have had to live under for the past seven or eight months. Who in their right mind would want to live in this situation? Is there an alternative to this type of draconian legislation that means that people cannot have the wedding that they would normally have, visit their families or visit relatives in care homes or hospitals, for instance? Is there any alternative?

I believe that there is. We need to look at international best practice. I have already given the example of the face masks. Among the countries that have been most successful in tackling the virus are such East Asian countries as Vietnam, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan, with a combined population of 178.5 million people. How many deaths have there been? There has been a total combined death toll of 629. That is fewer people than have died here, in a population of 1.5 million. Why is that? What are they doing right that we are not doing? What can we learn from them?

A couple of weeks ago, at a Committee meeting, I asked the chief social worker whether the Department had made any direct contact with any of those countries to find out what they were doing and from which we could learn. The answer was no; there had been no contact. I am not suggesting for one second that we are exactly the same as any of those countries. Of course, we are not; there are differences. I also remember, at the outset of the pandemic, being told about the lockdown in China, particularly in Wuhan. Commentators were saying that there was no way that that would be acceptable here — we could not have such a lockdown — because we are a democratic country and China is an authoritarian country. Lo and behold, we had a lockdown, and it did what it was intended to do. Unfortunately, we did not use the time to try to prepare for a second wave of the virus, and we are in a very difficult situation now.

Five or six weeks ago, I spoke here when the Health Minister was responding, and I raised the issue of our contact-tracing system. I told him that it was insufficient and that, with the upsurge in the number of people contracting the virus, it was not going to cut the mustard. Not long after that, the chief executive of the PHA, which has responsibility for contact tracing, was at the Committee. She said that 151 people were involved in contact tracing. When I asked what that amounted to in full-time equivalents, she could not, or would not — I am not sure which — give an answer. It has since transpired that there are 88 full-time equivalents. Do the sums. At that point, when the PHA was giving evidence to the Committee, the rate of transmission was around 1,000 cases a day. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) states that, in a lockdown situation, you can expect each positive case to have had two or three contacts.

Outside of a lockdown situation, that number rises to between seven and 20. So, do the sums: let us take an average and say that each positive case had 10 contacts; that means that there are 10,000 people who need to be traced in one day. Somebody explain to me how 88 people can do that. The sums just do not add up.

Just by coincidence, on the following day, there was an article in 'The Irish Times' about the contact-tracing system in the South. Some were saying that it had been overrun on the previous weekend, whereas others were saying that it had not been overrun but that it was understaffed and that that was the problem. Professor Samuel McConkey, who is a consultant in infectious diseases — he is originally from this parish but is in one of the universities in Dublin — benchmarked the system in the South with Wuhan in China, and he estimated that the South need 2,500 contact tracers to have a proper and efficient system to track and trace all those who have been in contact with positive cases. If you extrapolate from that, we need around 1,000 contact tracers, and we have 88.

According, again, to the ECDC, it takes between four and 20 hours to train a contact tracer. The topics covered include disease epidemiology, the contact-tracing process, how to conduct interviews, practical examples and exercises, and data protection issues. Why are we not taking 1,000 people off the dole queues and training them to contact trace in order to put in place a proper system of find, test, trace, isolate and support?

What do we mean by "find"? Well, the only way that you can get a test here is if you have symptoms, yet it is estimated that up to 60% of people do not have symptoms at all. How do we find them? We find them by mass testing. I welcome the announcement by the Chief Scientific Adviser, and more recently by the Minister, to say that there is a possibility, in the coming weeks, that the capacity may be there to carry out mass testing in a way that has not happened thus far.

We need to find those who have the virus, to isolate them, and then to support them. If they live in a house in multiple occupation (HMO), for example, how can they isolate in that context? They need to have support from the powers that be — whether it is the Department or the Executive or whoever — that can take over a hotel — as happened at the start of the pandemic, when one of the hotels in the centre of Belfast was taken over — so that people can isolate and have support and so that there is a system in place. If people need somebody to go to the shop to get their messages, there is somebody there to do that. If they need financial support, it is there as well, and that is —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. I have shown great latitude in allowing Members to extensively discuss the matter, but I draw the Member back to the specific regulations that we are here to debate today. We, in the Speaker's role, are showing flexibility, but we need Members to refer to the legislation for which approval is being sought.

**4.45 pm**

**Mr Sheehan:** Thank you for that advice. Of course, we are discussing the legislation, with the restrictions on gatherings, on going into other people's houses, on weddings, on funerals and all the rest of it. Collectively, it is all being described as a lockdown. I accept that it is not a lockdown in the true sense of the word, but that is the way that it is being described. I have tried to outline the type of system that we could put in place that would be an alternative to those restrictions so that society and the economy could carry on very much as normal, as is happening in South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong and so on. In a sense, there is agreement. I am in agreement, to an extent, with Jonathan Buckley. I do not want a lockdown. Jonathan does not want a lockdown. Let us think of some other way of tackling this, and let us look to international best practice, because others have been much more successful than we have been.

**Mr Middleton:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the regulations. I thank Minister Lyons for being with us and for giving us some clarity. Hopefully, we will hear more from him later in response to some of the questions. Like many others, I am mindful of the fact that we are living with these regulations, so it can be quite difficult at times to give an evaluation of how they have worked. Of course, many members of the public look to us for guidance on how we go forward, but we need to be mindful that the vote today, if there is to be one, is specifically on what has already been put in place.

The clarity that the tightening of regulations brought to the wearing of face masks was welcome, particularly for restaurants, cafes, bars, taxis, buses and those types of businesses, because many in those industries wanted that clarity. A taxi driver did not want to get into an argument with somebody who got into their taxi and was not wearing a face mask because the legislation did not specifically say that they had to do so. That clarity was very much welcome.

That messaging was important, because it has increased compliance right across our communities. Over the past number of weeks, I know that all of us have said that it was worrying that members of the public seemed to have dropped their guard when it came to wearing face masks in shops and other places, but I think that that message has finally got across to the public once and for all.

Amendment No. 8 relates to the restrictions that were brought in in my constituency and the wider Londonderry and Strabane area. The context at the time was that the infection rate in our area was several times higher than the Northern Ireland average and, at one point, was the highest in the United Kingdom. There was broad recognition, therefore, that the status quo could not continue and that something had to be done. At that time, while it was disappointing that it had to be done, the Executive were right to step in and take action. Thankfully, today — we have heard some of the news reports and some of the data that has been talked about — we have seen a 70% reduction in the infection rate. That was down to the fact that communities and businesses rallied and listened to that message. We can debate which specific restrictions did and did not work, but the fact is that the infection rate came down, and that was the ultimate goal. We need to ensure that we continue to go in that direction.

Obviously, from a business and an employer perspective, it came as a blow. We know that those in the hospitality sector in particular had

put in a lot of work to get PPE in place and to make their premises as secure as possible, so to find out that they had to close their doors came as a blow. That is why — we have said this all along — it is important that, when the Executive close businesses, support packages be in place. At that time, I was on the record with various news outlets as saying that the localised restrictions support scheme brought forward by the Finance Minister was not enough; it just was not sufficient. We talked about there being £400 for those at the lower end with premises with an NAV of £15,000 or below and about the amounts being scaled up.

Thankfully — I am not putting it down to me, although, if people want to do so, they can — that was doubled and rolled out across Northern Ireland, and it is welcome. We need to ensure that money, regardless of which Department it comes from, gets out as quickly as possible to those who need it.

Amendments No. 9 and No. 10 close up a lot of the gaps. There are varying views in the Chamber on the way forward. There is, I think, a collective position that we would rather be in a position where we did not have to shut anything down. We need to get to a point where we can coexist with the virus and are not switching the economy on and off.

A few moments ago, we heard the Economy Minister say that the four-week restrictions cost the Northern Ireland economy £400 million. That is a devastating blow. Absolutely, we have to point to the fact that our priority should be saving lives, but we also have to look at the evidence and the science. Mr Sheehan, who has left the Chamber, spoke about science deniers. For many businesses, however, it is not a case of denying; they want to see the science. They want to be assured that shutting their hair salon or beauty parlour makes a difference and that there is a genuine reason why they need to close their doors.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with his vein of thought. Does he agree that one of the most frustrating parts of the evidence supplied by the Chief Scientific Adviser and others is that it is modelling based on behaviour as opposed to transmission and infection rates in the settings that he talked about? Hair salons and beauty therapists, for example, that put measures in place so that they could safely admit their clientele had no transmission rate. Yet, because of a behaviour modelling approach, they were branded as a potential cause of transmission and forced to close.

**Mr Middleton:** I agree with that point completely. That is why we need to get to a stage where we try to find another way. I can speak only about my barber — I will not name him in case he loses business because of my haircut, of course. The level of PPE that he put in was exceptional, but he accepted, when localised restrictions came in, that something needed to be done.

This is not about criticising. The Executive have a huge balancing task. We hear from experts — they include the likes of Dr Tom Black, whom I know and whose view I respect — who have genuine concerns from a health perspective. The Economy Minister brings to the table her concerns about the effects on the economy, and, subsequently, on the mental health of those who lose their jobs and livelihoods, and that is where we may differ from the experts. All that has to be taken in the round but it is important that we recognise that we have to find another way to coexist with the virus.

Amendments No. 9 and No. 10 bring clarity on close contact, which was one of the frustrations when the restrictions came in. We need clarity. We need to know who is to shut and who is to open. They also bring clarity on worship, churches and face coverings. I would welcome the junior Minister giving us a bit of clarity on where places of worship sit going forward.

The need for clarity is the key message that I have been getting from businesses in my constituency, city centre and rural. They want the message to be clear. The current restrictions come to an end at midnight on Thursday. Café owners are asking me whether they can order produce, and people want to know whether they can take bookings for beauty salons. We hear a lot of talk in the media, but it is important that the Chamber is given its place. It is important that we get to hear and give our views on what is brought forward. I think that that view is unanimous.

Businesses regularly reiterate that we have to find a way to coexist with the virus. My colleague Mr Buckley spoke about the Belfast Chamber of Commerce. I, and others, have engaged with the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce. There is concern about job losses.

The furlough scheme has saved many jobs, and, thankfully, it is there, but it will come to an end at some point. We cannot keep coming to this cliff edge and worrying about what we are going to do next. We need a strategy, and that is about getting the balance right.



Like other Members, where the health service is concerned, I thank the Health Minister, because his is a difficult job, but we should not get ourselves into a position where we are pointing fingers and criticising. The Health Minister is just one Minister. We have lots of Ministers in the Executive, and that is where they can bring these issues, debate them and come to a consensus. There is an onus on all of us, because there are five parties in the Chamber that are in the Executive, and these are Executive decisions. When a decision is taken, as uncomfortable as it may be, it is important that we unite around that message and ensure that we go forward collectively.

In closing, I thank our healthcare and key workers for all that they have done over the past number of months and for their work going forward. We are coming into a challenging time. We know that waiting lists are increasing and that people are queuing to get in through the doors at A&E departments. We appreciate that work, and we cannot forget that those people are continuing to work day in, day out.

These are tough times for our businesses. It is important that we send a message to the businesses in our constituencies that we will stand behind them, continue to fight for their funding and support them. We want to ensure that as many people stay in employment as possible over the next couple of months.

**Ms Anderson:** There is no doubt that the rate of COVID transmission in Derry and Strabane was alarming. It was out of control. The regulations that are before us today were vital in bringing the rate of transmission of the virus down. I acknowledge the people of Derry and Strabane, because when the restrictions were introduced, I said that I had confidence that our people would do what needed to be done. They responded and reacted in such a manner that meant that they curtailed the transmission of the disease. We were reminded that, if we needed to be, when the restrictions were introduced that we are the people who carry the virus and that, therefore, we are the people who transmit it to one another. Thankfully, as I stand here today, the good news to report is that, five weeks after the restrictions were introduced, there has been a 70% reduction in COVID infections in Derry and Strabane. That shows that the restrictions worked.

The restrictions are draconian. Who wants to introduce them? There is not one person in the Chamber who wants people's civil liberties or rights taken away. However, when you hear how we were back then and think about where we are now, it is very clear that it has worked.

However, it has not gone away. Most of us know someone who ended up with the virus or self-isolating or, who, unfortunately, ended up in Altnagelvin hospital. I am thinking of two friends of mine, Moira and Neil, who are in ICU. Their families are distraught with worry, and they cannot get into the hospital to see them. I am conscious of the appeal that was made today by the vice Chair of the Health Committee, because it is important that we try to find a COVID-free pathway so that families can get in to visit their loved ones.

I say to those anti-maskers who are sending and spreading nonsense that they should stop sending me emails, because I, for one, do not want them. I do not want to hear that argument. I support what was said, and I support my colleague Pat Sheehan when he said that, at times, we acted too late with wearing face masks, but, thankfully, we are there. I support the need for us to wear them where we have to.

#### 5.00 pm

We know that, when the restrictions were introduced, there were bars, restaurants and sole traders who were worried about their businesses and livelihoods. They are still worried. We all talk to them; they contact us. The emergency financial scheme that was put in place quickly by the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, was welcome. However, in Derry and Strabane — this is probably not just in Derry and Strabane, but in all constituencies — we are being contacted by people who are designated as the "newly self-employed". They have heard that a financial scheme was going to be put in place to help them when these restrictions came in. They have been waiting and waiting, and they are getting very frustrated. They are still waiting. They heard from the Economy Minister that they are the people who fell through the cracks. However, Minister, I would like you to bring this back to your ministerial colleagues: enough is enough. They have waited for far too long. The Economy Minister needs to get moving to put in place such a financial package for the newly self-employed.

I heard the Economy Minister say today that she would be taking something forward to the Executive this week. I hope that is the case for all those in our constituency and other constituencies who have been dealing with these restrictions since March and waiting desperately for a package. They do not want any more excuses. They do not want any more dilly-dallying. They are giving out to each and every one of us, because they are absolutely disgusted and fed up with having to wait as long

as they have waited. There should have been a scheme in place long before now.

I want to acknowledge the communication from the two junior Ministers to us, as representatives in Derry and Strabane, since the restrictions were introduced. You have had almost regular weekly engagements with us, and that is very much appreciated. I also want to put on record that I acknowledge the work of other Ministers. Conor Murphy, the Finance Minister, met business stakeholders in Derry and Strabane more than once.

Minister, I know that you understand and appreciate that we need to protect our front-line workers, including our carers. To this day, those who are on low wages still do not qualify for statutory sick pay if they have to self-isolate. We cannot keep telling people that they have to self-isolate but not provide them with some kind of financial support if their employers are not paying them sick pay.

The discretionary grant that has been put in place by the Minister for Communities is very welcome. It is actually better than any other grant that is in place anywhere. However, the Communities Minister understands — I have talked to her — that, if you have a partner who earns over £20,000, you cannot apply for that discretionary support grant, even if you have two, three, four, five children or more. All the carers out there whose partners earn more than £20,000 are not getting any kind of financial support.

I am not the only one in the Chamber who has raised the valuable contribution that our carers make to people with dementia. I mention people with dementia because information from NISRA has clearly stated that dementia is the most common underlying condition associated with the deaths from this virus.

I have talked to many carers and agency workers who are working flat out and feel burnt out. Many of them are not getting a proper night's sleep. They certainly do not feel, and have never felt, that we are all in this together. What COVID-19 and these restrictions have done once again is laid bare the dire state of our social care, whilst those who work in it go beyond the call of duty. Social care can be seen as the poor relation of the health service, yet it is one of the most vital elements. The people working in it are dealing with the most vulnerable in our society.

When these restrictions came in, we said that people could not attend family gatherings and that people could not go into each other's

homes. Although carers were able to go in, we know that the restrictions had a detrimental effect, particularly on the most vulnerable and those with dementia who live in Derry and Strabane. Minister, although the restrictions were necessary and supported, we also need to find a safe COVID pathway, just like in the hospitals, for family members to visit residential care homes. I know that the homes have been trying to facilitate that, but it is one of the areas that is very traumatic for people.

Minister, Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry needs additional support to stop it getting to the point of being overwhelmed every time that the R rate rises. Despite the news today that the rate of community transmission of COVID is down by 70%, Altnagelvin's COVID surge plan remains on red alert. That is still its status as of today. When the restrictions were introduced, Altnagelvin Hospital repurposed ward 21, which is a vital, state-of-the-art, recently opened and much-needed orthopaedic service. The waiting time for a hip replacement or any other orthopaedic surgery is alarming. I have raised in the Chamber the example of one constituent who has been waiting for five years. That is just not acceptable.

Being in the EU has afforded quite a number of people the opportunity to avail themselves of the cross-border healthcare provision. I personally know two people from Derry travelling to a hospital in the South of Ireland today for healthcare provision. We talk about the restrictions and the orthopaedic service being closed as a consequence of Altnagelvin Hospital being overwhelmed, but people have had a pathway to try to obtain a service. With the Brexit transition period finishing in 52 days, however, people are worried that we could have further restrictions: that these restrictions will still be in place and that there will be other restrictions. They are therefore asking this question: what will happen to that kind of cross-border service? COVID is bad enough, and, of course, the restrictions have been tough, but when you layer Brexit on top of that, you can understand why people are so deeply worried about where we are at now with the restrictions that are in place and about possible other restrictions being put in place.

It has been said here that we owe a debt of gratitude to our healthcare workers, who have, without doubt, been to the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. Although we once again face the very serious challenge that this deadly virus presents, there remains an onus on us to ensure that other vital services — I have referred to the orthopaedic service in Altnagelvin Hospital — continue to operate in

hospitals, wherever they are, even when we are seeing a rise in transmission. When restrictions are being put in place and services in hospitals are being curtailed as a consequence, we need to look seriously at the support that is needed for our health service.

Many strands are needed to pull this all together in order for these restrictions to be effective in the long term whilst ensuring that Derry and its services, both public and private, are not, as Dr Black said, overwhelmed and brought to their knees. The restrictions show that there is no good coming out of COVID, but we need to work to build back better. "Build back better" should be our motto for improving the quality of life of our citizens, for protecting and enhancing the environment and for resetting the economy. That means tackling regional inequalities with ring-fenced allocations and policies, such as the Communities Minister announced last week with the reintroduction of —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Can I draw the Member back to the regulations, please?

**Ms Anderson:** I am; it is all part of the regulations, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not challenging what you are saying.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. I am acting as Deputy Speaker, and I will determine whether I think that it is appropriate.

**Ms Anderson:** OK. I will apply the regulations to deprivation and to deprivation for those who live in Derry and Strabane, which has some of the highest levels of deprivation. I will also speak about the restrictions that have been put in place and COVID-19. There is a correlation between deprivation and what happened in Derry and Strabane, why we needed the interventions that we had, and why community transmission was so high.

I return to the point about the need to ring-fence resources and allocate them where they are needed in places such as Derry, where the people have suffered from chronic and persistent levels of deprivation. We had the spike, and restrictions were put in place in the way that they were. I believe that that is the work of the Executive and the Assembly. If we are to build back better, we need to make sure that we do not leave the most deprived behind.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the junior Minister for being present. I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to the regulations, as they continue to be the most pressing of issues. I begin my

remarks by paying tribute to all in society who have made many sacrifices over the past eight tumultuous months. From front-line workers to single mothers and elderly grandparents, we have witnessed sacrifices from people from all backgrounds and walks of life. I would like to thank the public, who have considered the safety of others and their loved ones by continuing to wear face masks and washing their hands whenever necessary.

My party and I acknowledge the need for the regulations that are being placed into legislation. However, in the past number of weeks, I have had a number of outstanding concerns, including some that were raised with me by my constituents. As we all know, mental health is a huge crisis in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that the junior Minister, and all Members, will share my concerns about its impact on all our constituents and the effect that the pandemic and lockdown has had on mental health, especially during the dark winter months.

One deeply worrying fact is that, in June, 504 patients in the Western Trust, which serves areas such as Derry and Strabane that face deprivation, breached the nine-week standard waiting time for adult mental health support services, and the average waiting time for those services was 21 weeks. That is very alarming. I agree with the Member to my right, who spoke earlier. COVID-19 has truly revealed and further highlighted how chronically underfunded our health service is.

A survey on COVID-19 and mental health by Queen's University earlier this year, which was raised previously in the Chamber, showed that a third of people in the North meet the criteria for anxiety and depression and that 20% meet the criteria for COVID-19-related PTSD. Following the implementation of the restrictions, which limit human social contact so much, I am concerned about the student demographic. Recently, I spoke to representatives of the student unions about the restrictions. They told me that, given the unprecedented circumstances, we, as a society, private institutions and beyond, must change how we provide support to our young people. Currently, six mental health counselling sessions are being offered by university counsellors, but young people are being passed to other counselling services. Many students whom I have spoken to are greatly distressed as they are on NHS waiting lists and, depending on their trust area, and specifically in the Western Trust, they may not receive help until mid- to late 2021.

Sadly, the pandemic shows no signs of disappearing, and I am sure that the restrictions will remain in place. Our young people will need more mental health support. Their social contacts have been incredibly limited over the past eight months and so have their support networks. Although we must do everything that we can to protect ourselves and our loved ones from contracting the virus, including by adhering to the regulations that we are discussing, we must also ensure that, as we do that, we are prepared for the knock-on effects of the virus and the mental health impact of the pandemic in the months and years ahead for all of us who have experienced it.

### 5.15 pm

Understandably, the new realities of life during the pandemic have caused great distress and anxiety, not least because of the separation from family and friends, the wearing of face coverings becoming the new normal — that is especially distressing for young children — and the fear of a virus with no apparent end in sight. A huge part of alleviating that anxiety is through ensuring that there is clear messaging on what is expected of us all.

We have learned today that the Executive will discuss and consider plans for restaurants to potentially reopen without the sale of alcohol. I heard this morning from several frustrated restaurant and business owners who feel that they are not being listened to and that that would force them to close their businesses and livelihoods. I urge the Executive to ensure that the guidelines are communicated clearly and concisely, with, most importantly, the scientific reasoning at the forefront of the messaging to the public.

**Mr Chambers:** Members have spoken about the unsatisfactory method by which regulations such as these are being brought through the Committee and the Assembly; indeed, we are discussing legislation that has been operating since 16 October and is due to run out at midnight this Thursday. Having expressed dissatisfaction at that situation, we must acknowledge that this is a pandemic that is being grappled with by democratic government forums in many countries across the globe. It is an emergency and thus requires emergency and agile approaches to making rules and creating guidance designed to save lives. Delaying to meet normal bureaucratic standards could cause more lives to be lost. I do not like the situation, but I would not wish that any demand from me or my party to deliberately delay the implementation of any

regulations would result in any further loss of life.

Perhaps, when we overcome the many challenges that the virus has thrown at us and maybe even new challenges, given the news coming out of Denmark, we can reflect on how we reacted and what lessons we can learn that might assist those who come behind us in dealing with future pandemics. Pat told us — I cannot argue with the figures — about how well a number of Asian countries have dealt with the virus. We have to acknowledge that they have the benefit of having dealt with SARS and many other deadly viruses and have learned their lessons from those. That is why they have managed the virus better than other countries have.

**Mr Sheehan:** I thank the Member for giving way. That is exactly my point: those countries have vast experience of SARS, MERS, swine flu, avian flu and all the rest of it. They were prepared to put in place everything that was needed. There were lockdowns in some of those countries, but, in others, there were only localised lockdowns and so on. We are not the same as those countries, but we can certainly learn from them. Let us take the best examples and the best practice that they have used to try to get our situation under control.

**Mr Chambers:** Thank you for the intervention. Maybe that is the role of the World Health Organization; perhaps it has let us down in not sharing what it knows about how Asian countries have dealt with viruses.

My colleague Mr Steve Aiken spoke about leaks emanating from within the Executive. Whether it is political gamesmanship or someone's attempt to ingratiate themselves with members of the media, the people who are doing it are not serving the public interest and should reflect on how it will compromise confidence and trust in the Executive. Reports presented and debates held should remain confidential in the first instance. I genuinely do not envy the Executive their decision-making at present. I am sure that they are having a difficult time today, trying to come to some conclusions. If ever there was an occasion when it is almost impossible to please all the people all the time, it is right now. The decision-making task is not made easier by Ministers being lobbied through the media when they have not even sat down to consider what should have been a confidential document. If a Minister went straight to the media with a departmental report before submitting it to the Executive, there would rightly be outrage. Why would anyone else involved in the Executive

think that it is clever to take it on themselves to pass someone else's report on to the media?

Reference has been made today by a Member to calling in the army to assist in our fight against COVID; indeed, the Minister was asked about that subject by that Member at the Health Committee last week. It is a fair question. The Minister of Health informed the House many weeks ago that he would not hesitate to seek additional help wherever he could source it, as and when required. What the army does well is providing engineering and logistical support. To date, we have not required such help other than provision by the military of temporary mortuary accommodation at Kinnegar camp in Holywood during the first surge that, thankfully, did not need to be utilised. On offering medical backup, it is a fact that around 75% of army medical reservists are already involved in the battle against the virus in their day jobs in the NHS. On the army assisting in the track-and-trace and testing process, I imagine that, given the number of people out of work at present due to the virus, there should be an adequate pool of civilian workers to do that work. All that said, I go back to what the Minister is on record as saying: he will not hesitate to call in military assistance should the need arise. I will fully support him if that becomes necessary.

The other issue that worries me and should worry the House is the undermining of the public health messaging in relation to this dreadful virus. Elected Members, some who serve in another House and should know better, have been guilty of this. There have been examples even today of remarks that are not helpful. No matter what experts who seem to enjoy taking part in local radio programmes think, their input is not helpful. One wonders what their motivation is. The mental health champion has cautioned against highlighting the impact of the lockdowns on mental health. We need to respect that advice from the mental health champion.

Mr Aiken reminded us that all decisions around lockdowns and regulations are collective decisions of the Executive, on which the five main parties in the House are represented. The regulations made are not Robin Swann's regulations, as some people who should know better try to portray it; indeed, last week at the Health Committee, one of the two officials who were referred to and who were there to answer questions was representing the Finance Department.

The virus will not be defeated by petty party politicking nor by the input of armchair experts, even those who have the benefit of letters after

their name. The experts who really matter are our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser. My party has full confidence in those two gentlemen and their teams as they advise the Minister of Health and the Executive on the best way forward.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I understand his point about the significance of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser and health officials, but will he accept that, because of the radical speed with which we are putting the regulations through, other voices matter and should be considered? Today, four leading clinicians in Northern Ireland said that the regulations were not, as they saw it, in the best interests of defeating the virus. Important as those voices are, we as elected representatives must take cognisance of all the opinions and come to an informed decision.

**Mr Chambers:** No, I do not accept that. The experts whom we employ are the people whom we need to listen to. Is the Member advocating that I heed the hundreds of emails sent to me by crackpots telling me that this is some sort of fascist takeover of Northern Ireland? I do not think so. The advice that I want to listen to is the cool professional advice of our Chief Medical Officer and our Chief Scientific Adviser. If the House has no confidence in the officials, there must be a method to change their employment situation.

The other experts who appear to like the sound of their own broadcast voices should step back, as their input is not helpful. Today, Members could have indulged in a bit of finger-pointing, but they have been controlled. However, do the Members who have been criticising the test, trace and isolate system, face coverings and all the other aspects of what the Executive are trying to do and have said that we need to do better realise that they are criticising their own Executive Ministers? The lockdown and all that goes with it is a policy endorsed by the entire Executive. All the regulations being discussed today are collectively supported by every member of the Executive.

Today, I have heard a Minister and a Member say that we have to learn to live with the virus. When they say that, do they mean that we have to start learning to die with the virus? That is an important point. Jonathan mentioned the fact that the virus kills and the lockdown kills, but we have to acknowledge that lockdown saves lives. There is evidence that it has helped to save lives. If we look at the figures in Strabane and Londonderry, we realise that it works. Jonathan also said that he worried about the economy,

jobs and mental health: he omitted to say that — I am sure that it was just a slip of the tongue — he worried about the health of every citizen in Northern Ireland. I worry about the health of every citizen. I know that Robin Swann worries about the health of every citizen, and that is quite correct because that is his job as Minister of Health, just as the Economy Minister, the Finance Minister and the Infrastructure Minister have their jobs to do. Robin Swann is focused on one thing: protecting the health of every citizen in Northern Ireland.

Pat rightly talked about underfunding. That underfunding has not just occurred over the last two, three or four years; the underfunding has gone on for decades. The pandemic has been a wake-up call. It has shown us how close our National Health Service is to disaster. We know that the waiting lists for different treatments, even before the virus, were the longest in the United Kingdom. The pandemic did not cause the waiting lists. Whom do we blame for the underfunding of our National Health Service? We do not have to look any further than the House to see where the decisions were made or not made that, perhaps, would have put the National Health Service in a better place than it is in now. I know that talking about people who are waiting for treatments such as cancer treatment and hip operations is a sensitive subject. It is shocking, but put yourself in the place of a clinician standing at the hospital door. He does not have a bed available in his hospital, and somebody presents at the front door of the hospital who cannot draw a breath because of the virus. The person is dying with the virus. What does the clinician do? Does he say, "I am sorry, we do not have any beds. Just go home"?

No. He goes into the hospital. There, he may have a patient who is waiting to have a hip replacement the next morning, but he will send that patient home to make the bed available for the patient who cannot breathe because of the virus. Those are tough, tough decisions but, unfortunately, they are having to be made.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** May I draw the Member back to the regulations?

**5.30 pm**

**Mr Chambers:** I will finish now, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I go back to underfunding. Let us stop talking about building bridges that would cost millions of pounds. Let us start focusing on making the National Health Service the best that we can

make it. The people who work in it are the best, and they need the best facilities that we can give them.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I support the regulations but, unsurprisingly, not the process. First, I recognise that COVID-19 has, sadly, claimed over 1,000 lives locally, left many others with debilitating conditions and put our healthcare workers under immense stress. Therefore, and given the high rate of community transmission, it was undoubtedly necessary to act quickly to implement the new measures. However, while I appreciate the unique situation that we find ourselves in, it is unacceptable that we are debating these restrictions in the Chamber just days before they are due to expire. We are denied the opportunity to give them due scrutiny, which reduces the chances of accountability and risks eroding the public's trust. We depend on that trust to get us through this pandemic. If the public do not trust us and our decisions, they are much less likely to heed the restrictions, which would render them totally ineffective and useless. These restrictions have had a huge impact on individuals, and they deserve proper scrutiny.

I am sure that some people watching today are asking what the point of this debate is, and I absolutely understand why. Unfortunately, conspiracy theorists will seize on this lack of accountability and use it to justify their false claims that the pandemic is a hoax. We must not be complicit in adding fuel to that fire.

We must also ensure that our message is clear. Mixed messages have muddied the water and left many of my constituents feeling very frustrated. Most people want to stick by the rules but it can be hard to navigate the different restrictions. We need clarity in policymaking so that the public know what is expected of them and why. It is therefore concerning to hear the phrase "living with the virus" being bandied about. This is a highly infectious virus that has devastating consequences for many. It is completely disingenuous to suggest that we simply start living with it rather than implementing a proper strategy that seeks to suppress it.

There is no contradiction between the health of our people and the health of our economy. The solution, for employers and employees, is for Northern Ireland to deal effectively with this pandemic. In particular, that lies with the Health, Economy, and Finance Departments.

Members, I agree with my legislative colleagues Jonathan Buckley and Pat Sheehan, both of whom made points, albeit from slightly different

angles, that we need to get our test and trace to work effectively. We also need to speed up reforms in our National Health Service so that Northern Ireland has sufficient resources and capacity to support our patients and enable them to recover. It is unacceptable that 400 COVID patients can bring our National Health Service to near breaking point — 400 patients nearly flooded our health service. That is a real difficulty and one that we will have to face. We have to fix it.

We have seen that the restrictions on activities in Derry and Strabane have worked. The transmission rate has fallen, as colleagues said, by 70% as a result of the recent restrictions, but we are not out of the woods yet. In Derry, Altnagelvin hospital had 16 COVID-positive admissions this weekend. That is a significantly high number. So, whilst the restrictions are improving things in my city and region, we are certainly not out of the woods yet.

Some proposals, such as authorising restaurants to provide meals but without alcohol, are just silly. We have to give employers, employees and the wider public hope for the future, including for Christmas. Put yourselves in the shoes of our healthcare workers, who are sacrificing their mental and physical health to cope with rising hospitalisations. The phrase "living with the virus" offers no solutions and very little comfort. We need more than a vague sound bite to get through this crisis.

I emphasise the importance of promptly putting in place the necessary support measures. While support schemes have been announced, we find ourselves in the farcical situation where the restrictions are due to end this week but some schemes have not even started paying out money. They have not even opened up.

We still do not know the specifics of part B of the COVID restrictions business support scheme, and help for the previously excluded self-employed workers was announced many weeks ago, yet we have not heard a single bit of detail. That is unacceptable.

Minister Lyons, one constituent put it to me like this: "It is the silence that is the real killer. The lack of communication, with no indication when payments will be issued. It makes it impossible for me to plan my business". The current delays are spreading fear and panic, making a difficult time even more challenging for thousands of workers.

We need a plan that balances support for our employers and employees with the health of our communities. I cannot see it yet.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Robbie Butler.

**Mr Butler:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You caught me unawares there. It is a pleasure to speak in the debate today. I thank everybody who has engaged so far. Whilst there are a number of different opinions on some of elements of the strategy and how we go about it, we have to remember that we have been talking about this for some months now. It has gone by in a flash, but for those families who have suffered, are still suffering and are going to suffer, it is imperative that we speak with one voice and that we are not afraid to challenge each other.

As the previous contributor said, when the message goes out, we need to speak with one voice because that will give confidence. When we look at these regulations, we find that we are talking about them belatedly and slightly too late. However, I thank the Speaker for continually writing to the Executive to try to encourage them here to lay these regulations as quickly as they can. I also put on record my thanks to the Executive Office for offering up the junior Ministers, because that adds to the quality of the message that is going out.

We cannot be divided on this, guys. It is right and proper that each of the Executive Ministers and those with their different priorities give voice to that, but let us be honest about it: protecting and saving lives is the priority. It takes precedence over everything. A case has been made from both sides of the House about finances and poverty and the pressures that our businesses are under at this time, but we also have to give voice and testament to those businesses that are speaking to us and saying, "We really need help. We really want to open, but we do not want to open if our business is in any way a danger".

The evidence has been raised, and people have been calling for scientific evidence. That is OK, but when the evidence came, they said, "That is not the right type of evidence. We want it in a different way and in a different fashion". Guys, we are not virologists or scientists. We have to trust those we have put in place. I thank Mr Chambers for the point he made: either we trust our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser, or we do not. They do not work on their own; they have offices. Yes, we have a letter from four consultants who have raised concerns, but I suspect we have a

thousand consultants in this country. Had the letter been signed by 1,000 consultants, I would maybe be prepared to give it a little bit more light.

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

**Mr Butler:** Absolutely.

**Mr Gildernew:** Does the Member agree that the quest for evidence is not only to assess whether what was done was necessary, but whether what was done was enough? We need to be very conscious that we should take all the help and expertise we can get, from wherever around the world it comes, and stop this nonsense of trying to unpick the measures as to whether there was enough evidence. We are not an exemplar, and there is plenty we can and should learn.

**Mr Butler:** Yes. I do not disagree with what the Member says. This is something that none of us have dealt with before, and something that all our friends and families are involved in. When you embark upon any journey such as this, it is important that, numerous times, you put your head up, take a look around and assess what is working and what is not, and that you are agile. I do not see any conflict with anything that has been said here today. We all want the same outcome.

Looking at some of the regulations, I pay tribute to the communities we have. One of the greatest burdens has been the inability to spend time with family and loved ones. The Northern Irish personality is such that a lot of doors would normally be open in our streets. We are very hospitable, and very hospitable within our families. That has been ripped away from us for months now. Like many of you, there are members of my family who I have not seen since the start of this pandemic. Thankfully, we have some technology; we can speak and see each other. However, it really is quite tough.

The case has been made, and rightly so, for businesses that are struggling. The information and the finances need to be expedited into their hands. What actually cripples people is the unknown. That is what causes the most damage. When there is a void of information, a void of financial assistance and a void of a promise, that is more catastrophic than when you know the answer. I am not going to point the finger at any Minister, whether Finance or Economy, and think that I am just going to protect my party's Minister. These are Executive regulations. The Executive, in most

cases, have worked exceptionally well in their messaging. You have only to look at the elections in America recently to see how divided a country that some of us admire can be. We have a complicated system here but, in some ways, we need to be proud of some of our achievements. However, we need to improve and ensure that life and safety are the number-one issues.

With regard to masks — perhaps the junior Minister might respond to this — one of the things that concerns me, and which I have witnessed when travelling to work this past few mornings, is when I the post-primary schoolchildren gathering for buses. You see them in great crowds. They are standing in big numbers, and they do not have masks on. I know that the direction is to wear masks on buses, but what can we do to encourage them to wear masks even when they are gathering at bus stops? We have seen a remarkable response from young people in this country. We talk about them and say we worry about them but, in the round, they have been exceptional. Instead of a draconian measure pointing out what is not happening, we should ask how we fix the situation at bus stops and similar places to encourage schoolchildren to wear their masks.

The other thing was a conversation last week with regard to university students. Christmas is fast approaching, and we have thousands of students living here who will have to go home and students who will need to come back here. I declare an interest. My son is in Aberystwyth as we speak so, as a father who wants to see his son at Christmas, I think that it is incumbent upon this legislature, in conjunction with the other devolved nations, to ensure that our students have that information as early as possible and that they get back for Christmas. I hope that is something we can look at.

Finally, I am going to issue a challenge, and it is not a challenge for you guys. I go to church on Sundays; I am a churchgoer. I love my church. Last week, I was worried when I read a letter from some of the Church leaders in the UK who said that they were thinking of challenging the regulations across the water.

I call on them not to challenge the regulations. I call on the Church leaders to lead by example. In any church that I am involved in, I certainly want them to lead by example with the New Testament teachings and say, "Love your neighbour, so protect your neighbour". I want them to say, "If the Government have made a decision about restrictions, well, do you know something? They have done it in your interests



and in the interests of your neighbours". I do not know whether the junior Minister will speak to that, but it is certainly a challenge to the Churches from me.

**5.45 pm**

**Mr Nesbitt:** I want to start with the notion of the four consultants who have come up with a different view. We might call it a second opinion, because it is in the medical field. The question is this: is it for the House to say, "Here is a letter from four people that contradicts the direction of travel that we are going in, and that therefore justifies us perhaps taking a different turn"? I am not sure that it is.

By the way, let me declare that I am somebody with cardiovascular issues that had to be dealt with in an acute hospital during COVID. I was dealt with in a timely, professional and empathetic manner, and I thank all the professionals involved.

The point that I want to make, which is relevant, is that consultants no longer say to you, "Here is what you need to do. Here is the procedure that you must have". They will say to you, "You have a condition" — for example, I had a heart condition — "that a pacemaker should sort out, but you have to make the decision that you want the pacemaker fitted". They will then say, "You have another condition that could kill you. If you have an internal defibrillator fitted, that should keep you alive, if the condition kicks off, until we get you into hospital". They tell you your options; they do not tell you what you have to do. In the same way, if four consultants say that they think that we are taking the wrong tack, is it not for the Minister of Health to speak to his Chief Medical Officer and say, "What about that opinion? It contradicts where you are. I need to be reassured by you that what you tell me is the right thing and the right recommendation". I am sure that it is for the Health Committee to test the Chief Medical Officer and the Minister of Health by asking, "Are those four are right, or are we are sticking with our Chief Medical Officer?". I do not think that it is for the House, particularly those in it who want to take a view contrary to the path that we are on, simply to say, "Aha! Here is a handy bit of evidence: a new letter from four people who call themselves consultants, because they are, so I will use that to justify my path". That is not the right thing to do or the way in which scrutiny should work. We should test the Minister. The Minister should test the Chief Medical Officer. The Committee should test the CMO. We should follow the right medical and scientific advice.

Mr Sheehan made the good point that, for at least 10 years, the health service has suffered from underinvestment. We have an Ulster Unionist Minister of Health today. Ten years ago, we had an Ulster Unionist Minister of Health. Michael McGimpsey was able to forecast years ahead, to within three decimal points, in billions of pounds, what the health service needed to stand still, and the House did not vote through that money; in fact, the House tortured Michael McGimpsey. It brought him back again and again for debates, making sure that he spent as much time as possible in the Chamber, which meant that he had as little time as possible to do the job of being a Minister in his office. The House absolutely tortured him, but he was right, not least about the finances.

Let us also recall that, 11 years ago, there was a global pandemic: swine flu. Michael McGimpsey was in charge, and what did he do? He ensured that there was a vaccine for every citizen in this country. What happened? The vaccine was not needed. We did not need anything like a million vaccines. What did the House do? It tortured him for wasting millions of pounds. What if we had needed it? Did we learn the lesson from that? I am not sure that we did. I have been in the Chamber this year when some Members have tried to torture the current Health Minister over the Nightingale hospitals because the beds were not needed in the first wave. What if they are needed? I get the argument that it takes resource and takes professionals out of their day jobs to put them into a Nightingale hospital where, perhaps, they will sit unoccupied, but those are tensions that we cannot resolve, not if we want to be prepared for worst-case scenarios.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Can I draw the Member back to the restrictions that we are debating?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand your desire for me to do that.

I have a couple more points to make, if I may. Mr Buckley and Mr Middleton referred to the effects, particularly under regulation 8, of the impact on businesses, including those in the hospitality sector. This morning, upstairs in my office, I took a phone call from somebody who did not tell me who he was except that he was a businessperson. I did not ask his constituency or whether he voted, because those are not the important issues. His issue was that he had had to close up his business in mid-March and had not been able to reopen since. He said that he vacillates between frustration because he thinks that we are useless and anger and despair because he thinks that we are useless. His

point was that this is the second wave that we all knew was coming. His question was this: why did Departments, such as the Department for the Economy, not make sure that they had their data sets and processing arrangements in order so that, when they came up with a scheme to grant-aid businesses, that could be processed quickly and the money delivered?

That follows a lengthy email that I received yesterday, again with regard to regulation 8, relating to hospitality in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. The sender made the point that they now face the sixth week of having received none of the financial help — the £400 to £600 per week — promised by the Finance Minister. He said that businesses in the hospitality sector around Derry were informed that their claims would be dealt with first and that it would all be done in short order, seven working days after they were notified that the money was to go into their accounts, but here they are, having been told that they were successful in mid-October, still waiting for the money. In fairness to the Finance Minister, I sent him an email last night, and he has already responded to say that there have been difficulties getting the right data out of some councils, the Department is working on it and he believes that the pipeline for grant aid is now open. I thank him for doing that, but the point of this morning's caller remains: surely, we should have ironed out all those data problems in advance. Given that the pandemic may be with us for a long time and that there may not be just a first and second wave but more to come, I encourage the Executive to do more to ensure that the data sets are in place so that processes can be activated as quickly as possible.

Thank you for allowing me some latitude, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the point is that the health service needs to be supported not only to fight COVID-19 but to prepare for the radical reforms needed to best serve the health of the people of this country. Once again, I thank all those who have helped me with my cardiovascular issues in recent months.

**Mr Catney:** I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. There has been a lot that I could agree with and a lot that I could not agree with. Business is not easy, folks. You all know that. If it were easy, everybody would be at it. We live in difficult times.

The whole point of having the regulations in statute and, in fact, the main reason that we have our laws written down is to provide clear instruction to our citizens and businesses on what must be done, how it must be done and

when it must be done, clear instructions so that no one is disadvantaged or put under unnecessary duress. However, there has been no clarity on how we have got to the restrictions of this second lockdown. Yet again this week, we heard the First Minister say that there will be no extension to the current restrictions, but, yesterday, we found out in a TV interview that that will probably not be the reality for a lot of businesses. How do we expect any business to survive in this environment? How do we look at those who run our supply chains and need time to prepare for any reopening? They will be in limbo for another week, caught between the expense of preparation, if there is an extension, and a loss of income, if there is not.

It is particularly annoying that that is exactly what happened when the Executive first introduced the new set of restrictions. On the Monday, the Education Minister guaranteed that schools would not close. Questions had been asked for weeks about whether the schools would close, with no answers. On Tuesday, they were told to close. Honesty with the public is needed. Tell the public that a six-week lockdown now is a big step but would allow certainty that there could be some sort of relaxation to allow people to come together and businesses to open for the festive period. Surely, that clear instruction, rather than the political spin that we have got over the past few weeks, would give us a better standing with our business community.

I applaud the vast majority of the public, who have followed the restrictions over the past period and helped to get our infection numbers down from some of the worst rates in Europe. However, unrest exists due to the lack of clarity and a lack of decision-making based on scientific evidence. That will grow if what was leaked this weekend turns out to be true. Shame on those who leaked that information. Show me the evidence that a restaurant that serves a bottle of wine with dinner is more dangerous than a restaurant that does not. Maybe I am wrong, but that sounds less like decision-making based on evidence and more like decision-making based on the outdated conservative prejudices against alcohol that the Chamber spoke so strongly against last week. It is nonsense to suggest that restaurants should open, denying their access to the support schemes for businesses that are asked to close, but should not sell alcohol, which is critical to their business model. When the Executive ask any service to close, whether it is schools, restaurants or retail, they need to provide additional support to allow people to follow the rules. The slow pace of support to date has not inspired confidence.

Before deciding the way forward, the Executive should take advice from the president-elect and the first female vice president-elect of the United States: now is the time for science and the time for truth. That is how we build trust with our business community. That is how we can support them, and that is how we will get through the pandemic.

**Mr Allister:** There is something inherently farcical about the debate in the sense that we are debating regulations the first of which — the amendment (No. 8) regulations — have already been superseded. The amendment (No. 9) regulations will run out in three days' time. Yet this is the opportunity for the Assembly to say whether it consents to horses that have already bolted in terms of legislation. There is something inherently farcical about that.

The farce exists not only in the mechanics. I take you back to the amendment (No. 9) regulations. Members may recall hanging about the Building three weeks ago tomorrow — or was it four weeks? It was a Tuesday evening, and we were awaiting with bated breath an announcement from the Executive. It was coming at 5.00 pm, then it was coming at 7.00 pm, 8.00 pm, 9.00 pm. At 11.00 pm, we were told to go home. Why? Because, again, the dysfunctionism ruled. When the regulation came the next day, we were told that it was coming into effect at 6.00 pm on the Friday.

Businesses, in good faith, prepared to close at 6.00 pm — a whole evening of trading was lost in the hospitality industry — but the regulation was not made until 10.30 pm that night.

### 6.00 pm

Meanwhile, we had a sports Minister intervene to tell sports fans at Coleraine to go home. They could not get into the ground under a law that had not even been made, and, when it was made, it did not even say that. It never said that; it had the specific exemption for elite sports and was never in the business of banning the limited number of spectators.

That is the background of farce and incoherence, which speaks to many people in terms of the level of confidence that they should exercise in respect of these measures from the Executive. That is a contributor, among other contributors, to the loss of confidence among many in the public as to the regulations that are made. That is unfortunate, potentially damaging and dangerous because COVID is real. We all have our personal responsibilities to obey regulations and to take that personal

responsibility upon ourselves. However, when an Executive behave in that incoherent way, of course, it is easy for people who want to depart from regulations to find that route. Those are the reasons why I say that there is something inherently farcical about debating these matters at this stage.

Nonetheless, it is important to do it, because we are still in the climate of this virus where, frankly, we do not really know what the direction of travel is. We had the First Minister telling us, not later than last week, that that which was forbidden in the amendment (No. 9) regulations comes to an end at midnight on Thursday. Then we had the deputy First Minister tell us yesterday that that is only partially true, because some of it is going to open up but some of it is not, and we are now going to have new ideas about restaurants opening without the capacity to serve alcohol. Mr Catney depicted that as some sort of a fall out over a view about alcohol, but, frankly, I think that it is more likely to be the typical horse-trade of this Executive rather than anything else. However, I agree that it is illogical and that it makes no sense.

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

**Mr Allister:** Sure.

**Mr Catney:** Maybe he could help me, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was told that the Executive were going to meet on Thursday. They did not meet. I was told that they were going to meet today, and that is why we are debating in the House. I hope that the Member agrees with me that we have not got any direction from them. From what I can see, it is the two larger parties — Sinn Féin and the DUP — that are holding this whole process back at the moment, because I do not think that all of the Executive have met yet.

**Mr Allister:** I do not know whether they have met today or not, and I do not know whether we are going to hold our breath for some announcement tonight. Who knows? However, I know this: the Executive have not addressed the issues that they ought to have addressed post-phase one of COVID. Let us take the issue of care homes. Care homes were devastated by COVID in the first wave, and yet, today, we are back at the point where there are 139 outbreaks in our care homes. Why would that be? I respectfully suggest that one of the reasons for that might be that, up until last week, we were testing staff in care homes only every two weeks. Last week, the Minister announced that we will now do it once a week.

Given that care homes are effectively closed down to visitors, it is quite clear to anyone that the entry point for COVID has to come unwittingly through the staff. Why is it that staff are not being tested every day or at least every other day? What lesson has been learned from the first phase, given that, suddenly, multiple months later, we are only now starting to talk about upping the testing in care homes? I do not think that once a week is enough, although it is better than every two weeks. Again, knowing that the highest level of fatalities will be among people in the age bracket who populate our care homes, it seems a gross neglect to have allowed that situation to develop again.

It is not enough to say, "Oh, we must all rally behind the Executive; they are doing their best". Sorry, there has to be a role and an opportunity for criticism. When four clinicians, who are not four busybodies, decide to swim against the tide, it is not an easy task — swimming against the tide: I have a bit of experience of that myself — when you have the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser, the Minister and the head of the BMA all telling a particular theme. It is not a particularly easy course for four clinicians to put their name to a letter and say, "Well, in fact, is this right? In fact, do we not need better evidence than the evidence we have?". It is no answer to those four clinicians to say, "There's not a thousand of them". If they are making a valid point, the Minister and the Executive should be looking at that and taking heed of it.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, while many in the House call for more robust scrutiny, more conversations and more discussions in this place to discuss the regulations, when opinions contrary to those of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser come to the fore, they simply want to dismiss them out of hand without giving them due consideration?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I have given quite some flexibility to Members. I ask that Members come back to the regulations that we are here to discuss today. Please refer to the regulations.

**Mr Allister:** I am discussing the regulations before us, including amendment Nos 8 and 9. Amendment No. 9 was brought in on the basis that the Chief Medical Officer said that it had to be. That is the same Chief Medical Officer who, a few days ago, remarkably said that you could not have both hospitality and schools open. When a Chief Medical Officer says that and when four clinicians write a sentence such as

this, I think that this is very germane to whether or not these regulations are on the money. What did the four medical officers write? Amongst what they wrote was:

*"To deprive our population of livelihood, civil liberties and education, we believe that the evidence to support this should be scientifically robust and beyond reproach."*

Who could disagree with that: before we do what we are doing, we need to be sure that what we have is scientifically robust and beyond reproach? They go on to say:

*"That is clearly not the case."*

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. What he is saying and the argument that he is driving at remind me of Harold Macmillan's maxim:

*"We have not overthrown the divine right of kings to fall down for the divine right of experts."*

Does the Member agree that, going forward, a much more robust interrogation of contrasting and competing points of view on these matters will be called for in order to ensure public confidence?

**Mr Allister:** I think that the public, watching on to buttress their confidence that they should believe all that they are told, have come to the point at which they recognise that challenge is an essential part of building confidence. It is easy to say, "Here is what we must do", but you cannot do that and ignore credible contentions. If four clinicians of the standard of Dr Walsh and his colleagues are bravely saying that there is clearly no evidence for what lies behind some of these measures, it would be grossly irresponsible for the House simply to say, "We don't want to listen to that. That doesn't suit. We're going to ignore that". The letter says many other important things. The four clinicians make the point that people are dying because of COVID but not of COVID. People are dying because they are not getting the treatment for their other diseases. Every day in this country, 12 or 13 people die of cancer. What will that figure be next year because of those who did not get their diagnosis, did not get their tests or had their treatment delayed?

In the House, in the early stages of COVID, I raised with the deputy First Minister the tragic case of a young mother, aged 32, who had been diagnosed with cancer and whose treatment was paused. After some time, the

Minister intervened — I appreciated that — and treatment was resumed. In the weeks that were lost, however, she had weakened, and, tragically, that young mother died a few weeks ago. Was she a casualty of COVID? How many casualties of COVID will there be next year? As Ms McLaughlin said, we are in the situation where 400 cases have put our National Health Service in crisis. Really?

That brings me to Mr Nesbitt's point. He is absolutely right: some of the rundown in our health service was self-inflicted by the politics of this House. When Michael McGimpsey was Minister of Health and said that he needed funds to keep us standing still, the greater political forces in the House mocked him, refused him and forced upon him cuts, which, to this very day, we are bearing the consequences of. That was politics, not health. In fact, in the past 10 years, the House has reduced the number of hospital beds in our community by 1,500. Then, we are surprised that we are unable to deal with a pandemic and that 400 cases put us in this spin. The House needs to take a look at itself: why did it do that, and what will it do going forward?

In the autumn of 2016, there was a nationwide pandemic dry run, as it were. The Minister of Health in Northern Ireland was our present deputy First Minister. What lessons were learned? What preparations were made for a pandemic?

**Mr Sheehan:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member is insinuating that the Health Minister at the time of Exercise Cygnus had knowledge of the results of or the report from that simulation of a pandemic. In fact, the details were not made public until after she had left office.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I do not consider that to be a point of order but your comment is on the record.

**6.15 pm**

**Mr Allister:** I assure Mr Sheehan that I would never think of or accuse the deputy First Minister of being knowledgeable. *[Laughter.]* What preparations were made for a pandemic such as this? The preparations of the House were to reduce the number of nurses, reduce the number of doctors and reduce the number of beds. Those were the preparations that were made. Unless and until those are reversed, we will not be in a fit position — I hope that this does not arise — to meet future pandemics.

Where are we going now? Regulation 9 came in, and it expires on Thursday night. The First Minister told us that that is the end of it. We were told that if we get the R number under 1, the regulation has served its purpose. From what I have heard, the R number is significantly under 1. So why is there even a debate about continuing to strangle our economy with further regulations? Yes, it is very good to have all the support of the furlough scheme, and its generosity is considerable. However, I fear this: how many zombie jobs we are sustaining? How many jobs will not be there when furlough ends, as it must do one day? That is part of the real challenge. That is why the four doctors were right to say in this letter:

*"The deprivation of livelihoods and extreme measures that are being called for seem very difficult to justify on the basis of the current clinical evidence. When the wider societal and health costs are also considered we really must think again."*

I echo that. We really do need to think again.

**Mr Carroll:** Once again, it is ridiculous in the extreme that we are discussing these regulations in the Chamber weeks after they have been brought in. By all accounts there seems to be consensus among the majority, or certainly among the big parties of the Executive, to further lift the restrictions, thus effectively making these regulations meaningless just weeks after their introduction. Welcome to Stormont, where basic logic need not apply when making a decision. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask the Member to leave the Chamber.

**Mr Stalford:** Is that 'The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba'? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Carroll:** I was going to try to guess the composer of that mobile phone ring tone, but I will not.

We cannot have a situation where the Westminster Parliament, which is hardly a bastion of democracy, has more accountability in its course of action than the House. Why is it, as others said, that we have to wait three weeks from when regulations are brought in before we have the chance to discuss them? We are in a health pandemic that has claimed the life of over 1,000 people, and I give my sympathies to all those families who have lost a loved one. Why can the House not have emergency or extra sittings in the Chamber to

discuss the regulations in order to challenge or alter them?

As I am sure is the case for others, whenever there is a proposed change to the regulations, I am inundated by questions from constituents about what is going on and what it means for them and so on. We should insist that Ministers bring the regulations to the House before they are implemented. Otherwise, we cannot say that there is any serious scrutiny or accountability at play here. Is that because, as was revealed in Sam McBride's book about the RHI scandal, Ministers are overtly sensitive to criticism and in this instance are running scared of it, or is it because they do not want any scrutiny of their dangerous strategy of living with a killer virus like COVID?

Amendment 8 relates to the regulations and restrictions in the Derry and Strabane area. It is worth remembering that those restrictions on hospitality were brought in because case numbers rose rapidly. Evidence shows that the restrictions helped to bring the infection rate down by a significant number. We heard that the biggest proportion of cases in the Derry and Strabane area came from hospitality and then from community transmission. Restrictions on workplaces are not ideal and are not what anybody wants, not least workers themselves, but these restrictions are an important method in getting the infection rates down as opposed to letting it spread rapidly across our community. In the absence of the Executive adopting a zero-COVID approach, they are clearly still necessary.

Amendment No. 9 implements restrictions on hospitality and other sectors. Again, this situation arose after the Executive moved prematurely to lift restrictions at the end of the summer, precipitating the spread of COVID in a second wave. This move, alongside the abject failure to establish a proper track-and-trace system, has created this disastrous, uncertain situation where the Executive have been forced to put the hospitality sector into lockdown again after lifting it too soon. That said, I strongly contest the idea that now is the correct or safe time to further open up hospitality or any other sector and to push people back into restaurants and other venues when this virus is still spreading and taking people with it. How many more lives will be put at risk and lost because some people in here want to see laissez-faire capitalism run riot over people's lives?

In the Chamber, I have criticised DUP members for their approach to the virus. Obviously, Mr Sammy Wilson has been at it again. I think that we urgently need to isolate the rotten politics of

Sammy Wilson. Now even Sinn Féin, or the deputy First Minister at least, seems to be dancing to a similar tune. When we have a whole range of medical experts warning against the reopening of hospitality and suggesting that an easing of the current restrictions would be dangerous and result in mayhem, the First Minister and deputy First Minister seem to be taking a very different approach in the media this week — very worrying indeed.

I have to say that it is quite astounding to see some quarters feigning concern for low-paid workers despite not lifting a finger to support them or improve their conditions since Stormont has been sitting. Is this a tough period for hospitality workers? Absolutely. Many workers in this industry are worried about their future and their livelihoods, but they are also terrified of this virus. If people here are seriously concerned about these workers, I appeal to them and urge them to support the motion on the Unite Hospitality rescue plan that Rachel Woods and I submitted last week. The last time that I checked, the bigger parties had not supported it. That motion calls for a policy which would financially protect hospitality workers and adopt a proper testing system, along with making other important and achievable demands.

We cannot look at hospitality in isolation from how people may react to the rumoured change in restrictions. If people see that, according to the Executive's logic, it is safe to go into a restaurant, they will also draw out the obvious contradiction. If it is fine to mix and socialise when they are spending money in a restaurant, then why not in their private lives? The Executive need to stop trying to effectively privatise social interaction by allowing people to mix only where they spend money but then restricting, and indeed fining, people in respect of elements of their family lives.

My worry is that efforts to reduce the spread of this virus in recent weeks will again have been wasted if restrictions on workplaces are relaxed once again. This is happening because our political establishment at both Westminster and Stormont are too tight-fisted to deliver the real provisions that need to be put in place to help workers and small businesses to shield and protect themselves from COVID.

Amendment No. 2 relates to face coverings. I have raised the point several times that wearing a mask is an important act of solidarity with those in our health service, retail supermarkets and so on and so forth. I have raised this with a number of Ministers a number of times, but I repeat my call for the Executive to urgently

adopt a position of providing free reusable masks to the general public. If we are saying that masks are an important part of protecting people from this virus — and they are — then the Executive need to step up to the plate and support people in those endeavours.

Finally, the Executive need to radically shift from their dangerous policy of living with the virus and adopt the zero-COVID approach and elimination strategy outlined by the independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and others. When we look at other countries adopting this approach and strategy, we see not only that they have a level of deaths way below our astronomically high figures, and that they are not going in and out and in and out of lockdown. Those countries are living what could be considered, in this period, to be relatively normal life, with people being able to go to large sporting events and do other activities.

The Stormont Executive's living with COVID strategy is a disastrous one which creates a false choice of health versus economy. In reality, it delivers the worst of both of those worlds by continually pitching people's health against their jobs. You cannot keep sending people back to work unsafely before a proper track-and-trace system exists, for example. The negative repercussions of this impact on individual workers as well as on businesses and workplaces collectively. If cities such as Liverpool can implement mass testing of citizens, we should be able to do so in Belfast and across the North more generally.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

We need to adopt urgently a zero-COVID strategy of elimination and control, not this constant stop-start situation of mini lockdowns, with seemingly no rhyme, reason, logic or long-term planning involved. Anything less means more deaths, as well as job losses in the long run. The lack of vision on the Executive on this is astounding and increasingly appalling.

**Mr Stalford:** After listening to Mr Carroll, it is probably important for me to note that pennies do not fall from heaven. They have to be earned here on earth, and the economy pays for everything that government can do. Without a strong and thriving economy, government cannot exist and the services that we want to provide for our people do not exist. Only the most economically illiterate would attempt to assert that we should continue to keep vast swathes of our economy under lockdown.

I do not envy Ministers. At the start of this year, no one had heard of COVID, so they have been dealing with an extremely fluid and evolving situation. They have to take advice. We have a Chief Medical Officer and a Chief Scientific Adviser who are paid to give advice, but, as this progresses, I hope that there is a preparedness perhaps to look outside government and to take advice and to listen to other, contrary opinions.

I want to speak about the hospitality sector in particular. For many people, the sector provides a second job, and those few pounds that were coming in through that second job were perhaps going to pay for Christmas, the kids' school uniforms and other such things. The longer that those jobs are not accessible, the more that devastation and hardship is being heaped upon people. I am also mindful of the fact that, although we are making decisions, the income of no one in this Chamber will be affected by the decisions that are made here, because we are public-sector workers. It is therefore easy for us to stand up, as the previous contributor did, and say "Lock it down, lock it down, lock it down". It is not us who will be damaged economically by a loss of income through taking that approach. It is easy for us to sit in a big white house on top of a big hill in Belfast and tell people, "You cannot go to work".

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for giving way, but, to be accurate, I did not ever say "Lockdown, lockdown, lockdown". He raises concerns about low-paid workers and about hospitality workers. I have said repeatedly in the Chamber that there is a plan in place from Unite Hospitality to support workers and ensure that their pay and jobs are protected into the future. Will he and his party support that motion and plan?

**Mr Stalford:** That is the difference. You can pass motions, as the Member's party is wont to do on Belfast City Council, that are a form of words or you can actually use the levers of government to act. The best way in which to act is to get the economy open as quickly as possible, because — I said this in March — the cost of all of this is immense. We are running up huge debts that my children, and possibly their children, will be paying off as a consequence. There is no such thing as free money. This has to be paid back, and therefore, for the good of people, I am pleased that relaxations have been announced for the economy and to allow people to get back to work. I urge the Executive to move as quickly as possible in that direction, because people need to be allowed to live, allowed to earn and allowed to support their family.

### 6.30 pm

I want to ask a question. I do not know whether the Minister can tell me the answer; if he cannot, that is fair enough. It would be useful for people to know what the R number is currently. I was not in the Chamber for the entirety of the debate, so I do not know whether it has been put into the public domain, but it would be useful for people to know it. We knew that it was well above 1. If we are aiming towards a goal and the Minister was in a position to tell us that it has fallen from where we thought it was and will keep falling if we do X, it would give people something to aim for. That has been one of the problems, and, as I said earlier, I do not envy Ministers. As the situation has evolved so quickly, and because the regulations have had to be amended almost weekly, there is confusion out there. I am sure that people accept that.

One of the issues on which I absolutely agree with Mr Allister is the cancellation of medical procedures. I am sure that we all have constituents who have had medical procedures cancelled or delayed. That is devastating for people. The mother of a girl I grew up with went to hospital in March complaining of pains in her stomach. They thought that it might be her gallbladder, but it turned out that it was stomach cancer. It is all well and good for us to have abstract conversations, but there are real people suffering real effects. That is why it is important that we move as quickly as possible to give our people the capacity to earn and support themselves and to give our Government the capacity, through rates and taxes, to deliver public services and reform.

I will finish on this point. There was criticism of the health service. We all know that, as things stand and without reform, the Department of Health will consume more and more of the block grant. It already consumes over £50 of every £100 that the Government have. Once this is out of the way, we will all have to be courageous. When Mr Swann became Health Minister, one of the things that I said was that he should be given political cover to take through the Bengoa recommendations. The easiest thing for him to do would be to say, "I need more money", and the easiest thing for the other parties to do would be to say, "We need health reform". We need to be brave and not allow parochial or sectional interest in that area.

**Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** I am grateful for Members' contributions; they have certainly been comprehensive. When I saw that the Business

Committee had allocated until 6.30 pm for the debate, I thought that it was being extremely generous. However, it seems that we have gone beyond that, as Members have certainly made the most of the time that has been made available to them.

I want to address the substantive points raised by Members. First, however, I will address the issue that nearly all Members raised during the debate: the process that we find ourselves in and taking through regulations that were put in place a number of weeks ago but which we are only now having the opportunity to discuss.

Members will be aware that the Assembly had agreed to that process and that regulations would be made and that they would then be subject to debate and an affirmative vote in the Assembly. It is right that Members get the opportunity to do that as early as possible. However, under the current system, a number of measures have to be taken first. The regulations have to go to the Examiner of Statutory Rules, then to the Committee, and then to the Business Committee to get time on the Floor.

I understand why the Health Committee has written to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to ask them to look again at the process. We are following the process, and we are following it properly, and I am sure that Members would not like it if we took out certain elements of the process that is in place. However, the First Minister and deputy First Minister share Members' concerns about the length of time that it is taking for regulations to come to the Assembly. They have said that they are content to review that so that they can come to the House in a more timely manner. I hope that Members accept that the Executive Office recognised that there was an issue in that regard; Ministers made themselves available for questions when the Ad Hoc Committee met, and it now provides written ministerial statements and, where possible, statements to the Assembly so that Members have the opportunity to question Ministers about the changes that have been made. Nevertheless, it is a less than acceptable situation in which we find ourselves, and I hope that it can be changed.

Mr McGrath is no longer in his place, but he raised a number of issues around compliance. That is very important; if we do not have compliance with the regulations, we will not get the desired outcome. I recognise how important that is. I appreciate that he recognised the work that has been done already in regard to communication. I think that we have seen



greater adherence to the regulations over the past number of weeks because of the additional communications that the Executive have put in place. I put on record our appreciation of all the partners that have worked with us over the past number of weeks. We have had extensive engagement with local government, retail, hospitality and church leaders. We are Zoomed out. We wanted to engage, and it has helped with communications in particular.

Another issue that Mr McGrath and many others raised was that of leaks. Obviously, that should not be happening. Decisions should be made in the Executive, and, once made, should, in the first instance, where possible, come before the Assembly. I can say only that I am not responsible for those leaks; I assure the House of that. I hope that all Members who raised that issue will also raise it with their Executive Ministers, so that they understand the strength of feeling in that regard.

Mr Gildernew and Mr Stalford, who is no longer in his place, wanted information about the current estimate of R. It currently sits between 0.6 and 0.9 and is most likely to be 0.7. The current estimate of R is definitely below 1. It is important to note that that is what we had sought to achieve. I am pleased that we have that now and that hospital admissions have begun to decline slowly over the past week. They remain relatively high, but the number of COVID hospital patients should begin to decline further in the next week, although that is expected to be slow and will depend on hospital discharge.

One of the good news stories in the second wave is that fewer people are dying as a result of the virus, but that requires them to go from ICU back into the general wards again. The pressure is still there because more people are living. Significant challenges are still there, but we are heading in the right direction.

Pam Cameron raised a number of issues. She expressed concerns about the distress of families who have a loved one dying in hospital. In order to reduce that distress for families and support decision-making for staff in circumstances in which end-of-life care is being provided, the Department of Health has issued updated guidance that recognises end-of-life care as being an exceptional circumstance in which restricted visitation to a patient will be permitted, regardless of the regional alert-level at the time. That will apply to ministers of religion; we know how important it is in those final moments of life to have a minister or someone from your faith community with you. At all times, we want to balance the public

health and infection control guidance with the need for compassionate care at the end of life.

The Member mentioned that there is a threat to life from COVID. She is absolutely right, but there is also a threat to life from other illnesses. That has been very well illustrated by a number of Members today, particularly Mr Allister, who gave us that heartbreaking account of what had happened to the young woman in his constituency. There is no other word for it: it is just absolutely heartbreaking that that lady did not have the treatment for a time. Our hearts go out to all the people who find themselves in that situation, because it is not an isolated incident. I thank the Member for bringing that to the Floor and for reminding us all of the many challenges, not just COVID, that exist in healthcare.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the junior Minister give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I am more than happy to give way to the Member.

**Mr Gildernew:** First, I apologise to you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, and to the House for my phone going off earlier. I thank the Minister for the information that he has given and for the undertaking that there will be a review of the processes involved. Will he raise with his Executive colleagues the need for the basic pieces of information that Committees are seeking to apply their scrutiny to be available and for officials who come to Committee to have basic information such as the R number at any given time or the impact of measures on it? That would provide not only the Committees with the opportunity to carry out their scrutiny role but the public with the confidence that the measures that are being taken are necessary and are best-positioned to deal with the virus.

**Mr Lyons:** The Member has certainly put his views on the record. I will also pass that on and get my officials to pass that on to the Department of Health. I advise him that we get that information only once a week. Getting it daily is not as useful as getting the bigger picture over a seven-day period. I think that it is important that not only members of the Executive but Members of the Assembly, especially those who have a role in the scrutiny of the Department of Health, have that information. I have no problem in passing that message on to the Minister.

I also want to associate myself with Pam Cameron's comments about the impact that the virus is having on wider society, on people, on the economy and, as she said, on the fabric of

society. I do not think that that is hyperbole. This virus has the potential to change so much of how we live our lives, how we interact and our relationships. It is having a big impact, and she is absolutely right that we must break the cycle of lockdown. I will speak more to that later.

Steve Aiken, who has also left the Chamber, mentioned the need for a vaccine and the good news that has come out today. That is to be welcomed. It gives us hope for the future. However, it should not make us complacent, and it should not make us think that this will be a solution. We are still a way away from that, so we should not let our guard down. I also agree with what he said about the importance, as I stated, of the Assembly hearing about the decisions that are made first and that they do not go out via the media.

Paula Bradshaw raised the issue of whether it should be a requirement for individuals to wear a face covering in all indoor settings. That has been considered, however, I am told that evidence suggests that, when there is a prolonged close contact between individuals, cloth face coverings will not offer effective protections and that, therefore, extending the regulation to require blanket wearing of coverings would not be justified. There is an inconsistency, she said, in requiring junior pupils to wear face masks on public and home-to-school transport but not in retail settings. That matter, I can inform the Member, will be discussed when the face coverings working group next meets. I note that the social distancing that has become a feature of the retail environment is not possible on public transport, and we need to keep that in mind.

Jonathan Buckley raised a number of issues. He is not in the House at this moment. I am informed that the risks of infection associated with the hospitality industry and the impact of restrictions on the hospitality industry are well known and recognised by the Executive.

Finding a way through those difficult issues does not involve easy answers, and, until there is a vaccine, we will continue to seek an effective way through. It is right to thank those in the hospitality sector who have spent so much time engaging with us over the last number of weeks. We appreciate that and will continue to engage with the sector.

**6.45 pm**

We then had Pat Sheehan, who is in his place. The more things change, the more they stay the

same: no matter how often the Member is told to stick to the regulations at hand, he always likes to give his current assessment of where things are. He was certainly comprehensive in his assessment today. Perhaps contact-tracing capacity is a subject for a further Assembly debate. There has been a significant increase in the pressures faced by the service, including a threefold increase in the number of new cases notified to CTS on Friday 2 October. The number went from 300 to 900, so that was significant. We understand the pressures, and the Public Health Agency has now introduced mitigations such as the introduction of the new texting and digital self-trace platform.

**Mr Sheehan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I really should not, but I will.

**Mr Sheehan:** It is important to point out that, when the chief executive of the PHA attended the Health Committee a few weeks ago, she initially told us that the modelling had been carried out by Ian Young, the Chief Scientific Adviser, and his team. She then recanted that for some reason. She said that the modelling estimated that the maximum number of positive cases would be 300 and that was the basis on which the PHA had recruited contact tracers. Now, we were getting 1,000 cases a day at that time. The numbers whom the PHA was thinking of recruiting were a serious underestimation, even for 300, but, given that we were getting 1,000 positive cases a day, as I said, the sums did not add up. It was a woeful underestimation of what was coming at us.

**Mr Lyons:** That is not a matter for the regulations that are before us today, but I appreciate the fact that the Member has raised the issue. I can inform him that Department of Health and PHA colleagues are working on options for contact tracing in Northern Ireland. Options are being considered, including a hybrid model with a focus on digital solutions to deliver early messages to contacts and cases that includes more advanced analytics to help to enable a more targeted input from expert health professionals to risk assess and deal with more complex cases, clusters and outbreaks. That work is being progressed at pace as we aim to optimise the current window afforded by the Executive's interventions and the consequential short-term impact expected on virus transmission. I hope that that is of some use to the Member today, but I do not doubt that he will find other avenues to raise this further. I understand the importance of the subject.

Gary Middleton rightly raised a number of issues, and I will answer one in particular about churches. I am proud of the fact that we have kept churches open in Northern Ireland, and I very much hope that that will continue to be the case. I understand the importance of worship to so many people. They want to be able to come together and worship, and corporate public worship is an important part of so many people's religion. I understand how important worship is for many older people in our society who do not have the interaction, perhaps, that others can have in the work environment. The Executive recognise the importance of that, and it is only right that churches remain open. I believe that churches are safe. If Members want to see an example of a church opening safely, they are more than welcome to come to my church. I extend that invitation, although there are many other reasons that Members might find it beneficial. It is important that we allow people to meet in that way and recognise the right of people to express their faith and religion.

Martina Anderson made comments about two of her friends who ended up in Altnagelvin. It brings home to us the fact that the virus is among us, it is real and it impacts on people whom we know. It is important that we recognise that. I will pick up on a couple of other points that she made. First, financial support for businesses is extremely important. The Executive are continually looking at the grants and support schemes that are available. I am concerned about the time that it takes to get money out. A number of colleagues have expressed similar concerns, and I have had many complaints from constituents. It should be an absolute priority for the Department of Finance because people do not have any other source of income. It is really important that the money gets to them as soon as possible. I hope that the Member is aware that the issue of payments to people who are self-isolating is also being considered.

Cara Hunter made comments about mental health. It is important that we recognise the impact on people in Northern Ireland. She also made comments about communication, which is important. We have ramped up communication well, and we need to continue to do that.

Mr Chambers made a number of comments. A theme throughout the contributions from the Ulster Unionist Party was the importance of listening to the experts. We have always said that we will listen to what the experts have to say and to the advice that they give. However, as Dr McBride and Professor Young have said,

they are there to advise; they are not the decision-makers. It is the Executive — the Ministers — who make decisions, and Dr McBride and Professor Young would not want it any other way. It is important that we do not look at this from a purely health point of view. In no way do I dismiss or downplay the importance of this as a health issue, but, as an Executive, we have a responsibility to look at the economy as a whole, to look at education and to look at all the other aspects of life that are so important. That is why we take the recommendations and listen to the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser and others, but we also have to listen to what other Ministers and stakeholders say. That is why none of this is easy. It all has to be done in the round.

I want to pick up on a few comments. One particular comment was from Sinead McLaughlin, who tried to portray our saying that we needed to live with the virus as being in some way irresponsible. She implied that, by saying that we need to live with the virus, we are saying, "Let it run rampant across the place, and we will just get on with things". We also heard that from Gerry Carroll. That is not what we mean at all, and I hope that the Member for Foyle recognises that. That is not what we want to happen. We are not throwing caution to the wind. What we mean when we say that we want to live with the virus is that we want to live with it and suppress it at the same time, which is, I believe, possible, if we make sure that mitigations are in place. We have done it in a number of sectors, and some sectors have really stepped up to the mark. Churches have stepped up to the mark. People are looking at how they can operate their businesses and hold the gatherings and events that they want to take place while making sure that they adhere to the basic science: social distancing, where possible; the wearing of face coverings; and good hygiene — all of those simple messages. How can we put in those protections so that we can make sure that businesses and life can carry on in as normal a way as possible? It is not sustainable, as Mrs Cameron and others said, to go in and out of lockdowns, interventions or whatever.

We have to look at how we can be COVID-secure. I thank the hospitality sector and the retail sector for the work that they have done on that so far and for looking at how they can improve standards in the businesses that they operate. We have to look at testing and tracing and at contact tracing, as Mr Sheehan mentioned. We need to look at what can be done to expand hospital capacity. We need to take all those things in the round, including

testing, and think about how can we take them and build them in to make sure that we are living with the virus. That is not to say that we do not think that it is real or we do not need to take proper precautions. I think that it is possible, and that is what we should want to do. I will touch more on that later.

Mr Butler raised a number of issues. I think that I covered what he said about the CMO and the CSA. It is not a matter of whether we trust them; it is about taking their advice along with everything else and coming to a solution to the problems that we face. I have endorsed what he said about churches as well. He said that children should be encouraged to wear a face covering on school buses. Whilst the evidence shows that masks can be important in confined settings such as indoors and on buses, we have not required them to be worn outdoors. Children waiting for the bus should maintain appropriate social distancing. That is the right thing to do at this moment in time.

We had a few more comments from other Members. Mr Nesbitt raised a common theme, which was that we should not listen to anybody other than the medical experts in the Department of Health. I have a lot of time and a lot of respect for our CMO and our CSA, but it is wrong for us to say to other medical professionals and other advisers, "If you are saying anything that is contrary to what we hear, we do not want to hear from you". We live in a free society, and I welcome the fact that other people want to contribute to the debate. They should have the right to contribute to the debate without being shut down. If we are convinced of the scientific evidence and of our position, we should welcome interactions with and interventions from other people. That is not something that we should be afraid of, and I do not want us to go down a route where people are censored because of what they have to say. That would be entirely the wrong route to go down.

Pat Catney made a number of comments about what is being planned by the Executive or what may come from the Executive. I do not know what is coming for the simple reason that, I think, the Executive are meeting now and I am here with you fine people instead. I am not able to provide him with any clarity on what may or may not be being discussed at this time. However, I have said that it is important that, whenever decisions are made, they are placed on the record in the Chamber and in this place.

Mr Allister raised points about the process. I have addressed those already and agree that this is not the way that we want to do things. I

agree with him wholeheartedly that we should not be afraid to hear other points of view.

Mr Carroll raised concerns about the process that we have here for the regulations that are coming in. He loves to have a go at Stormont and at the power, control and supposed secrecy that there is here, but it is Mr Carroll who wants an ever more powerful state that goes into every aspect of our life. That was evidenced by what he said today. I cannot understand his aversion to economic freedom and to people who want to do things for themselves and his continual rants about capitalism. There is not much more that can be said to that. Some people have said that others have tried to sectarianise COVID; it seems that Mr Carroll wants to bring in socialism at every opportunity as the solution to all of —.

**Mr Carroll:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Lyons:** We are probably going to hear the same old nonsense, but I will give way to him.

**Mr Carroll:** There is nothing wrong with wanting to expand the state, especially the NHS, as many people, including him, I am sure, clapped for it during the pandemic. That is certainly not my definition of socialism, and I am happy to give him a full definition of that some time in the Chamber if the Speaker allows.

**7.00 pm**

**Mr Lyons:** Of course, the Member does not want just to expand the NHS, does he? He wants more government control in every aspect of our lives. We have seen what socialism does, and I am happy to stand here and support economic freedom, because economic freedom is what brings prosperity to people. We have only to look at some of the regimes that he would support to see what socialism does.

**Mr Carroll:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Lyons:** The Member has nothing to say that is of any value or adds anything to this conversation.

**Mr Givan:** I thank the junior Minister for giving way. As he is addressing Mr Carroll, can he advise him that you are not meant to put your mask under your chin or touch it? You are meant to take the mask off appropriately, and he sends out a very dangerous message to the wider public in the way in which he is not wearing the mask appropriately.

**Mr Speaker:** We are getting to a point where this is starting to become a farce. Can we get back to business? I invite the junior Minister to conclude the debate.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It is important that we lead by example in this place.

Mr Carroll also mentioned Mr Wilson. As the Member of Parliament for East Antrim, Mr Wilson is free to express his views. It seems, however, that he lives rent-free in Mr Carroll's head. I advise Mr Carroll not to get caught up in what others say or do. It is not always good to be obsessed in that way.

I have missed out Mr Stalford. I agree with the points that he made and hope that I have answered his question in relation to the R number.

I want to acknowledge how difficult these regulations have been for so many people. For some, they are a minor nuisance or inconvenience, but I recognise that, for so many more, the regulations are having a major impact on their life. I understand that they are keeping people away from their families, having an as-yet-unquantified impact on people's well-being and causing huge uncertainty and worry for many about their jobs and businesses. Like many other Members, I have heard from those who have built up their businesses over many years and spent energy, effort and thousands of hours trying to build them up. Some have now depleted their savings and are worried about their survival. That is why it is so important that we do everything in our power to make sure that we get out of this cycle of lockdowns.

I am pleased to report that good progress has been made through our interaction with retail, hospitality, faith leaders, local government and key players to ensure that we can get to a place where we live with COVID in a way that does not require the type of intervention that the Assembly is discussing today. Whilst effective, the interventions are far too blunt a tool for the problem that we face. It is simple and straightforward to tell people to stay away from work, stay at home and not do the things that we are so used to doing. It is straightforward, but it is not realistic for us to do it any longer. We can and must do better, because there is so much at stake. However, it is only right that we acknowledge the sacrifice of so many. That sacrifice has paid off. I want to say thank you to the majority who abide by the rules. You have caused the R rate to fall. Transmission is falling, and hospital admissions are falling. It is

therefore inevitable that ICU admissions will fall, and deaths will fall, too.

It is certainly the case that, all too often, politicians and experts seem to bring a message of doom. It is certainly true that we find ourselves in a difficult time, and this is no time for complacency. However, I have no doubt that we will get beyond this difficult winter and that 2021 will be a much better year than 2020. We will get better at living with this, we will find a vaccine and life will get back to normal. However, in the meantime, we need to adapt, get smarter and get better so that we can live through COVID.

It is important that we recognise our healthcare professionals at this time. They are deserving of so much praise. Over the weekend, I spoke to a nurse who works in an ICU ward. It is really difficult for them. They are finding it tough. They are under strain. Having done their jobs so valiantly through the first wave, they are now under pressure once more. I am incredibly grateful for all that they have done. I know that it may sound trite and clichéd to say so, but I highlight that so that the public will be aware and so that those who are not taking it seriously might think twice. I say to them: your actions have an impact and could lead to increased pressure on our doctors and nurses, who are already getting it tight.

I am grateful for the contributions that Members made today. There is much for us to take away, not least on the process that we find ourselves going through today. If I have missed any issues in the debate, I will, of course, write to Members.

We all have a responsibility to curb the spread of the virus. The most important thing that we can say, and this is the advice that we are getting from our medical experts, is to do the simple things. It is about maintaining social distancing and good hand hygiene, wearing a face covering, self-isolating if we experience symptoms, downloading the app and complying with all the restrictions in place.

It is certainly the case that none of us likes these restrictions or wants them to be in place for any longer than they have to be, but we are informed that this is what we need to see happen at this time, so, reluctantly, I commend these regulations to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.*

### **Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**

**Mr Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

### **Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**

**Mr Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

### **Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**

**Mr Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Members. Please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

## **Private Members' Business**

### **Manufacturing Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Dr Aiken:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises the vital role played by our local manufacturing sector in sustaining and growing our economy; further recognises the huge pressures on our manufacturing sector during the COVID-19 pandemic; commends employers and workers in the manufacturing sector who continue to persevere in the most adverse of economic conditions, with limited financial support; notes with concern the potential job losses in the manufacturing sector; calls on the Minister for the Economy to detail the short- to medium-term support measures that will be put in place to support the manufacturing sector through the COVID-19 pandemic; and further calls on her to produce the long-overdue manufacturing strategy to help the long-term recovery of, and growth within, the sector.*

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

**Dr Aiken:** Before I enter into my remarks on the motion, I wish to express my sympathy with the 700 workers who will shortly lose their jobs with Caterpillar in Larne, and also those many manufacturing workers who have lost their jobs in the bus and coach building sector, aerospace, high-tech low-volume fabrication, the maritime outfitting and repair sectors, agribusiness support, and, indeed, all those who, until recently, supported what was a growing, agile and adaptive manufacturing base, which contributed about 14% of GDP and which has — I use the future tense — hopefully, to grow much larger, to 20% or even beyond, but can do so only if it is given the right support.

We first raised the issue three years ago, when, in the Assembly, we debated with the then Economy Minister, who has gone on to pastures new, that we needed to spend approximately 2% of R&D on manufacturing. We needed to seek angel seed funding, create a start-up nation culture and build on our acknowledged areas of global expertise; areas

that we could help to nurture to get us to that goal of 20% manufacturing. We then wanted a change in the culture of how Invest Northern Ireland focused on bringing business in, but needed to shift towards incubating small and medium-sized sectors to allow them to grow. We also wanted the economy to be fully driven by our greatest natural resource: our people. For that, rather than disinvesting in the higher and further education sectors, we needed to join with them to create that spark, desire and ecosystem of entrepreneurship that we had here at the turn of the last century.

That was when Belfast and its surrounding areas were an industrial and technological powerhouse. We had the combined push of academia, banking, business and politicians, who joined together to make Ulster the economic hub that it was. It was that synergy, which, quite frankly, did not come from politicians, that created a successful economy.

It came from those who were fully invested in what they were doing and were unafraid to make difficult choices and sacrifices. However, that spirit of entrepreneurship has been hindered rather than nurtured. With all the crises that our economy has faced, it has now been saddled with the twin impacts of COVID and an uncertain post-Brexit world.

### 7.15 pm

While much has changed in manufacturing over the past 100 years, with reductions in shipbuilding and the development of man-made fibres, machinery and machine tools, elements of manufacturing have remained, and, indeed, thrived. They have done that by understanding fully their markets, finding niche technologies that they can utilise, building on a skilled and adaptable workforce and tapping into a higher and further education sector that can refresh ideas. The fact that companies have managed to do that in the face of what, over the past decade or so, has been a studied disinterest from government in much of what they do, a banking sector that is more interested in fuelling property speculation, and a rating system, coupled with a monopolistic energy supplier, that has sapped the desire for growth, is testament to what they could, and should, achieve.

In reviewing what we asked for three years ago, it is worth reiterating the main points and asking whether they are still appropriate. Three years ago, in a cross-cutting manufacturing strategy, we asked for a commitment to provide investment funding for Northern Ireland

companies rather than a focus on FDI; the creation of a strategic investment culture that wants to invest for the long and medium term, rather than short-termism or, worse, subsidy mining; competitive energy prices with efficient utilities and an electricity market and regulator that works for the customer; the nurturing of our education sector, particularly by building our R&D base through helping to promote STEM, and to stop disinvesting in our universities; a longer-term commitment on derating and the simplifying and speeding up of planning rules and regulations; and, above all, the placing of prosperity based on manufacturing at the centre of our Programme for Government.

Regrettably, none of those objectives has been achieved, but we as a party would argue strongly that each of those issues remains germane, and, at the height of the COVID pandemic, even more appropriate. We are faced with a manufacturing industry that is disappearing, never to return, unless action is taken now. We need to take additional measures.

With the global downturn, we have to preserve as much as we can in some sectors, such as aerospace. That needs pressure from our Government to award contracts, especially from the Ministry of Defence, and to allow new and emerging areas of technology to be pushed ahead. We will also have to work closely with employers and unions to see if we can be more innovative in the use of business-support grants and loans.

We also need to change the culture of the Civil Service. The fact that the acting permanent secretary of the Economy Department thought that it is probably OK for some firms to fail because they would have failed anyway is beyond reprehensible. As we have said many times, right now, businesses need cash. They do not need more consultants to tell them the time with their own watch. They need help, and they need it now.

I also want to talk about the excluded and why it is important that we utilise some of the remaining half a billion pounds, which will go back to Treasury if we do not spend it, to help them. We all know who they are and why we need to help them. The question is this: what is holding the Department back? We have had eight months to build a support package for them, so why have we not done so?

We are also proposing a new Programme for Government for next April — a programme that, at best, has a year to run. Anyone who believes that we should be advocating another tome of

42 outcomes and hundreds of subclauses does not think that that is a good idea. As we attempt to pull ourselves back together, as our companies come out of the furlough period, we need to be able to work on that. We should go back to creating and delivering a strategy that works.

Minister, let us commit to putting our economy, especially our workers, first. Let us create a Programme for Government that has two or three deliverables that work, particularly towards the economy. Let us listen to our businesses, workers and unions, and, where we can, let us get cash and resources to those who need them. Let us try to help them rather than hinder them. I commend the motion to the House.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for tabling the motion. It is, of course, very timely given the fact of the huge blow to the jobs at Caterpillar and the fact that the debate follows on from the discussions regarding the regulations and the impact that the additional restrictions have had on the economy. It is timely and welcome that we can discuss our manufacturing industry.

Manufacturing must be at the forefront of rebuilding our economy in Northern Ireland post COVID-19. The manufacturing sector sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs right across our Province and many millions of pounds worth of extra economic activity in other sectors in the supply chain. It is clear that, when manufacturing grows, the whole economy grows with it. From food processing and pharmaceuticals to aeronautical technology and new and emerging tech, like artificial intelligence and machine learning, Northern Ireland punches well above its weight when it comes to producing world-class products and services.

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact, not only on our economy but on those across the globe. However, it has been heartening to see so many of our local companies, particularly in the manufacturing sector, innovating and adapting their production. Some 600 local manufacturers repurposed, in whole or in part, to meet the challenges of the public health emergency. They are to be congratulated on the way in which they have adapted. There are so many real examples out there of businesses that adapted and stepped up to the mark. The question that has to be asked — it has been asked by other commentators in the public domain — is this: if the manufacturing sector had not been there during the pandemic, where would we have been? I think that we would have been in a much more difficult place. The

sector stepped up when we needed it most. We need to develop and to build on that. We need to develop our local supply chains and government procurement to ensure that we can source our quality products in Northern Ireland. That will, of course, be of benefit to our health service, as we continue to coexist with the virus, and to our economy.

It is also important that the Executive and Economy Minister continue to look at ways to support the sector at this difficult time and in the short- and medium-term. It has been clear from the outset of this new Assembly that the Economy Minister has put manufacturing as one of her top four priorities. The Minister will, no doubt, play a leading role in trying to deliver higher-paying jobs, a highly skilled workforce and a more regionally balanced economy, which is, of course, important to us all. That will be a huge challenge. Prior to the extension of the furlough scheme, Manufacturing NI made it clear that one in three jobs in the manufacturing industry was at risk. That was at the end of October. Thankfully, furlough has been extended and there is a bit more safety there, but, again, we cannot get to that cliff edge over the next couple of months.

We acknowledge and support the idea and premise of a specific medium-term strategy for manufacturing in Northern Ireland. However, we also need to consider whether this would be better served in a wider, holistic approach to driving forward growth across all sectors, while creating synergies where appropriate. Other cross-departmental and, indeed, national issues will also need to be addressed. One such example, which I have raised before, is around the apprenticeship levy. We also need to look at how city deals can be harnessed to present new opportunities for support.

There are many strong advanced manufacturing and engineering opportunities that would help to support the future growth and development of the sector. We support a joined-up and UK-wide approach to supporting and getting the best from our manufacturing industries. Going forward, we want to support those emerging and growing sectors to innovate and drive growth.

Northern Ireland is a place of excellence in manufacturing and in research and development. That has, again, been demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Success requires innovation, and the Minister has made it clear that she will seek to help manufacturing businesses by investing in skills development, robotics and specialist machinery to allow the sector to maintain its



competitiveness and to grow. Of course, that is also a priority for us as a party.

**Dr Archibald:** I, too, welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. I also send my solidarity to the workers and families of those facing job losses at Caterpillar and other companies that have faced a similar fate recently.

The latest Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index (PMI) published today paints a bleak picture: it has the economy in the North contracting by 15% this year. That shows the scale of the economic challenge that we face as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis. The manufacturing sector here comprises many indigenous businesses that are highly innovative, employing thousands of people, and that, as well as playing a vital role in our local and island economy, have a strong export presence. The manufacturing sector is diverse, but all the businesses in it have been impacted negatively, to a greater or lesser extent, by COVID-19. Statistics published in September show a quarterly decrease in production of 14.9% and a decrease over the year of 22.2%. Some manufacturing businesses have faced vastly reduced demand, while others have faced consistent or even increased demands and had to deal with the necessary implementation of social distancing and hygiene measures.

In the short term, some supports have been provided to the sector in the form of direct job support from the British Treasury and the Executive. Those have been vital to prevent wide-scale job losses and business failures. The furlough scheme in particular has been crucial, and Mr Middleton highlighted its particular importance to the manufacturing sector. The official statistics on the job retention scheme published in October show that, of the total number of employees furloughed in the manufacturing sector, 63% were fully furloughed and only 37% were partially furloughed while working some hours. That shows the disastrous impact that ending the furlough scheme and moving to the job support scheme, which requires a minimum number of hours to be worked by employees, would have had on manufacturing, resulting in many, many redundancies. The extension of the furlough scheme until March is welcome, but it is due to be reviewed in January. It is vital that there is planning now to support sectors such as manufacturing that have a skilled workforce, because it is likely that, once demand begins to resume as the economy opens up, they will need those workers. We need to continue to make the case that, in line with the approach

adopted in other European states, they should be supported in keeping the connection with those workers and avoiding unnecessary redundancies.

The support from the Executive — the rates holiday and the inclusion of some small manufacturers in the business grant scheme — has also been crucial. However, I again make the case to the Minister that there are other small manufacturers that, simply due to the nature of their work, have larger premises and were therefore excluded from that support. I ask that she look again at providing some vital cash flow support to those small businesses.

As we all know, the fragility of global supply chains was laid bare at the beginning of the pandemic when we had difficulty securing PPE. At that time, local companies stepped up to the challenge and diversified their operations. In my constituency of East Derry, companies such as Paragon Health in Ballykelly, Hutchinson Engineering in Kilrea and Armstrong Medical in Coleraine are among those that have played an important role in supporting our health service and society in general through the production of PPE and other items. However, there is a barrier to those companies being awarded government contracts in that tenders are evaluated on price alone, meaning that those contracts will likely be awarded to companies in other countries where those products have traditionally been sourced, due to their lower prices because they have bigger economies of scale, with no consideration to the need for security of supply or the local economic recovery. That needs to be addressed to give those local companies that have successfully diversified the chance to be competitive in that process. Across this island, there are opportunities to collaborate and cooperate to develop a thriving sector that creates and sustains employment, so I ask the Minister to work with her Executive colleagues to address the issues with procurement.

Last year, looking to the medium term, Sinn Féin published its consultation document, 'Inclusive and Sustainable Growth', which proposes that economic development should be based on creating good jobs, improving productivity, addressing regional imbalances and decarbonising our economy. We advocate taking a sectoral approach that would see a mapping exercise of our economy for major sectors such as manufacturing, conducting an analysis of those sectors and their needs and developing an action plan for them. To achieve an effective action plan requires partnership working. We therefore propose the creation of sectoral partnerships involving industry,

academia, government and trade unions. Skills will play an important part in any economic strategy, and the skills strategy needs to be advanced alongside —

**Ms Dillon:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Archibald:** Yes, sure. Go ahead.

**7.30 pm**

**Ms Dillon:** On skills, does the Member agree that we need to encourage more women to go into the engineering and manufacturing industries?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Dr Archibald:** Thank you.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Just in time.

**Dr Archibald:** Just in time. Thanks, Linda.

I absolutely agree. Addressing diversity and increasing the uptake of STEM subjects by girls remain key. That is a hobby horse of mine. I could talk about it for quite some time, but I will move on.

In June, we published our economic recovery strategy, which proposes four principles for recovery: supporting workers and their families; supporting businesses to create and sustain jobs; a just transition through a green new deal; and giving the Executive the tools to resource recovery. The economic recovery strategy should link strategically with other Executive priorities and strategies, including, but certainly not limited to, major infrastructure projects, the anti-poverty strategy, skills development and, of course, climate action. It must have a focus on dealing with the outworkings of Brexit and building on the opportunities of an all-island economy.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I welcome the opportunity to support the motion. If anyone had forgotten that we have a crisis in manufacturing in Northern Ireland, the loss of 700 jobs at Caterpillar should remind them, in the worst possible way.

Any economy will struggle when it loses large numbers of manufacturing jobs; Northern Ireland's more than most. While our neighbours in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland have a largely service-based economy, we have not. We, to a much larger extent, are a manufacturing economy. More than 70% of

Northern Ireland's external sales are manufactured goods. That compares with less than half of exports for the UK as a whole.

We are facing new pressures in manufacturing. Much of our manufacturing is in food. Thanks to the politicians who misleadingly promoted Brexit, our food industry is facing a crisis of its own. Less than two months from the impact of a head-on crash, we do not even know the details of that crisis. It is essential that we focus increasingly on high-value manufacturing. We cannot compete on cost with all countries, but we must compete on quality. For businesses such as Caterpillar, and many other large and small manufacturers, success is based on skills, productivity and innovation. Those areas are where we have serious challenges.

My party realises that we have a real problem in our education system. While it provides a strong pipeline of grammar-school pupils who go on to university, many of them to Great Britain, never to return, it fails to inspire many pupils who do not go to a grammar school. The system fails to give confidence and aspiration to pupils who often have the potential to develop the practical skills needed by our manufacturers. If we are to build the skills needed for the future, we have to connect better with pupils who may feel alienated and discarded by the schools system. By doing better for those pupils, we will do better for our manufacturers, economy and society.

Strong skills feed into productivity, but productivity is about more than skills. It is also about innovation, and that is where the city deals come in. The SDLP has been pushing for and demanding those for many years, usually without the support of other parties. The city deals in Derry and Belfast can provide the innovation needed for a new generation of manufacturing. I hope, for example, that the Derry city deal will provide a manufacturing base for medical products and treatments. I hope that the Belfast city deal will provide an impetus for the capital city as a base for advanced manufacturing.

DUP members on the Economy Committee complained last week that, in standing up for my city, I was, in some way, doing down Belfast. I want both cities to be world class and successful.

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I would also like to see both cities doing well. However, I do not want to see Mid Ulster and everything between those two cities losing out.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you. I take your point absolutely. We are small, and we want all areas of Northern Ireland to rise together and to be successful as one.

We can be partners in progress, not in competition over the breadcrumbs. I hope that the city deals will provide an innovative basis for a new generation of manufacturing. However, we also need to invest massively and quickly in our infrastructure. Some of that will come from the public purse, but much of it will come from the private sector. Our road network is poor, which means that it takes longer to get goods to market. We need to improve our transport connectivity and our water network in order to enable new factory builds.

I urge Minister Dodds to accelerate progress on the energy strategy and the roll-out of the digital network. I also urge her to ensure that Invest NI works with local industry in order to enable businesses to exploit the opportunities from the Northern Ireland protocol. I have been told by some business leaders that there is an apparent reluctance by Invest NI to work with companies in order to seize any opportunities that may be created by our unique relationship with the EU and GB. This is not a time to be reluctant to work with any business.

There are new opportunities as well as new challenges. However, unless we work and look to the future and build, we are at risk of losing large numbers of well-paid jobs, particularly in our manufacturing sector, which has a very proud history of excellence and a proven track record in our region. Let us support and protect them.

**Mr Dickson:** I welcome the opportunity to speak about our manufacturing sector, because it has a vital part to play in our economy. I want to take the time to highlight those who work in it.

COVID-19 has had a major impact on all our lives. Back in March, much of society ground to a halt. That included much, but certainly not all, of the manufacturing sector. However, damage has also been done by the decreased demands for certain goods and the disruption of global supply chains. I commend our workers in the manufacturing sector, our trade unions and the businesses themselves. Despite challenging circumstances, they have helped to keep factories running and supply chains have proved more resilient as time has moved on, and I hope that the extension of the furlough

scheme will help to alleviate pressures on the sector. I just wish that it had not been announced at the eleventh hour.

The Health and Safety Executive has its part to play in advising on and enforcing health and safety at manufacturing sites, particularly, but not exclusively, in food processing, where a whole new level of additional safety measures had to be added because of COVID-19. We must ensure that that organisation is properly resourced.

I want to note, with sadness, the news coming out of Caterpillar in Larne last week. As referred to in an earlier discussion in the Chamber, the loss of 700 jobs, many of which will be in my constituency of East Antrim, is a devastating blow to workers and their families.

We are also aware of the concerns that surround Bombardier, which is one of Northern Ireland's key employers, supporting well-paid jobs not just in the Belfast region but across the Province. I am happy to see that Spirit AeroSystems has taken over the business, and I hope that that will secure an extremely valuable linchpin in our economy, because it employs so many from our constituencies.

Where do we go from here in supporting and expanding our manufacturing sector into the future? We need a direction, and that is where a manufacturing strategy comes in. I have previously asked the Minister questions on strategies, which we are waiting for the Department for the Economy to develop, including an industrial strategy, only to be told that work has stopped on them due to the need to respond to COVID-19. That is simply not acceptable. If anything, those long-term strategies are needed more than ever as part of the COVID-19 response in order to guide our way to recovery. I hope that the Minister will take note and will work with the Department in order to resume substantial work on an Executive-endorsed comprehensive and integrated strategy.

There are so many opportunities out there for manufacturing in Northern Ireland, especially with green and advanced manufacturing opportunities. We need a Minister and the wider Executive to press for a UK-wide revolution in green technologies funding, and we need to fully energise that sector.

The business support interventions that we are making now should not be haphazard and reactionary. They should be planned and visionary, and we should be using them to achieve coherent goals in rebuilding our

economy. Manufacturing, with the well-paid and skilled jobs that it brings, has the potential to build and support our supply chains, which have to be a key part in all of this.

Finally, I want to note what might be described as the elephant in the room: Brexit. Brexit is very unlikely to be positive for our local manufacturing industries, so I find it strange that it has not been noted in the motion. The protocol itself is a response to the regrettable decision of the United Kingdom Government to pursue a hard Brexit and cut themselves off from our closest trading partners and our biggest single market. It is not perfect, but it is better than a hard border. The Executive need to push the UK Government and the EU to negotiate a comprehensive agreement with the lightest of touch and checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea. This can be done. In the meantime, our Minister needs to get on with implementing those parts of the protocol that fall within her Department, producing strategies to meet the challenges that COVID-19 and Brexit bring to our manufacturing sector. These are challenging times indeed. We now have less than two months.

**Mr Dunne:** Our manufacturing sector has been the very backbone of our economy for many years. With our mixture of a very highly skilled, innovative and educated workforce and a rich industrial and entrepreneurial heritage, we have a very proud and capable sector that we all want to see develop and be more competitive in the future. The manufacturing sector, like almost every other sector, has been heavily impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While the strategy is important, now is the time to ensure that the Economy Department is able to be responsive and agile to the opportunities and challenges facing this sector, such as we heard today with the loss of jobs at Caterpillar.

The motion rightly commends employers and workers within the manufacturing sector who have continued to work through the many challenges facing us, not least the very many who are unable to work remotely from their normal workplace due to the nature of their work. The recently completed acquisition of Bombardier by Spirit AeroSystems brings some reason for optimism for this long-established and valued company by safeguarding its significant employment of over 3,000 employees right across Northern Ireland.

Manufacturing supports many jobs right through the supply chain, from those who service the equipment and supply components to the delivery services and the many subcontractors supported by the sector. Creating the right

conditions to improve our economic competitiveness and building on our export markets are key to truly developing this sector. Invest NI must continue to support our local manufacturers in the European and global markets. This is rightly a focus of the 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' medium-term plan that our Minister published in June. The Economy Minister and I recently visited the Denroy Group in Bangor. I was delighted that, only three weeks ago, it announced a recruitment drive for 120 staff over the next six months. The Denroy Group has demonstrated its ability to diversify within its business with the production of innovative masks for the health sector. It is a very valuable local employer in my North Down constituency.

I welcome the planned city deals and growth deals that were mentioned earlier. That investment in a number of advanced manufacturing projects will be most welcome. The projects envisage investment in excess of £130 million right across Northern Ireland. I know that a significant amount of work has been done and is ongoing with our local councils to ensure delivery of these exciting and innovative projects.

Developing skills and apprenticeships for our young people through our universities and colleges is vital to a sustainable future and to ensuring that the right skills are in place for employers.

#### 7.45 pm

There are also significant opportunities for research and development and for the development of new products and equipment right across the manufacturing sectors, including our agri-food sector, our aerospace and defence industries and the quarrying sector, which is also a significant employer. It is worth remembering that 70% of manufacturing happens outside Belfast, and that highlights the regional spread of the manufacturing sector throughout Northern Ireland.

Some of the key challenges facing our manufacturing sector include energy costs, rates, relatively high wages and having to compete in a very high quality and competitive global market. We also need to get, as has been mentioned, the right infrastructure and connectivity in place by investing in our roads and in the rest of our transport network and by ensuring that Northern Ireland is digitally connected to the rest of the world through greater broadband and better mobile phone coverage, particularly in rural areas.

I know that the Minister very much recognises the value of our local manufacturing sector, and I know that she will continue to ensure that it gets the support that it requires to allow it to grow and become even more competitive in the future.

**Ms Dillon:** Members will not be surprised to hear that this is an issue of great concern to me. I am sure that the Minister will not be surprised either, because I have raised it on a number of occasions. I have pointed out that the engineering and manufacturing industry needs to be supported — not it alone — during this particularly difficult time, but there also needs to be a sustainable and future-proofed economic strategy across all our sectors, and it needs to happen through proper consultation and working closely with businesses. No Minister, no civil servant and no one in Invest NI has a complete understanding of what each sector requires in order to get the most out of its business, and we are strangling our economy by not engaging appropriately with those sectors.

Mid Ulster District Council took a very proactive approach by engaging with all sectors in developing the economic development plan for the district. In fact, one of my very first engagements as the first chairperson of the new Mid Ulster District Council in 2015 was to launch the economic development plan. We did that here in Parliament Buildings in the Long Gallery, because we recognised the need to be part of an economic strategy coming from the Department in conjunction with all other Departments.

A healthy economy creates a healthy society with better education and life outcomes. The Department could do worse than to take a leaf out of Mid Ulster District Council's book on the best way in which to do that, because the council has engaged with sectors to establish how it can best support and develop the businesses. It has also engaged with the schools and further education colleges to ensure that the skills required by businesses are being developed and supported. Our MP, Francie Molloy, has led a campaign to call for an engineering centre of excellence in mid-Ulster, and that would massively —

**Ms Sheerin:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Dillon:** Yes.

**Ms Sheerin:** I have written to the Minister about this, but does the Member agree with me that we should use the skills barometer for the skills

strategy and include a centre of excellence for engineering in mid-Ulster as part of our strategy?

**Ms Dillon:** Absolutely.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Ms Dillon:** Go raibh maith agat. It would future-proof the skills base and provide good and well-paid jobs, and it is something that the industry has said that it would welcome and that it needs.

Businesses, educationalists and the council have worked together to achieve the best possible economic strategy for the council district. I have had good feedback on the Department's apprenticeship recovery programme from those in the industry and from training providers. The model of engaging with industry and academia partners clearly works well, and I encourage the Minister to use models of best practice when developing a future skills strategy.

We tabled an amendment to the motion on the need to improve infrastructure as part of the economic strategy. Although the amendment was not accepted by the Speaker's Office, I call on the Minister to address that issue as part of her response to the motion.

The council, the MP and the MLAs have again had to be the driving force in delivering this in our constituency, and although we are happy to do this, and it is our job to do so, it would be a much easier task if there were an effective overall strategy to link up with. The council has had to provide business parks where Invest NI has failed to do so, and we have had to fight to get power supply for expanding businesses.

One of the identified key constraints stifling the economic growth of mid-Ulster is the lack of industrial and economic lands for growing businesses. The problem is particularly acute in Dungannon and can be clearly demonstrated in Granville industrial estate, one of the busiest and most economically successful of its kind across the North. The lack of service sites in mid-Ulster has a significant impact on the ability of operating businesses to grow and deliver investment and job creation in the local area.

Invest NI needs to take forward the development of new sites urgently to address business need in mid-Ulster. I can cite examples of businesses being advised to move their premises to Belfast if they needed

additional power supply, better broadband or bigger premises. It is simply not an acceptable strategy to move businesses out of an area where they have a skilled workforce and their suppliers are based.

I ask the Minister to work with her Executive colleague Nichola Mallon on that point, as it is recognised that there is a need for significant investment in mid-Ulster's road infrastructure; for example, in progressing the Cookstown and Dungannon bypasses. Infrastructure is the essential foundation for businesses to deliver employment, growth and economic prosperity. The area boasts a world-class, high-growth cluster that manufactures at least 40% of the world's mobile-crushing and screening equipment. That cluster needs to be protected, supported and developed.

Manufacturing has been identified as a sector with a higher risk of pandemic-related recession, and large numbers of staff have been furloughed or laid off. Therefore, immediate and direct intervention is critical. We have asked DFE to take the lead in establishing a mid-Ulster manufacturing task force comprising key public and private stakeholders to protect the sector's economic and employment base.

We have the largest business base outside Belfast, and the area is recognised as the entrepreneurial capital of the North for business starts. Mid-Ulster has higher productivity per head than the average figure for the North. Given the importance and contribution of mid-Ulster to the economy, Mid Ulster District Council believes that Invest NI should establish an office presence in the area, particularly at a time when businesses of all sizes face unprecedented challenges from COVID-19 and Brexit. I commend the businesses in mid-Ulster for working with us to keep their businesses there. I call on the Department to give them the required support, which has been sadly lacking to date.

Several Members spoke about R&D and its importance. My question is this: where will the support for R&D come from in the absence of European funding? I have heard nothing to give me confidence that that support will be replaced.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members, I want to raise two points. First, during his contribution, Mr Dunne was not near a microphone. I think that it will be recorded in Hansard, Gordon, but I do not know if it will be on the audio. Could Members who participate in

debates make sure that they are near a microphone?

Secondly, earlier in the proceedings, Mr Deputy Speaker Beggs reprimanded Ms Pam Cameron for veering quite close to questioning whether the Speaker was right in refusing to accept an amendment. I am sure that the Member was not questioning the Speaker's judgement on the amendment. I know that she would not do that, but she came a bit close to the wire.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am sorry that Mr Dunne's contribution was not recorded for posterity.

Looking at the notes on the debate, I asked myself, "What is manufacturing? What is that sector?". It is easier to say what is not manufacturing than what is manufacturing. That is because our economy is very reliant on large, medium and small manufacturing plants. I joined the Committee for the Economy this term. It is my first term on it, and I have found it very interesting. However, some of the strategies that have been brought forward are very high level. Many of our manufacturing businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises, and I often ask myself, "What has that policy or strategy got to do with the work that is going on in companies that employ 20 to 50 people?". Those companies may have started with a couple of people working in a shed and have developed into manufacturing businesses, some of which are exporting. I often wonder whether the strategies that we bring forward are of any relevance to those people. One of the points that I make constantly to the Department — I make it again to the Minister — is that our strategies have to be relevant to the employers and employees out there. As I said, sometimes they are not.

My colleague Linda referred to Invest NI. To many small and medium-sized enterprises, Invest NI is a Belfast-based promotional company with which they have no relationship. Despite reaching out to Invest NI or trying their best to engage with it, they always run into barriers. Invest NI will tell them many reasons why they are not relevant to its strategies, but those companies then feel alienated and will perhaps turn their back on the opportunities that, perhaps, exist. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that any strategies that are brought forward, particularly by Invest NI, are made relevant to where the jobs are.

The economy is changing. The global economy has taken a massive hit as a result of COVID-19. Foreign direct investment will not be as readily available as it once was, and we have to protect what we have. We have to protect and

invest in the small and medium enterprises that we have while the global economy stabilises and we all work out what direction it is going in. The new American Administration will have a different attitude from the previous one on global trading. They will have to establish relationships with China and all the other major global players. Let us make sure that we are well placed. To be well placed, you have to have the proper skills in place.

I welcome the skills strategy that has come forward. It has been warmly welcomed by our colleges, in particular, and our employers. It has to be relevant to our employers and employees. Our colleges can be the poor relations of our universities. A lot of that is to do with the perception of what is a good job or career. As I said, many of our small manufacturers have developed from three or four people working together to become companies that employ 20, 40 or 50 people and could be involved in exporting. We need to promote the courses that are available in our colleges, whether they are engineering or manufacturing courses. We need to promote those as being worthwhile careers. We also have to give our colleges the ability to react to a changing economy. The Economy Committee has heard reports that our colleges feel constrained by, strangely enough, the number of awarding bodies out there — I think that there are 60 or 70. Our colleges cannot respond quickly to the changing dynamics of our economy. That is particularly relevant in mid-Ulster and my constituency, which are crying out for engineers, manufacturers, welders and all the people those companies need to build the equipment that we export across the world.

I appeal to the Minister to ensure that our colleges are given the freedom to react quickly to the changes in the economy, that we promote the trades that are needed in our manufacturing industry and that Invest NI is relevant to all our businesses and is not seen as a body that operates in Belfast and does trips around the world. If we bring all those points together, we will ensure that our manufacturing industry moves forward successfully.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I was enjoying the Member's contribution so much that I did not realise that he had gone over time.

**Mr Catney:** I thank Mr Stewart, Dr Aiken and Mr Robbie Butler for tabling the motion. Robbie will know of the great manufacturing tradition that we are lucky to have in my area, going back to our linen industry, which was famous all over the world. Lisburn was built on

manufacturing. Many families owe their livelihood to it. It is an industry that has worked hard through the burning of Lisburn, the terrible impact of the Troubles and the economic uncertainty that we have faced over the past number of years. Now, COVID presents a new danger. It has an impact on supply lines, which reduces the availability of raw materials. It restricts manufacturing processes, as workers are unable to come together as they used to in a safe way, and it impacts on demand as end users are not operating or do not have the same opportunities to buy as they used to.

Many manufacturers have been able to adapt, be that in how they operate to allow business to continue while keeping workers safe or how they have adapted to make in-demand products, such as PPE, which has already been mentioned. When our supply chains for those vital products were less than certain, the innovation and willingness of those companies to change quickly was incredible. I have spoken to many companies that were uncertain of how they should best act and am extremely glad that they did.

#### 8.00 pm

However, there are many who, due to the nature of their business, have not been able to operate, while not being able to avail themselves of some of the support put forward by the Executive. We already have too many job losses, but what scares me is not only the immediate impact of this pandemic but that the recession that will follow will cast a shadow far into 2021 and beyond. Any failure to act will lead to countless more job losses in the future — jobs of highly skilled workers that, I fear, we will never get back.

That could be compounded by our restrictions on being able to spend on capital public projects, which many manufacturers rely on. That is why it is clear that a robust support package must be put in place for the industry. I say "the industry", but, of course, our manufacturing industry is extremely varied, and any support packages must take that into account. We cannot make the mistake again of announcing support packages with gaps that leave out certain businesses and certain employers. The Minister for the Economy must speak to the industry. I know that you have done, and I know that you will engage, Minister.

The main pressures for the coming year must be identified, and support must be put in place on that basis. I know from speaking to many businesses that they are willing to work with us and to adapt as best they can, but that is

impossible without support. We also need to be clear that difficulties for the manufacturing industry existed before COVID and will exist long after. Ministers and MLAs are very good at attending photo opportunities at the opening of new businesses, but that rings hollow if we cannot come up with a long-term strategy to grow the sector. We need a plan to grow our skilled worker base, to build the infrastructure and broadband capabilities and to facilitate the sector, and we need to look ahead to new technologies and new areas like green manufacturing that can future-proof our industries while protecting workers, their livelihoods and their world-class skills.

**Mr Chambers:** It feels a bit like Groundhog Day. My mind goes back to 6 June 2016, which was quite a historic day in that the first formal opposition motion was brought to this Chamber since 1972. It was supported by Mr Allister, the SDLP, Alliance and the Ulster Unionist Party. It was also the first motion brought in during that mandate. It called on the then Minister for the Economy, Simon Hamilton, to commission a manufacturing strategy.

The economy of Northern Ireland — indeed, as I have to reference, that of Belfast, as well — really was built on heavy manufacturing. As a proud son of east Belfast, I remember places like the ropeworks, Shorts, Sirocco Works, the Tab factory, Mackie's, Harland and Wolff and many manufacturers of linen products. I also remember watching thousands of men on cycles coming up the street where I lived, every night, as they came home from work at the shipyard. That was them coming home only to one part of Belfast; that must have been replicated throughout Belfast. Those big hitters spawned a number of smaller manufacturing units that supplied the big boys with components. Some of them were based in barns and were in tin huts up back alleyways, but they were feeding off the big manufacturing companies and were providing employment. Maybe that was for small numbers of people, but, nonetheless, it was employment.

In 2015, there were over 85,000 direct jobs in the manufacturing sector, 10% of Northern Ireland's total employment at that point. In 2019, 1,790 jobs were lost in the manufacturing sector, which represented 59% of all job losses in Northern Ireland in that year. Wrightbus was a jewel in our manufacturing crown, and that lost 1,200 employees in 2019. It is easy to dismiss all those figures as mere statistics, but what are the stories behind the statistics? They are breadwinners. They are providing for families. They are paying off mortgages. They are providing a quality of life for their family.

They have lost that, and who suffers? It is not only the breadwinner in the family but the small corner shop, the bakeries and — dare I say it?— even the pubs suffer on payday when jobs are lost.

More importantly, it is also about the loss of skills, which we cannot afford to lose, but we do. When those places close, the skills go with them. Engineering skills were traditionally passed on over generations, and all that has gone. Shipyard workers and other manufacturing workers may not have been well educated, but they could solve any engineering problem that was put in front of them.

Was an opportunity lost in June 2016 when Sinn Féin and the DUP voted down a proposed manufacturing strategy, preferring to bury it in an all-embracing economy strategy? Where is that strategy today? I have looked at the transcript of that debate, and Simon Hamilton said:

*"There is something of a perception that Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector is in the doldrums." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p46, col 1].*

Maybe he was implying that our motion suggested that, but that was certainly not the case. My party wanted to increase the manufacturing sector's contribution to the economy. My party feels that, if the strategy had been put in place at that time, we may not have avoided some of the job losses but we would have been better placed to confront the job losses and do something about it. Simon said:

*"I would not for a second suggest that the sector is not challenged, but it is not in the crisis that some suggest." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p46, col 1].*

The sector is now heading into a crisis. I have to acknowledge that there are lots of manufacturing companies all over the country that are doing really well and providing good employment. However, manufacturing is in a little bit of a crisis. Simon also said:

*"Our region's strong manufacturing heritage remains intact". — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p47, col 2].*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, the Member's time is up.

**Mr Chambers:** OK. Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.



**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** I have listened with interest to the debate today and welcome this opportunity to respond. I will start, as I did earlier in the Chamber today, by saying how disappointed I was to learn last week that Caterpillar is considering transferring some of its Larne-based operations out of Northern Ireland, with a potential loss of 700 jobs. Any redundancies that may arise from this announcement are deeply regrettable and, of course, devastating for the individuals and families involved. I know that the House will agree with me on this issue.

However, I have confidence in Northern Ireland's capabilities and that the Caterpillar operation will continue to be a key contributor to the manufacturing and engineering base here. Invest NI and the relevant Departments will work with the management and staff who have been affected to provide the appropriate support. We hope that we can work with Caterpillar globally to look at its footprint across the world to see whether other operations could come to Northern Ireland.

The manufacturing sector remains at the very heart of business and industry here, generating around £6.4 billion to the local economy and accounting for over 11% of employees. This has been a challenging time for our business community, and I am proud of the perseverance and resilience displayed throughout the crisis, particularly in the manufacturing sector where many businesses have innovated and pivoted to continue to succeed in these difficult times. My colleague Gordon Dunne referred to our visit to Denroy, and that company is an inspiring example of innovation in the face of the COVID challenge. There are other examples such as Huhtamaki and Bloc Blinds, and there many other companies across Northern Ireland that have responded in these challenging and difficult times.

Manufacturing will continue to play a significant role in the Northern Ireland economy. It will be a key sector in driving our economic recovery. Its success remains a priority for my Department. That said, I fully recognise the pressures that face the sector at present. The level of support put in place to assist businesses, including those in the manufacturing sector, by the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive is unprecedented. The support ranges from government furlough and self-employment support schemes to the business support grant schemes and rates holiday delivered by the Executive. Over 42,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector have been supported by the furlough scheme, almost half of which are in the eligible sector.

**A Member:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** I am sorry. I have a lot to get through, and I want to respond to a lot of the comments that were made.

Around 2,000 self-employed workers in the industry have availed themselves of the second self-employment income support scheme.

I am aware that many firms are reporting lower demand — that is despite the fact that demand was up in the weeks prior to the circuit breaker — and describing the impact that this is having on workers returning from furlough. Therefore, I welcome the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement that he will extend the job retention and self-employed schemes until March 2021 and April 2021 respectively. Executive colleagues and I have been calling for those schemes to be extended. This decision will continue to protect jobs and livelihoods in the months to come. It is particularly important for sectors such as manufacturing that have difficult to replace skills. It is important to retain those skills until the markets recover, which they will.

At least 65% of all manufacturing businesses were eligible for support under the £10,000 business support grant or the £5,000 microbusiness hardship fund. As well as the business rates holiday for part of the year, our manufacturers benefit each year from industrial derating, which is normally worth around £60 million to the sector. Indeed, I would support an extension of this for the remainder of the year as an important means of delivering immediate help to the sector.

My Department has also identified — in many cases, it now delivers — a range of schemes to assist manufacturing businesses to adapt to the combined challenges of COVID-19 and EU exit. The schemes support innovation; apprenticeships; skills; supply chains; product resilience and diversification; access to finance for early-stage businesses; and business and financial planning. My Department continues to look at what further interventions may be necessary to assist Northern Ireland businesses, including those in the manufacturing sector, to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

Recently, I met with companies in the aerospace sector, mainly those in the supply chain of the larger aerospace companies here. I have asked my officials to explore with that sector what can be done to increase the help that it gets. It has been hit so significantly by COVID-19 that it will require a significant tail of

help to recover from the pandemic. I agree with the proposer of the motion that further financial support and the better procurement of defence contracts would be of immediate help to the aerospace sector, where many of our companies carry out a dual role.

I also welcome the planned city and growth deal investment in a number of advanced manufacturing projects. The projects envisage investment in excess of £130 million across Northern Ireland. They present a real opportunity to significantly scale up capabilities and increase the profile of manufacturing across the UK and make Northern Ireland a powerhouse of advanced manufacturing. That is where I see the possibility and, indeed, every opportunity for those great companies in mid-Ulster, for example, to take advantage of the growth deal. There is around £260 million in that particular growth deal, and much of it will be used to help manufacturing and infrastructure.

I have also been working with the AERA Minister to advance the agri-food sector, identifying need and driving forward the industry in the face of the twin challenges of Brexit and COVID. I will say to my colleague from Londonderry that helping the agri-food sector with those challenges has nothing to do with the promotion of Brexit, which I see as a valid democratic choice by people, but has everything to do with the promotion of the protocol, which will significantly impact and act as a barrier between us and those companies and their main market in the rest of the United Kingdom.

### **8.15 pm**

It is my view that there is no need for a stand-alone manufacturing strategy. Manufacturing is a key component of the Northern Ireland economy. Indeed, I identified advanced manufacturing as a key growth area in my 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' document. While I appreciated Mr Chambers's amble through the 2016 debate, the reality is that, in the midst of a COVID pandemic, we have to take specific actions in the here and now alongside building the strategies that will help to move us forward.

I, along with Executive colleagues, am doing all that I can to address the significant challenges that COVID-19 continues to present to our economy. It is a very quickly evolving situation, and we must retain maximum flexibility in order to adapt to the frequent changes in the virus spread and the public health advice. As I said, we must also find a way of living with the virus

that negates this cycle of lockdown, which costs jobs and businesses.

It is reckoned that the four-week restrictions on the Northern Ireland economy will have a hit on output of around £400 million. As the Chair of the Economy Committee indicated, that hit to output overall in Northern Ireland across the year is around 15%. The whole economy, not just manufacturing, will find itself in an incredibly significant and difficult situation. The best way that government can help is to create an open and free economy and environment that supports technology and enables manufacturing companies to move forward with policies and support that are tailored to their specific needs and, indeed, to the needs of the whole economy.

I also recognise the importance of supporting companies to invest in research and development and innovation. Companies that innovate are more productive, more resilient in a crisis and more likely to grow. Our innovation accreditation scheme has so far helped over 500 firms to proactively assess their innovation capability and to access interventions that can help them to improve their innovation performance.

We are seeing a significant increase in companies seeking to bring forward R&D projects through Invest NI's grant for innovations and innovation vouchers. They are an excellent way to help small companies to access research capabilities from universities and colleges.

Work is ongoing in my Department, Invest NI and MATRIX, which is the Northern Ireland science industry panel, to develop the medium- and long-term steps that are necessary for recovery from the challenge of COVID-19 and for return to growth. Advanced manufacturing, materials and engineering are critical to that strategic policy.

In June, I published 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', which provides a framework for how we can build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy that delivers higher-paying jobs. It recognises that, in addition to skills, there must be a focus on high-potential sectors, including advanced manufacturing. Building on that work, a new economic strategy will recognise the significance of manufacturing to the local economy and will set a clear direction for ensuring that the full range of appropriate policy instruments are in place to support the sector. Those include a pipeline of talent to meet the skills that are needed in the sector now and in the future; investment in economic

infrastructure; a supportive environment for innovation and research and development; business growth; and support measures with assistance from market development and exporting. Supporting those enablers is even more important in the wake of COVID-19.

I agree that economic recovery, and recovery for the manufacturing sector, is not just for the Department for the Economy but for all the Departments right across the Executive. The Department for Infrastructure will be key to that. Road and rail connectivity are key enablers of economic growth, but so too is digital connectivity, and I am happy to report that the procurement for Project Stratum is almost complete and ready to launch. That will be a key enabler of competitiveness for the whole economy, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland, in the years to come.

Rebuilding our economy will be possible only if we accept that more needs to be done. I will of course be making further representations to our Government for further support measures for the economy in the wake of Brexit. I outlined some of those challenges earlier today.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and assure the House that I am committed to supporting our businesses and our citizens through this very difficult time. The spirit and tone of this debate will be welcomed by those listening. I look forward to working with you all in the next number of weeks and months to ensure that our economy is on the best possible footing that we can make it, so that we can help people with the challenges that they face.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Roy Beggs to wind up the debate and conclude on the motion. He has 10 minutes.

**Mr Beggs:** Local manufacturing has a vital role to play. As others have indicated, there has been growth in the service sector and in digital technology, but we should not forget about the importance of manufacturing strategies and the manufacturing sector.

Diversity brings about increased security. We should not put all our eggs in one basket. My East Antrim constituency has suffered particularly, along with the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area, with the loss of a significant number of manufacturing jobs over the past years. Many Members mentioned Caterpillar, where approximately 2,000 jobs have been lost over the past decade. Schrader Electronics has closed its base in Carrickfergus. At one stage, there were 400 jobs there but, in

the end, the 270 remaining jobs were recently announced as losses or transfers to its other plant. There were also losses at Michelin, JTI and Wrightbus. Thankfully, a business is growing again from the ashes of Wrightbus, and I hope that it prospers.

All of that shows me that there is a need for a manufacturing strategy to help sustain and grow businesses. We need to address what government can do to assist. The motion talks about looking at what we can do in the short term, as well as what might happen in the longer term. It also indicates the importance of manufacturing and the pressures that are on it during this time of COVID.

I acknowledge that there has been, thankfully, a reprieve for many who might otherwise have experienced redundancy, with the Chancellor announcing just recently a more flexible and continuing furlough scheme. It is regrettable that it came so very late, and some may even have lost their jobs, although I hope that the opportunity to engage in the scheme will not have been lost. It is important that we keep work teams together in the hope that we can get through this and that manufacturing, and business generally, can continue.

There has been huge pressure on our businesses during COVID. Many businesses had to shut down until appropriate mitigation could be put in to protect workers. That has resulted in a loss of efficiency, in some instances, but it has allowed the businesses to continue. I thank the Health and Safety Executive for the guidance it gave during that period, allowing significantly safer working practices to be adopted.

Businesses have experienced disruption to their supply base. Just today, I was talking to a local retailer, and he indicated that there are still difficulties in sourcing some supplies. It is strange how, if it is missing, even one small component can shut down a production line. That particularly adversely affects the car industry, with its lean manufacturing and just-in-time manufacturing. It is important that everyone stay afloat and be aware of the difficulties and that delays can cost.

In reference to that, Steve Aiken and Stewart Dickson mentioned the dangers of Brexit. Equally, delays in the movement of goods either coming into Northern Ireland or being exported to our main market, whether that be Great Britain or other parts of the EU, will significantly adversely affect our businesses. I hope that Members will take the issue seriously and stop grandstanding about the argument

over whether Brexit was right or wrong. It is coming on 1 January, and we have to learn to live with it.

In case some Members have not seen it, I draw their attention to a report out just last week from the National Audit Office titled 'The UK border: preparedness for the end of the transition period'. There are some very concerning comments in it about how we are really not prepared for it. The report states that implementing the protocol is very high risk because of the scale and changes required and the time available. It adds:

*"The government has left itself little time to mobilise its new Trader Support Service (TSS) and there is still a high risk that traders will not be ready."*

To get you used to it, some of the new terminology includes "goods vehicle movement service" (GVMS), "customs declaration service" (CDS), "trader support service" (TSS), and "customs handling of import and export freight" (CHIEF). That is what businesses have to learn to live with, and the sooner that we make their life easier, the better. I hope that all sides will stop grandstanding and lobby the UK Government and the EU for a reasonable accommodation so that our economy can continue here and fewer businesses will experience difficulties.

I now turn to comments made by Members during the debate. I welcome the general and widespread recognition expressed from all sides of the importance of the manufacturing industry. I noted at the end the Minister voicing her opposition to a manufacturing strategy. Given the recent loss of manufacturing jobs and the pressures on the industry, I was surprised to hear that. I hope, however, that all other Members will recognise the importance of the manufacturing industry and support the motion.

Sinead McLaughlin and Gordon Dunne highlighted the importance of city deals and how they might encourage innovation. Indeed, the Minister highlighted the importance of innovation, R&D and the new innovation vouchers that are available. It is important that there be research and development and an improvement in what our companies produce in order that we can sustain employment in the long term.

A number of Members mentioned the fragility of the supply chain during COVID. Caoimhe Archibald, Gary Middleton, Gordon Dunne and Pat Catney all highlighted the fragility that was there, but they also highlighted the flexibility

that the manufacturing industry showed and the entrepreneurial spirit that is still there. They spoke about how many of the businesses turned to meeting the urgent health needs of the country by providing vital services and producing vital products to help us battle COVID. There is much that can be done, and I welcome the fact that industry was flexible and able to improve.

Other Members made a range of comments during the debate. Steve Aiken highlighted his disappointment at the fact that many of the valid points that were raised three years ago are still valid today and have not been addressed. Admittedly, Ministers were not in place for much of that period, but for probably about a year of it they were. The rest of the time, it was civil servants. It is disappointing that we still need to speed up planning decisions, that manufacturing is still not the centre of policy and that we still need a strategy to encourage investment.

A number of Members highlighted aviation in particular. It has certainly been one of our blue-ribbon sectors and has brought high-value employment and jobs. Many supporting companies feed into its supply chains, and its products are made to a very high standard. There is, generally, good value, good money and good employment. It is important that that continues into the future. As Steve suggested, perhaps the defence industry should look at how it could sustain local aviation, so that, when the cycle moves round and demand grows again, those skills and jobs are still there and can respond. It is important that that is the case.

Members made other valid points that were worthy of mention. There are hundreds of thousands of jobs directly in manufacturing. Equally, many others are involved in its supply chains, and there is a knock-on effect for those businesses.

I see that time rolls on, so I will draw my comments to a close. Regrettably, there have already been significant job losses in manufacturing, so it is important that we protect the remaining jobs. I hope that the Assembly will back our motion to do so. I hope that those who oppose it have the grace to do so quietly and allow the motion to be passed. It is important that we support the manufacturing industry. I hope that Members will support the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises the vital role played by our local manufacturing sector in sustaining and growing our economy; further recognises the huge pressures on our manufacturing sector during the COVID-19 pandemic; commends employers and workers in the manufacturing sector who continue to persevere in the most adverse of economic conditions, with limited financial support; notes with concern the potential job losses in the manufacturing sector; calls on the Minister for the Economy to detail the short- to medium-term support measures that will be put in place to support the manufacturing sector through the COVID-19 pandemic; and further calls on her to produce the long-overdue manufacturing strategy to help the long-term recovery of, and growth within, the sector.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Your prayer was answered: the Ayes have it. Given some of the rumours that were circulating in the Building, Members will be delighted to know that the next item on the agenda is the Adjournment.

*Adjourned at 8.32 pm.*

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