



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 November 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we commence today's business, I want to take the opportunity to remind Members about our procedures and conventions on Speaker's decisions, particularly that Speaker's decisions are final and that it is not in order to challenge them.

Over the last few months, we have seen a significant increase in requests from Members, especially, for questions for urgent oral answer and amendments. I do not take those decisions lightly and can assure Members that, since we returned in January, I have spent many hours with officials considering all those matters. I take account of a wide range of factors, including the criteria, the level of business in the House and the other opportunities that Members have to raise those matters. Mostly, Members seek to raise important matters, but I am responsible for deciding whether it is necessary to provide additional time to them on any given day.

I have been concerned at a trend in the last days and weeks of Members seeking to breach the procedures and to question decisions of the Chair in the Chamber and particularly on social media. I advise Members that I am considering how to deal with that matter. I do not want to stand on ceremony or to suppress people's obvious enthusiasm to raise important matters, but those matters are beginning to prey heavily on our minds, and I want to consider and reflect on how I approach them in the days and weeks ahead.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council Summit: 6 November 2020

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. Before I call the First 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 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 as well as notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question. This is not an opportunity for debate and long introductions should not be entered into.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): In accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the thirty-fourth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC), which took place in virtual format on Friday 6 November 2020. The deputy First Minister, Minister Dodds, Minister Murphy, Minister Ní Chuilín and I attended the summit, and they have agreed that I make the statement on their behalf.

The Scottish Government hosted the summit, and the heads of the delegations were welcomed by the First Minister of Scotland, the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP. The Welsh Government delegation was led by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Mark Drakeford MS. The United Kingdom Government was led by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP. The Government of Guernsey was led by the Chief Minister, Deputy Peter Ferbrache. The Government of Jersey was led by the Chief Minister, Senator John Le Fondré. The Irish Government was led by the Prime Minister, Micheál Martin TD. The Isle of

Man Government delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Hon Howard Quayle MHK. The full list of the delegates who attended the summit is attached to the copy of the statement that was provided to Members.

This was the first summit meeting of the Council since it met in Dublin in November 2019. It is also the first meeting attended by Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive since 2016. So, although we have had frequent engagement with UK, Scottish and Welsh Ministers this year concerning COVID-19, we welcomed the opportunity to re-engage with Ministers from the other Administrations.

Since the Dublin summit, the COVID-19 global pandemic has, of course, emerged to dominate the agendas of all Administrations. Ministers used the meeting to discuss the impact that it has had on their countries and the interventions that they have made to protect the health of their people and to support their economies. All Administrations have experienced a significant economic impact, which has set back many of the gains that were made over the previous decade. COVID has also had, and will continue to have, a long-term impact on our communities, particularly on the young and other groups who were already experiencing economic and social disadvantage.

The Council discussed the vision, priorities and opportunities that are required to drive economic recovery while living with the virus, and there is a shared view that this recovery must not just be used to return to the status quo, but rather, and drawing from our experience, to improve what we do in areas such as social disadvantage, well-being and the digital and green economies. It also discussed areas where Administrations could usefully learn from the experiences of other Administrations, and there was a commitment to continuing dialogue between us to share information and best practice. The Council mandated the secretariat to keep under review the actions of each Administration to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, particularly on economic equality, and to consider how further dialogue might take place on the question of travel, both within the common travel area and further afield.

The Council welcomed the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive since the last British-Irish Council summit in Dublin in November 2019, and the deputy First Minister and I recorded our commitment to continue to work collaboratively with our neighbours on a North/South and east-west basis. The agenda also provided an opportunity to discuss current

political developments. The focus of that discussion was the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The UK Government provided an update on the continuing discussions with the European Commission, including on the Northern Ireland protocol. All Administrations are conscious of the impending end of the transition period and emphasised the need for a successful conclusion to the negotiations. We, once again, registered our determination to achieve the most favourable outcome for Northern Ireland.

The Council noted the secretariat's 2019-2020 end-of-year report and its 2020-21 mid-year report. It also welcomed the publication of its annual report for 2019-2020, which can be viewed on the British-Irish Council's website at britishirishcouncil.org.

As the final item of business, the Council noted that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2021. We look forward to welcoming member Administrations here and, I hope, in person. The date for the meeting will be agreed in due course.

In conclusion, it is scarcely surprising that the summit was dominated by COVID and Brexit, but despite any differences in opinion and perspective that may exist, it revealed a real determination to work together to face our common challenges and demonstrated the value of the British-Irish Council as a forum for doing so.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the First Minister for bringing this statement to the House. It is welcome to, once again, see the North represented at the British-Irish Council meetings, and I think that it is fantastic that we will be hosting the British-Irish Council meeting in 2021 — hopefully not virtually — and there is undoubtedly much that we can teach, and learn from, each other.

If this issue was discussed at the meeting, I hope that the First Minister can update us on how the other Administrations are progressing their COVID economic responses to affected industries, similar to those in our hospitality and close-contact sectors, and whether they are supporting them in a timely manner and providing them with clarity rather than confusion, as is the case here. Is she aware of whether those Administrations have elected representatives in senior roles sending out contradictory messages or, indeed, verbally attacking their senior health professionals, and others leaking information to the press?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. We very much look forward to welcoming our colleagues from across the other seven Administrations to Northern Ireland next year. I hope that it will be in person, and it will most likely happen in June next year. We hope that that can happen in a meaningful way and that, given the year that is in it, we will also be able to have some wrap-around events at the British-Irish Council.

The Member asked about the ongoing restrictions that many Administrations have had to put in place. I refer him to what happened in the Republic of Ireland and the reaction of some members of the Government down there to their health specialists. We are all dealing with very difficult situations. We will have an Executive meeting later today, and I very much hope that consensus can be achieved. We are in a five-party coalition. Many Administrations across the United Kingdom and the other Administrations in the BIC do not have to deal with differing political philosophies and ways forward, but we will work together. We have a determination to work together to find a solution, and that, hopefully, will happen today.

Mr Stalford: The First Minister will know that one of the key areas of growth in the Northern Ireland economy over recent times has been in the creative industries. Can she provide an update on the work of the British-Irish Council in expanding creative industries across these regions?

Mrs Foster: Indeed, it is important to put on record that, while the British-Irish Council summit takes place only once or sometimes twice a year, there are ongoing work streams that do a lot of good work. The environmental sector met just last week, and the AERA Minister attended. We take the lead in some of the work sector activities, such as collaborative spatial planning, housing and transport.

You are absolutely right about the creative industries. It is one of the newest industries in Northern Ireland, and, as you know, before COVID-19, we were doing very well in it. We take a full part in the creative industries work stream in the British-Irish Council. That work has continued, even with the pandemic ongoing. The engagement has been a really good opportunity to share information on funding and on how the restrictions are impacting the creative industries. Some filming has continued in Northern Ireland. 'Line of Duty', for example, has continued to film, and I commend those involved with that for dealing

with the restrictions and with all the things to keep everybody safe during that time. It just shows that, if there is a determination, we can continue in that sector. We look forward to continuing the work in the creative industries sectoral working group and, indeed, all the sectoral working groups. Again, we are sharing information and learning from one another, which is a good way in which to use the British-Irish Council, and, if we can, we intend to use it more.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, Minister, for the statement. You said that Brexit was one of the items that was discussed at length. Given that a no-deal future relationship would be the worst outcome for citizens and for businesses, what discussions took place at the BIC on addressing the growing prospects of a no deal, particularly its impact across these islands?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Indeed, we had an update from Michael Gove on the negotiations. The deputy First Minister and I stressed the need for a timely resolution to the issues in order to give clarity, even at this late stage, to our businesses.

We stressed the interdependencies between the working of the protocol and the main negotiations. We are concerned, if things look good for the negotiations, about what impact that will have on us in Northern Ireland due to the protocol that has been put in place. Again, we stressed our two main objectives for the practical outworkings of the trading relationship, particularly with Great Britain, our largest market, and that the final relationship between the UK and EU should not damage, even in an unintended way, the Northern Ireland economy. We made those points clearly. There was a good discussion across the Administrations about the end of the transition period. We look forward to the end of the negotiations, hopefully towards the end of the week.

10.45 am

Dr Aiken: I thank the First Minister for her remarks, particularly those on the British-Irish Council. Did she and the deputy First Minister take the opportunity to raise the implications of the withdrawal agreement and the letter that both Ministers sent to the vice president of the European Commission the day before? In particular, if I may quote:

"with a real threat to the continuity of the supply of existing food and other products to

our market unless these issues are urgently addressed and solutions found."

Did you raise that issue at the British-Irish Council?

Mrs Foster: Yes, because we have heard a lot from people telling the United Kingdom Government to act in good faith but we need the European Union to do likewise. The European Union says that it does not want to damage Northern Ireland. If that is the case, it should, of course, come to a determination that supermarkets are not bringing across products that are at risk of going into the Republic of Ireland. These are sealed containers that come across from Great Britain into Northern Ireland for sale in Northern Ireland. We just wanted to make the point that those goods are not at risk of entering the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, that issue should be closed off as quickly as possible to give certainty to supermarkets. I am sure that the Member has heard some supermarkets express concerns about the range and price of products that they will be able to bring to Northern Ireland. So, let us deal with that issue and get it off the table. If the European Union feels that it wants to protect Northern Ireland, there is a simple way to do that.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement on the meeting. Minister, you will be aware of a group of people in Northern Ireland who consider themselves to have been excluded from any business supports surrounding the COVID pandemic. You have not met them yet, and I hope that you will do so as soon as possible. Given that Scotland, Wales, the English regions and other jurisdictions have taken a great deal of action to support those people, yet nothing has been done to support them in Northern Ireland, what actions do you and the deputy First Minister plan to take,?

Mrs Foster: I think that the Member will agree that we have provided a large amount of support to businesses and individuals across Northern Ireland. Again, I put on record that we are pleased that the furlough scheme will continue until the end of March. That is very helpful to us as we try to battle through the COVID-19 pandemic, as is the granting of an extra £400 million in Barnett consequentials. That, too, will assist us in the fight against COVID and in addressing the need to support businesses and people finding it difficult at present.

The Member raises an issue about people who have fallen through the cracks. As I understand it, now that we have extra funding, the Economy Minister is putting forward a paper that looks at all of that and at how to deal with some of those issues. We understand that a lot of people have been missed, and we are trying to create schemes to help them. I hope that we will have news for the Member and, indeed, the House, in due course.

Mr Robinson: I thank the First Minister for her statement. What progress is being made in the environmental work sector?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. As I indicated, the environmental sectoral work stream met in the week before the full summit meeting.

There is an aim to launch a new British Standards Institution (BSI) specification on plastic pellets — plastic is one of the main environmental threats, as we all know — by 2020-21, so we hope that that will come forward soon. Solutions for the collection and recycling of end-of-life fishing gear from the main fishing ports are being developed, and it is planned to run webinars on blue carbon evidence, research and management for adaption and resilience and mitigation of climate change. A whole range of practical issues are being discussed across the Administrations. That shows the strength of cooperation, of sharing of information and of working together in the British-Irish Council that I hope to see more of as we mature into what I hope will be the normal run of things.

Post-Brexit, for me, the British-Irish Council is very important. It allow us to speak with our colleagues not only in the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland but in the smaller jurisdictions of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, who we have not had the opportunity to meet because the Assembly was down for a number of years. I very much welcome that ongoing sharing of information and collaboration that can now take place through the good offices of the British-Irish Council.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. I welcome the statement on the British-Irish Council, which is an important institution of the Good Friday Agreement. It is important that there is cooperation and mutual understanding across these islands.

The Minister covered some of the implications of COVID, such as the health and economic

issues, but if we are going to have an economic recovery from COVID, one of the important things will be that our Executive have fiscal powers. Was there any discussion at the BIC about the devolution of fiscal powers to institutions such as the Assembly?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, the Finance Minister is quite keen to set up a fiscal commission to look at those issues. He will have to seek cross-party agreement in the Executive, and, as such, there has been no paper brought forward thus far. The amount of fiscal help that we have received from Westminster over the past year has been quite staggering: £2.8 billion has come to us to help in the fight against COVID. That, again, underlines for me the importance of our relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom, and we look forward to continuing that good working relationship.

Mr Dunne: I thank the First Minister for her statement. In relation to the British-Irish Council, are there lessons to be learned from across the various Administrations in the management of COVID-19 and economic recovery?

Mrs Foster: The fact that we are able to share what has worked in each of the different Administrations has been very useful. I was very taken by something that is happening in Jersey — I accept that they have a much smaller population than some of the Administrations — where they have a scheme where they give all their citizens a £100 pre-paid MasterCard. You cannot spend it online; you have to spend it locally in shops and restaurants. It is a way to help to boost the local economy, and I thought that that was a very good way to do that. I know that the Economy Minister has been looking at the idea of voucher schemes, particularly for our hard-hit hospitality and tourism sectors. It is good to hear of ideas and schemes that are working across different Administrations and to learn from and adapt those and to perhaps introduce them in Northern Ireland.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers thus far. Will the Minister confirm whether there was any discussion at the British-Irish Council about the importance of promoting inclusion and equality of outcome as a core element in our COVID recovery planning across these islands?

Mrs Foster: There was a discussion that COVID pointed out difficulties for different sectors in our communities right across the

eight Administrations and that we do not to go back to the status quo. We want to build on the experiences of dealing with COVID and to look at equality of opportunity right across these islands. That is very important and is something that we will continue to work through in the Council.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the First Ministers for bringing the report. I must say that the detail, particularly on Brexit, is pretty thin gruel, though we have become used to that in the Assembly. In the statement, there are more words devoted to introductions and telling us who was at the meeting than there are to Brexit.

Can I ask the First Minister precisely what was discussed? What work streams will the British-Irish Council take forward, both before the end of the year and afterwards? I agree that that institution is critical to relations going forward. Can I also ask her specifically about the issue of crime, justice and security cooperation? That is critical across these islands. It is critical that we get the right outcome of, ideally, access to the European arrest warrant on a North/South basis and on an east-west basis across Britain and Ireland. Was that discussed and, if it was not, why not?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Maybe the Member misunderstands the role of the British-Irish Council. It is not to negotiate our leaving the European Union or, indeed, the end of the transition period; it is to share experiences from Jersey, Guernsey, the Isle of Man, the four Administrations in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It is certainly not to deal solely with our leaving the European Union. Despite that, of course, it was recognised that the end of the transition period was a big moment. When we have clarity in the negotiations that are taking place between the United Kingdom and the European Union, we can move forward together and work collaboratively. It is important that we use the British-Irish Council to continue those relationships, and I am sure that it will do so.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for her statement. We have heard some ideas around boosting the economy. Can the First Minister update us on whether any further novel or innovative ideas for boosting economic activity came up during the discussions with other Administrations?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. We had a good discussion on economic recovery. Of course, there were common themes of varying degrees across the

eight Administrations, including supporting and creating jobs, the need to have a green recovery, improving community spaces and, of course, prioritising well-being. Digital inclusion, cybersecurity and areas like that are, of course, very much part of the agenda of the British-Irish Council, as indeed are some of the new technologies that are coming forward. For example, we want to push very strongly the importance of having a hydrogen hub in Northern Ireland. We can share ideas and learn lessons from other Administrations, particularly Scotland, in relation to how they have moved forward on the green agenda as well.

Mr Nesbitt: I note that, in her concluding paragraph, the Minister referred to "differences in opinion and perspective": what was the most challenging thing that she heard?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that it will come as any surprise to the Member that there are those of us who have different opinions on Brexit and the advantages and, for others, the disadvantages of leaving the European superstate. We continue to have different opinions on that. However, for those of us coming from a Northern Ireland perspective, whilst we have different opinions on that issue, it is vital that we do all that we can to protect businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland so that they can continue to have the choice that they currently have. That is critical.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, thank you for your statement. Considering our reliance in 2020 on social media and the use of digital technology to advertise public health guidance in the context of COVID-19, can the Minister advise whether there was consideration at the British-Irish Council of a digital inclusion strategy to end rural poverty around information technology and broadband provision? That exacerbates the social exclusion of rural dwellers, particularly in the context of COVID-19.

11.00 am

Mrs Foster: Yes, absolutely. The BIC digital inclusion work stream absolutely recognises the rapid pace of technological change amongst all our members. Of course, the size and scale of our membership is very different, but, sometimes, smaller Administrations — it is nice for a Northern Ireland Minister to be able to say that — at the table can come up with innovative ways forward. .

We are looking forward to that continuing discussion. The Department of Finance in Northern Ireland leads the discussion at the BIC

work stream on digital inclusion. In the past year, the unit has been working in collaboration with several additional organisations, focusing on those hard-to-reach groups and communities with the aim of increasing internet usage by 1% annually across the BIC area. The oncoming Project Stratum, which the Department for the Economy is bringing forward, will be a real game changer for us in Northern Ireland. I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and the project will allow people there to have that digital inclusion. We have realised this year, through COVID-19, how important digital inclusion is so that people can get online and do all the things that they need to do, whether that be work, education or, indeed, just socialising.

Ms Ennis: It was reported from the British-Irish Council summit that the First Minister stated that the COVID virus would be with us for some time. On that basis, does she accept that further interventions to protect public health may be required in the period ahead, including greater collaboration and coordination among the health agencies on these islands and between these islands to stem the spread of the virus?

Mrs Foster: I am very much on record as saying that we need to continue to recognise that the virus is here and that we have to live with that fact going into 2021. Of course, we have good cooperation across the United Kingdom and, indeed, with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. I spoke with Micheál Martin at the weekend about the threat that has appeared from mink farming in Denmark, and we should all be concerned about that. We do not have any mink farms in Northern Ireland — they have been banned since 2002 — but there are three mink farms in the Republic of Ireland, so I want to be assured about them. As well as that, the Minister of Health has written to his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland about the need for us to have information on travellers from Denmark, so that, if people come to Northern Ireland from Denmark through the Republic of Ireland, we know that and can enforce quarantine for 14 days if they are resident here. The United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, has said that, unless you are a citizen of Northern Ireland, you should not come from Denmark into the United Kingdom, because we want to protect ourselves from the new strain that has appeared. I note this morning that the World Health Organization has said that it is concerned about the new strain, which has appeared in six countries to date. We should be alert to that, and we need to take all precautions to make sure that it does not come to Northern Ireland.

Mr McNulty: I thank the First Minister for her statement. A major issue has arisen in recent weeks because of the checks in relation to COVID restrictions at the border by an Garda Síochána on the A1/M1 near Jonesborough. They happen almost daily and cause considerable delays and huge frustration for key workers: healthcare workers, construction workers, IT workers and businesspeople, all of whom are working hard to keep our all-island economy afloat. Was that matter raised at the meeting? If this is an issue during COVID, we in border communities will be very worried about how things may turn out in the event of a no-deal scenario in 2021. Will she undertake to write to the Garda Commissioner to raise that issue of deep concern?

Mrs Foster: Operational gardaí issues are, of course, a matter for the commissioner in the Republic of Ireland. The gardaí take whatever actions they feel are necessary to protect their citizens and to make sure that the COVID regulations are policed properly. I commend the gardaí on their very visible presence in the Republic of Ireland and the way in which they have been ensuring that their residents and citizens abide by the restrictions. That is so important. We have heard a lot from Members about the need to protect citizens from this terrible virus, and it looks to me as if the Garda Commissioner is taking that very seriously.

Mr Beattie: I thank the First Minister for her statement and for making it in a timely manner. That is important. I also thank her for her full answers.

Given that Christmas is so important to all of the economy and there is always added movement of people over the festive period and looking at the factors that we are drawing from what is being done in other areas, is there any way that there will be a harmonisation of the COVID-19 approach in all jurisdictions over that period?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question; it is a hugely important issue. Many people travel during the Christmas period to see their loved ones across the British Isles, and therefore it is important that we continue to have those conversations. We have them when we meet Michael Gove and the Scottish and Welsh Administrations in our regular quads. We also need to take into account the citizens moving from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland and vice versa and from the other smaller Administrations. There is an absolute need to have clarity between all the

Administrations on travel, not just for family and friends but for students. We need to be able to have our young people coming home at Christmas. In Northern Ireland, a lot of young people come home at weekends, and I know that that has caused difficulty. I commend our young people for choosing to remain at home and do their work online or to stay in Belfast, Londonderry or Coleraine. They will, however, want to go home at Christmas, so there is a need for us to find solutions for that. I am committed to finding a solution to that, along with colleagues in all the other Administrations,

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her statement. In it, she says:

"The Council discussed the vision, priorities and opportunities which are required to drive economic recovery while living with the virus".

Will the First Minister share with us the vision for Northern Ireland that her five-party Executive have agreed so far? Wider society, much of which is on its knees waiting for a plan, desperately needs to know.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I agree that we need a clear exit strategy on these issues. It is important that people are aware of how we will live with the virus. I do not believe that we can continually go into circuit breakers or lockdowns — call them what you will. You cannot keep turning on and off the economy. You will go back on one occasion, and there will be nothing left. People will not have jobs; they will not be able to support their families; and they will fall into destitution and poverty, which, in itself, has its own health outcomes — mental health and issues with poverty. There is a need for us to find a way forward, and I hope that we can work in collaboration to find it

There was good news yesterday about a vaccine, and I welcome the fact that Pfizer and BioNTech are making great advances on one. Of course, we also need to make sure that we have an appropriate test, trace, isolate and support system in place. I pay tribute to those who are working on that system for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland people. The capacity in our health service needs to be ready. Every winter, we face problems with capacity in our health service, but, this year, we know that there are additional problems because of COVID-19.

There is much work to do, and we are committed to having an exit strategy and

communicating it. Businesses have been through so much this year. I empathise with them in relation to everything that has happened to them. We will continue to do all that we can to assist them.

Mr Allister: I welcome the expedition with which the statement was brought to the House. It is such a contrast to the feet-dragging on many other statements, particularly those on North/South meetings.

I take the First Minister back to the issue of flights from Denmark. It is an issue now about Denmark, but it has long existed, because Dublin has been a back-door entry point to the rest of the United Kingdom. Was that problem discussed at the Council, and was any shape of a resolution found to it?

Can she shed any further light on how our centenary next year will be marked at the British-Irish Council?

Mrs Foster: The issue around mink and Denmark came to light only after the Council meeting. The Council was on Friday, and it was only late on Friday and early on Saturday that we were made aware of the problem. I immediately contacted our Agriculture Minister, who was able to tell me that there were no mink farms in Northern Ireland and had not been, as I said, since 2002. I then contacted Micheál Martin about it.

Regrettably, there is an ongoing issue — the Minister of Health has raised it on many occasions — around the fact that we do not have the information coming forward on travel locator forms for people who come in to Dublin and then come up to Northern Ireland. We need to have that information. We will continue to press on those points.

As the Member knows, the centenary forum continues to meet. We hope that it will be a very meaningful commemoration and celebration next year. I am pleased that the British-Irish Council is coming to Northern Ireland in our centenary year. We should use it as an opportunity to tell the story of all that is good about Northern Ireland, including our industry. We look forward to doing all of that.

Mr Carroll: The First Minister said that we should not just return to the status quo after the virus: I absolutely agree. The First Minister also mentioned tackling social disadvantage. What discussions were had at the Council about a COVID wealth tax to tackle inequality, given that billionaires have increased their wealth

during the crisis by £25 billion? We are definitely not all in it together. What work is being done to tackle the astronomical wealth gap that exists on these islands?

Mrs Foster: There was no discussion about a "wealth tax", but there was a determination to help all those who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. That determination is shared across all of the Administrations. We look forward to the continuing work to deal with that issue.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

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

11.15 am

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Final Stage

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

That the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22] do now pass.

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

Mr Murphy: Today's Final Stage debate concludes this part of the legislative process for the 2020-21 financial year. As I explained at the Second Stage debate, following the unusual step that we had to take by passing a further Vote on Account before the summer, the financial position now allows us to pass this Budget (No. 3) Bill together with the Main Estimates, which were agreed on 19 October. This provides the legislative authority for the expenditure of the Departments and other bodies for the remainder of this financial year.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that financial circumstances this year have been unprecedented. The Executive have acted quickly to provide funding, not only to deal with the health impact of the pandemic but to respond to the economic impact. We are continuing to plan and respond to the situation, and Members will be aware that I have made a series of announcements over the past seven

months as the Executive have agreed further allocations.

My most recent announcement on the outcome of the October monitoring round on 29 October brings to over £2.3 billion the allocations that have been made to Departments by the Executive. That includes almost £1 billion of additional in-year funding for the Department of Health to ensure that our doctors, nurses and other medical staff have the resources that they need in the fight against this health emergency. It also includes over £428 million to the Department for the Economy to directly support businesses and the further and higher education sectors.

Almost £200 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities to support those most disadvantaged in our communities, as well as to provide support for the voluntary and community sector and the sports, arts and culture sectors. Over £180 million has gone to the Department for Infrastructure to ensure that our transport networks can continue to operate, including not only Translink but also our airports and seaports and our taxi and private coach and bus industries. The allocations to Infrastructure are also supporting Northern Ireland Water as it adapts to the changes in demand from its customers and consumers. Almost £180 million has gone to the Department of Education to support our schools and to continue to safely deliver education for our children and young people and to provide free school meals.

The Bill provides the legislative authority for that expenditure. I remind Members that, as well as authorising the expenditure in this current financial year, the Bill regularises the excess expenditure incurred by some Departments in the 2016-17 financial year, which came about because it was not possible for the Assembly to pass the spring Supplementary Estimates at the end of that year.

My Department has continued to engage with all other Departments to ensure that the Executive have an up-to-date picture of the pressures that they face and how the available resources are being used. As the situation develops further and the Executive make further decisions, as is likely, on the allocations of resources, I will bring these back to the Assembly through the spring Supplementary Estimates and a subsequent Budget Bill at the end of the financial year.

I wish to express my gratitude once again to the Finance Committee, which acknowledged the unique circumstances in which we found ourselves this year and agreed to accelerated

passage. I thank all the departmental scrutiny Committees and, indeed, all Members for the level of scrutiny that they have been able to bring to this process.

To conclude, this is the Final Stage of the legislative process for this Bill. I now look forward to hearing any final thoughts from Members on this important legislation.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his comments so far. As previously outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources required to reflect the departmental spending plans in the 2020-21 Main Estimates. As I indicated during the previous debate, the Committee agreed, under Standing Order 42(2), to grant accelerated passage to the Budget Bill on the basis of having been consulted appropriately on the expenditure provisions in the Bill. As we progress through this mandate, it is important that all Departments engage constructively with the Assembly Committees, particularly in relation to budgetary matters.

As I alluded to during the Second Stage debate, the Committee identified an inconsistency of approach by the Department of Finance surrounding the approvals for spending under sole authority. These are the now quite infamous black box items. Whilst acknowledging the Minister's recognition of the inconsistency during the debate, it serves as a reminder to us all that scrutiny adds real value and, therefore, requires all Committees to question, probe and challenge existing processes and practices to improve transparency and drive improvements to ensure high levels of accountability.

However, for that to be a continual process, reform of our existing systems needs to be delivered through initiatives such as the Department of Finance's current review of the financial process, which aims to provide a simplified read-across of the information in the Budget, Estimates and accounts. The review needs to be complemented by a memorandum of understanding (MOU), which aims to safeguard the information sought by the Assembly when undertaking its scrutiny. That work is continuing and will require consideration by the Executive and the Assembly once the draft procedures are developed, worked through and reflected in a draft version of the memorandum of understanding.

During the Second Stage debate, my Committee colleague Matthew O'Toole highlighted the need for long-term

improvements to our Budget process, which should be underpinned by internationally recognised key principles. At various times, the Committee has heard about the need to move towards a fiscal council, and we need details about that sooner rather than later. I note the First Minister's remarks today when she said that a paper on a fiscal council has not yet come before the Executive.

I will move to the outcome of the review of the financial process being conducted by the Department of Finance and the MOUs being developed between the Department and the Committee for Finance. That process seeks to provide a single consistent approach to requesting, presenting and analysing budgetary information to support the scrutiny role of the Assembly. Of course, a memorandum of understanding can be put in place only on an agreed process. We also need commitments from Departments, Committees, the Executive and the Assembly to adhere to that process to enable us to participate fully in providing a timely, open and transparent financial process that lends itself to full accountability for the expenditure of public finances.

The Committee is interested in the role of arm's-length bodies and their financial accountability, responsibility and reporting procedures. At the Committee's meeting on 7 October 2020, it agreed to seek details of all bids that had been submitted by Departments during this financial year. The response date was extended to four weeks to take account of the recess period, and Departments were asked to provide this information by 6 November — last Friday. It is, therefore, disappointing to note that, to date, responses have been received from only five of our nine Departments. The remaining four Departments did not provide a suitable reason for the delay, request an extension or acknowledge that the deadline had been missed.

I take this opportunity to recognise the efforts of the Departments that have furnished the Committee with the information within the requested timescale. However, I will also highlight the Departments with outstanding responses. Whereas the Department of Health can be forgiven for not necessarily having its responses through in time, I cannot believe that the Executive Office, the Department for Communities and the Department of Justice have any excuse whatsoever. That is not acceptable, particularly when the extended response time is taken into account and when the requested information should be easy for departmental financial divisions to access and,

therefore, readily available to the Committee. We must do better.

As we look ahead to the remainder of the financial year, a key challenge will be the effective deployment of all available resources received through our normal settlement and the additional COVID-19 funding to ensure that it is focused on the areas of most need and where it can bring the greatest benefit. We are aware of the additional £400 million of Barnett consequentials that came within the last two weeks and, added to likely outcomes, that shows the ability to have up to £0.5 billion available. However, that money needs to be spent before the end of the financial year, which is a significant challenge for our Departments.

The Committee would like there to be a focus on improving the Executive's utilisation of the allocation of financial transactions capital (FTC). As the Chairperson of the Committee for Communities said during the Second Stage debate, the reclassification of registered housing associations will provide a much-needed opportunity to utilise more of our allocation, which we must do. Whilst this is to be welcomed, we need to recognise the need for a more sustainable strategy to maximise the opportunities that FTC can bring in delivering positive outcomes for our society. We have had this opportunity for a considerable time but not managed to utilise it effectively, at any stage.

The Committee is generally supportive of the Minister's approach of seeking further flexibility from HM Treasury. However, Committee members want to ensure that any flexibility is used appropriately and only where absolutely necessary. I would appreciate the Minister's undertaking to keep the Committee fully informed of any developments as soon as they are known and updating it on any proposals that he may have to avail himself of such flexibility when the time comes. In the meantime, on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the Bill.

Mr Frew: This is the last legislative stage of the financial process that is the Budget Bill. With a Budget (No. 3) Bill, we are in strangely unique times. I have not seen one before in my time. In what has been a very traumatic year for the financial process, I have certain sympathies for the Department and the officials. However, in light of the evidence that we have gleaned and the experiences that we have lived through over this last traumatic year, it is absolutely clear that things need to change.

At Second Stage, I asked the Finance Minister where in the Bill was the support for

hairdressers, the self-employed, entrepreneurs and people on their own who were trying to scrape a living to provide for their families after the Executive closed them down. He said, "It is all here. It is all in this Bill." It must be still in the Bill, because there are people and businesses in my constituency who have not seen a pin from it. They have had no support from the Executive or the Finance Minister since the day and hour that they were closed down. They were closed down abruptly without any indication of when, how or why they should do so. Since then, we have seen the evidence that led to their closure, and, boy, that is so flimsy. I met those businesses the week after, and even this week, and they just cannot understand it. It is beyond anger now.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Member for giving way. I represent the same constituency and have the same businesses coming to me. That is why I am writing to the Minister responsible for providing financial support — the Economy Minister. I am extremely disappointed in her performance to date in supplying those businesses with grants and getting money out to them quickly.

Mr Frew: I am very disappointed, too, that a party in the House can hold on to money that it did not need and which was not even meant for it. The party held on to that much-needed finance for months without alerting the authorities, bringing it to the attention of the Finance Committee or even declaring an interest to the various Committees. That is shameful. When businesses are crying out for anything — anything — that is absolutely shameful.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. He paints a stark picture for businesses. There are a lot of pressures on businesses, and we heard some of those mentioned on the radio this morning. Does the Member agree that the calculation is based not simply on the scientific modelling but on the fact that our R rate is rising and more people are dying due to COVID? The Executive do not work on the basis of a single figure, which may be presented as 0.5 or 0.1; they take into account the rising rates, the rising threat to health and the increasing number of deaths in our population.

11.30 am

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention again. I know that he made an intervention last night during my colleague Jonny Buckley's speech on the very same issue. My answer is the same as Jonny

Buckley's. Of course this is a very dangerous disease. Of course we are in the midst of a great pandemic.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to face the Chair to ensure that the sound is picked up.

Mr Frew: Of course we need to address those issues and make it safe for those people and those businesses to operate, but closing them down was never the answer. Closing them down so that they cannot operate is never the answer. Not allowing people to earn a living to provide for their families was never the answer.

When you look at the evidence for the decisions that were taken and at some of the sectors that were closed down, you will see that there was absolutely no justification for the Executive to make the decisions that they did. Those business owners are still scratching their head asking, "Why has my business been closed down? The Executive forced me to invest hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds on safety measures to keep me, my staff and my customers safe. Why did the Executive close us down?". That is what I hear when I meet the businesses.

It is beyond anger, as I said. It is just pure frustration, and, in many cases, it is just hopelessness now. Yet here we have an Executive that cannot even agree on the exit strategy and the opening of those businesses that were promised that they would be opened this week. That is an absolutely shameful position to be in.

A number of weeks ago, when we were discussing the Bill, I rhymed off to the Minister all those sectors that needed support, and the Finance Minister gave me the commitment that the support is in the Bill. It is here. It is what we were passing. Where is that money now? Where is that funding? Where is that support that was promised? It is not just on the Department for the Economy or the Minister for the Economy; it is Land and Property Services (LPS) that administers the scheme.

LPS was tremendous the first time round. It put money out to businesses on a system that was designed to bring money in, not to push money out. Of course, mistakes were always going to be made, and I will never be hard on LPS for those mistakes, simply because the speed with which it got that money down the first time round was immense. It was tremendous.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that the Chair and members of the Finance Committee wrote to LPS thanking it for its work and its quick response? These are horrific times, and that was the reason for doing that. We are not attacking it, and I hope that it does not come across like that. I thought that it did a tremendous job.

Mr Frew: A tremendous job it did. I echo the sentiments of my colleague Pat. He is absolutely right. The effort, the tremendous work and the coordination and communication with MLAs was immense. It was perfect. It was brilliant. It was really good. You could have gone from the top to the bottom of the organisation and you would have got the same, concise, clear answer in a speedy manner. It did tremendous work. However, it is now three weeks since businesses were forced to close just like that, abruptly, without any warning, so why are they still crying out for that support, little as it is? Let us face it. They have not received one bean; not one penny. They have employees asking them, "What shift will I do on Friday? What hours do I have to work on Saturday?". We have business owners asking, "Do I bring my supply chain in? Do I order all that food? Do I fill my freezer?".

This is unbelievable. This is a tremendously harsh time for businesses, yet this Executive are doing an act of vandalism to those businesses. It is an act of vandalism to be unable to tell a business, on a Tuesday, that it can open up for sure on the Friday, fill its fridges and freezers, bring in its stock or pay its supply line. All these businesses have no idea. That is no way to run a business, and it is no way to run the Executive. It is an absolute disgrace — an absolute farce — that we are letting down so many people who earn a decent living, provide employment to our people and are being let down by the hour this week, without any knowledge of what they are going to do next week. It is an absolute disgrace.

Here we have a Finance Minister who wants more fiscal powers. Really? Do you think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I would stand here as an MLA and want to support and vote more fiscal powers for this Executive and this Finance Minister? Is that where we are at? No, I will not support more fiscal powers coming down to the Executive, when they cannot even spend the Barnett consequential moneys that we have received from our sovereign Parliament. We are going to find it tough to spend that money. It is perverse that I am speaking about money sitting at the centre, and yet, out there in the real world, businesses cannot employ their

people, provide a living, open their shop floor, cut somebody's hair, provide a meal or sell a coffee, despite all the investment that they have put in. They are an absolute farce of an Executive. It makes a mockery of the Budget Bill and process. More fiscal powers? Are we having a laugh? Go and ask a business, any business, that has been forced to close down whether the Executive should have more fiscal powers. The answer, every time, will be, "No way, no chance."

One thing I have learnt about the process is this scary thing. Look at the decisions that have been taken by the Executive over the past eight months; yesterday was a typical scenario. The Assembly, which should really be the seat of power, was asked to approve regulations that are coming to an end and have had their impact. They have destroyed businesses and lives. People will die because of the decisions the Executive took. Should we have more fiscal powers? No. Should we have more democratic accountability on a finance process? Absolutely yes. It is not good enough to usurp the power and will of the House, or to bypass it. Whilst I understand the reasons why the Finance Committee gives accelerated passage to a Budget Bill, to hasten the process, we should not compromise on scrutiny in return for that acceleration.

What do I mean by that? I do not know that the Finance Committee's role should really be about what pound goes where and that sort of thing. The minutiae of that would bog it down. However, the monitoring rounds are an important cycle in the Budget sequence. We have seen their importance clearly, through this Budget Bill and this process. I see the Budget process as two-yearly. There is the year in which you produce a Budget, which then comes into force in April, but then you have the in-year work, where you move around that money in monitoring rounds. That is critical, especially if we get to the point where we have multi-year Budgets.

Here is the thing, however. If we get to multi-year budgets and have monitoring rounds in-year, they become very important, because, with the best will in the world, you can have the best financial advisers in your Department, but they do not have a crystal ball. It is therefore very hard to predict what will happen in three years' time, so that flexibility must come with a three-year Budget, but scrutiny must also be enhanced.

The Chairperson of the Finance Committee talked about the fiscal council and the memorandum of understanding. When the

Finance Minister was on the Finance Committee, he identified not having the memorandum of understanding as being a problem and pushed for it, and I thank him for that work. Surely he should see that there is a democratic deficit in the way in which we do a Budget, because it is an excepted matter. There is a duty on the Finance Minister to provide a Budget to this Assembly, and that is it. There is so much more that the Assembly needs to see on budgetary and financial matters, however. I am talking not just about having a memorandum of understanding but about having deep, meaningful reform. I am talking about reform that will make the Assembly the place where the power resides. By that, I mean that Departments take an inconsistent approach to bringing their information to the Committees. Some are late with it, which is unforgivable. Some provide scant information to their Committee, and, let us face it, sometimes Committees have other priorities. Sometimes the financial side of things does not get the time and scrutiny that it should.

We have problems. We should all see that, and, if we do not, we are blind. What, as an Assembly, can we do to fix those problems? Codes do not work: quite clearly they do not. I do not believe that a memorandum of understanding would work either. It would just not be strong enough. The Finance Committee can produce a series of platforms and produce pro formas that Committees and Departments can fill in. That has helped to a certain degree, but it has helped identify the weaknesses. It has helped us see the holes in the system.

That is why I say that we need statutory reform. We need laws in this place that place statutory duties on the Finance Minister and on all other Ministers to bring information to their Committee in proper time and information that serves its function. That information would then be scrutinised. It would then go into a centralised system whereby we all, as an Assembly, could see and scrutinise that work. When we got to monitoring rounds, they would then become vitally important, if they are not already important, of course.

It is not good enough that the Assembly rubber-stamp or vote on something for which the Executive have decided to move money around. With the democratic deficit that we already have in this place, I say that the Assembly should perhaps have that say and agree to pass the monitoring rounds. We do at the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) stage, which is in February, and thus after the event, so why not allow the Assembly to vote to pass the monitoring rounds? In that way, we, as

MLAs and as an Assembly, have a say. In that way, we can ensure that the Executive take cognisance of what our Committees have to say and what the Finance Committee has to say. That is the way forward.

One thing that I have learnt in my time as an MLA, and since I came back to this place, is this: there is a lot that we get right, but there is a lot that we get wrong. We cannot abide by that. Where we see problems, we should fix them. We need to repair, we need to fix and we need to resolve. Fiscal powers? Not a chance. There is not a chance that I will support more fiscal powers for an Executive that have made decisions this month to destroy livelihoods and jobs and to ruin businesses. There is no chance. I ain't going there. Maybe I will be persuaded. It is up to the Minister to persuade the House. I ain't seen anything yet. I say this to the Finance Minister: get that money to those people. Last week and the week before it was the time to do it. Do not leave those businesses hanging any longer. Some of them are already gone; some will not reopen. This is a record month for redundancies.

11.45 am

Do not get me wrong: I do not blame the Executive for all of it; it was caused by the pandemic. However, when people needed the Executive to support and help them in the midst of this cruel pandemic, in which people are dying, what have the Executive done? They have destroyed livelihoods and businesses by the decisions that they have taken. They need to change step; they need to go out into the real world and see the suffering in it. Will the Budget help those people? Money has been lying at the centre for months. There are business owners lying at home, not knowing what to tell their employees about Friday. It is shameful.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the independent — sorry, DUP — Member for North Antrim for giving way once again. I take exception to the tone of his remarks and the accusations that he has levelled at the Executive, which, in my view, are doing their very best. The Member talks about destroying lives and livelihoods, but I caution him and suggest that he take a walk round Antrim Area Hospital, Causeway Hospital or the hospitals in this city to see for himself the impact of the pandemic on lives and livelihoods.

With regard to the finance Bill — which, halfway through the Member's contribution, I forgot we were actually discussing — it is the job of the Finance Minister to provide money and resources to his Executive colleagues. I repeat

that the accusation that the Member has levelled most about destroying businesses is one that he should take up with his party colleague in the Department for the Economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before the Member responds, I want to draw the debate back to the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

Mr Frew: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker. If only the thought police mattered. This is a place of challenge. That is what the Assembly is meant to be; it is how it is meant to function. I say to the Member that I know the real world out there. I see the people who go into hospital; I see the people who need operations but cannot get them; I see the people who have been on waiting lists for years and will, now, have to wait further years. I know how the pandemic has affected families because it has affected my family. My very brother had it. Even today, my sister has it. I will not take any lectures about the real world from Members across the House. I will not. However, I will plead with the Member to walk with me around Ballymena, Ballymoney, Ballycastle, and every village and art and part in between, and he will see real struggling and suffering. That is not of those people's own making; it is because they cannot make a living. They cannot earn a pound; they cannot get benefits. They are waiting on compensation from the Executive, the very Executive that closed them down. They cannot see that compensation, they do not have it in their bank accounts, and they cannot spend it.

I suggest that the furlough scheme is the game changer and the only thing that has kept most of those businesses afloat. However, the furlough scheme came from Westminster. What have the Executive offered? Nothing but pain and suffering in these past three weeks. Where is the money? Where is the funding? Where is the support for people? They cannot see it or feel it. Now, they do not even know whether they are opening on Friday. That is a shame and disgrace.

Dr Archibald: It is striking that, since we last discussed the Budget a couple of weeks ago, the financial picture for the Executive has changed yet again. An additional £400 million has been allocated to help with COVID pressures, which, of course, is very welcome, but that money has to be administered. Although there are plenty of pots that it could go into, there is a challenge in making sure that it is spent effectively before the end of the financial year.

Since we last debated the Bill, funding has been allocated to the Economy and Infrastructure Ministers for business support schemes for businesses that have been impacted by the restrictions, for newly self-employed people and for the taxi and coach sectors. The supports for the newly self-employed and the taxi and coach sectors have, in particular, been long awaited. Since that money has been allocated, I have been contacted nearly every day — I am sure that other MLAs have been as well — about when those people can expect those schemes to open. I talk to business people every day, Mr Frew. I met some bus tour operators yesterday, and there is real frustration out there. We all get that. I know that it is not in the remit of the Finance Minister, but, once funding is allocated for schemes, it is important that those schemes get the money out to people as quickly as possible. Similarly, with the supports for those who are impacted by the restrictions, we still await the opening of the scheme for businesses in supply chains. The restrictions are due to end later this week, and many businesses have not yet received that support. Under normal circumstances, businesses may have had reserves, but those reserves are much depleted and debts are mounting. That support needs to go out speedily.

We have asked a lot from people, and, when restrictions — the very necessary restrictions — are introduced to protect lives, financial support schemes need to be forthcoming. We all know the challenges that Departments face and the pressures that they are under, and we recognise the work that staff have put in, but the Finance Minister has allocated the funding, and Ministers and Departments need to step up that delivery, because businesses, jobs and livelihoods depend on it.

Minister, I know that you have voiced support on many occasions for giving support to those who have been excluded from previous schemes. While we await the newly self-employed scheme, we know that there are still groups of individuals and businesses that have missed out. Local newspapers are one such example and another is travel agents. I know that representatives of travel agents met Ministers last week, and, hopefully, we will see some support for that sector soon. Travel agents have highlighted to us the fact that they have had to provide refunds and things like that. The Economy Minister was asked about that yesterday, and she said that she recognised the need for support and was looking at it. She also referenced the fact that travel agents have been able to avail themselves of other supports. However, it is

important to remember that, as with every group, there are anomalies. Not all travel agents work from an office; some are self-employed and work from home. They also need to be considered in whatever support is brought forward.

A number of schemes have been announced over recent weeks, and those have addressed some of the gaps, but there is now a need to address and evaluate what gaps remain with the support that has been offered. Some remain excluded after all these months, and we need to try to address those gaps. I ask the Minister to look at that in conjunction with Executive colleagues, so that bids can be made, speedily, to the Department of Finance to allocate the funding that remains at the centre to further supports.

I commend the Minister on his efforts to make the case on behalf of the Executive to extend the furlough scheme. Albeit that it was extended belatedly, that is very much welcomed. We know that there will be a review in January, so we need to continue to make the case so that businesses can keep in contact with their workforces. That is particularly the case with sectors in which there are skilled workforces that are furloughed and may need to gear up quickly once the economy reopens and conditions improve. We need to make that case now and ensure that that support remains for those businesses.

Another issue that I would like to raise with the Minister — I know that he has been sympathetic to it, previously — is support for our students and young people, who have had a very tough year. A few months ago, the Executive allocated additional support for the student hardship fund. That was important, particularly for those young people who were trapped in rental contracts for houses that they are not using and still having to pay household bills but do not have the normal opportunities for part-time employment in cafes, pubs and shops that are all operating at a much reduced capacity. They continue to face difficult financial circumstances, and we will continue to monitor the support that is in that pot. We have raised that issue with the Economy Minister and will continue to highlight it, but it may need to be looked at again in the time ahead.

My colleague John O'Dowd has called for support for the mental health and well-being of our young people and students. It has been a very stressful year for those young people, particularly those who have gone into first year at university or college and who had the issue with grades in August. Now, at a time that

should be a really positive experience for a young person, they face great uncertainty and, in some cases, isolation and the worry of dealing with self-isolation and family worries. As with all of society, there will be a great toll on mental health, and we have called for the Economy and Health Ministers to look at what support might be needed with regard to that, and that will likely need to be resourced.

We know that restrictions have a huge toll on the economy and our way of life. The Executive have indicated that it is, obviously, their intention to build capacity in our trace, trace and protect system as part of the strategy to move away from these circuit-breaker-type interventions. Investment in the health system will be required to develop that capacity in the test and trace operations, and support will be required for individuals to enable them to self-isolate. I welcome the discretionary support grant that the Minister for Communities has put in place. However, I am still hearing from workers who, when they have to self-isolate, are being told by employers that they should take leave — in some cases that is unpaid leave — and they are only entitled to statutory sick pay. I have raised the issue with the Economy Minister to see if anything additional can be done to support those people. I have also raised the need for guidance for employers and workers. We understand the impact that COVID has on businesses, but, again, it is vital that workers and families have incomes and that people are not being forced to choose between their health and putting food on the table.

This has been a tumultuous time for our society, and the economic fallout continues. While we are, obviously, right now continuing to mitigate the worst impacts, there is a need to look towards and to plan for economic recovery. Obviously, that needs to be led by the Department for the Economy, but it must have a truly cross-departmental approach to it. In that context, it is disappointing that the British Chancellor moved to set only a one-year Budget, because the type of planning and investment for that recovery is going to have to be multi-year to address the major challenges that we face, along with the structural issues in our economy, which have resulted in the lowest productivity in these islands, and that will not be a quick fix.

I said in the previous debate, and I think that it is worth repeating, that there needs to be a focus for Invest NI, as our economic development agency, on the economy as a whole. We had a debate yesterday evening about the manufacturing sector, and I have

seen, in recent days, the particular hit that that has had. So, there is a need for support to start up and build capacity in our local businesses, and that is as well as tackling regional inequalities and supporting the decarbonisation of our economy. The supports that are being made available to businesses need to be developed in partnership with businesses to ensure that they are practical and are delivering what is required, and that is something that we will continue to raise with Invest NI and the Department for the Economy.

There is also a need for Invest NI and DFE to support businesses as they prepare to deal with the outworkings of Brexit. I know that the Minister is continuing to press the British Treasury on the need for funding for Brexit preparations and the replacement for our various EU programme funds. The lack of detail and information about the shared prosperity fund and how it will be delivered is constantly being raised with us through the Committee for the Economy and at other engagements. I ask the Minister to comment on any further discussions that he has had with the British Treasury on that particular issue.

Finally, I refer to the representations that the Minister has made to the British Government around additional borrowing powers and flexibilities, because that is going to be crucial in giving the Executive the ability to shape the recovery. I look forward to hearing further details on the forthcoming fiscal commission, which the Minister intends to establish, as part of that broader conversation about economic and fiscal powers. I look forward to persuading Mr Frew on its merits because, in some ways, we are hamstrung by the dribs and drabs of money from the British Treasury and by the one-year Budget. It is really important that we have that ability to plan our investment, our spending and the way in which we pay for things. I will leave it there.

Mr O'Toole: Today is the final stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill. During this year, financial legislation has been something like the proverbial London bus. We waited for three years to vote on a Budget, while this place was not here, and during this year we have had three, one after another. Of course, the spending that we are legally authorising has to happen. I am glad that it is happening, as we need to keep public services functioning and, particularly, as has already been rehearsed well, to help us through the maelstrom of COVID-19 and the end of the Brexit transition period.

However, we again find ourselves in the position of authorising spending with very little meaningful scrutiny of whether funding is being correctly prioritised or how it helps to deliver against any agreed strategic priorities. That is, in part, because we have very little by way of a strategy. There is something slightly futile about standing up to hold an Executive's finance plans to account when there is not really any overall plan to speak of.

12.00 noon

We have heard from some today about the need for individual allocations in individual areas. I share many of the concerns, and I share the desire to increase allocations to those who have been excluded so far from financial support. We need support for students and for our water infrastructure. There is a long list of areas where allocations are essential, including in the local newspaper industry, as Caoimhe Archibald just mentioned. I have been pushing on that subject for a long time. I want all those allocations to be made, but, if we are just talking about allocations in a piecemeal way, it is very difficult to judge the Executive's or the Department's overall performance in delivering a financial plan that makes sense.

Of course, the allocations that have been made in response to the crisis are welcome. They have been made in response to the acute, unprecedented crisis of COVID. I again put on the record that the SDLP welcomes much of the work done by individual civil servants and organisations in Northern Ireland to get money out quickly to businesses. I might add, in parenthesis, that it would have been good had certain organisations been as quick in returning money that they had received in error. As I said, although I welcome the hard work done by all those institutions and civil servants, it is not unreasonable for us to state that there have been profound issues with the Executive's overall performance in prioritising spending and delivering to the Northern Ireland public a coherent plan for how money would be spent to deal with the unprecedented crises. As I said, the allocations that have been made in response to COVID and the looming Brexit crisis are welcome. The Executive are not responsible for either of those issues, albeit one of the parties in the Executive had something of a hand in delivering one of them.

I should add that the Executive should be taking, as I said, much more public ownership of the effort to protect our economy and our society from the worst effects of Brexit. We saw the First Minister and deputy First Minister here today delivering a statement on the British-Irish

Council. Again, it was slightly light on detail about what the Executive Office is doing to prepare our economy for Brexit, and that is not new.

It would be one thing if, in handling the immediate-term crises, the Executive were acting robustly in making allocations in a timely and coherent way. Unfortunately, they are not. Decisions are being made haphazardly, including with the current debate over whether and how to extend COVID restrictions. There are no easy answers to the extraordinarily complex policy challenges thrown up by COVID-19 and its knock-on effects. Policymakers everywhere are trying to find ways to balance carefully the challenges of virus control with the myriad economic and social consequences that managing the virus has caused.

I acknowledge much of what Paul Frew said. The problem is that, from listening to his remarks, you could be forgiven for thinking that there was not a virus. I recognise what he said about close family members suffering from the virus; I am not saying that he is taking it lightly. Unfortunately, we do not live in a world where there are perfect solutions to protecting absolutely every sector of the economy when we need to keep a virus suppressed. There was, I am afraid, no way in which we could have left economic activity unchanged a month ago. Had we done so, we would have seen the virus run riot.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that I acknowledged in my speech that it is a deadly virus and that we need to take measures to protect people. Does the Member realise that the Executive persuaded and incentivised businesses to put in safety measures — barriers, shields, face masks, gowns and safety equipment — and that some even went as far as putting in motion-sensor lighting so that people would not have to touch light switches, which came to an investment of thousands of pounds? Does the Member accept that it was criminal to tell those businesses that they then had to close?

Mr O'Toole: I agree with the Member that businesses have been extremely poorly treated in many ways. They have had abysmal communication and very little clarity from the Executive overall. They should have had more support, and they should have had it more quickly. I will, however, say, gently, to the Member that, if he knows anyone in the biggest party in the Executive, perhaps he could write a letter to them. I do not know whether he knows anyone in a big party: perhaps the First Minister

or the Economy Minister? I encourage him to write to those people because I share many of his concerns. Businesses have been poorly treated and communicated with, albeit that restrictions were necessary when the virus numbers were getting out of control in Northern Ireland, we were in severe danger of our health system being overwhelmed, and there simply was not a scenario in which we could leave everything open.

Policymakers everywhere are having to find ways to carefully balance virus control with the economic damage and myriad other societal consequences. Long after we have a COVID vaccine, and our lives have returned to something approaching normal, there will be myriad societal consequences that we have to deal with and for which the Minister will have to make allocations. It is a tragic and, in part, unavoidable truth that, as individual MLAs with constituents and, more broadly, as an Assembly, we will have to deal with many unintended and unavoidable consequences. However, in Northern Ireland, while we are facing these challenges, as is everywhere else, in working out how we come to a rational outcome, rather than balancing the needs of epidemic control and economic mitigation, we seem, unfortunately, to be trying to find ways of balancing public health, economic damage and what Edwin Poots wants.

As it is with COVID-19 regulations, so it is all too often with our spending allocations. Rather than matching our spending to a set of agreed priorities, such as those in a Programme for Government, we have all too often been improvising and ad-libbing. I acknowledge that some of that, in the circumstances, is inevitable, but not all of it.

This virus came to these shores at, I believe, the end of January/early February. We began our period of restrictions in early to mid-March. We have now had nine or 10 months of this virus being the biggest issue facing us. It is understandable that there has been a fast-paced and occasionally frenetic response. However, that does not explain everything about the ad-libbed and disjointed nature of that response.

In the absence of an agreed Programme for Government, our financial allocations process — our Budget process — becomes the de facto strategic policymaking tool for the entire Executive. Given that we do not have an agreed Programme for Government — the Minister has been more positive and optimistic about this than me — it seems, I am afraid, pretty unlikely that, about 18 months out from

the end of this mandate, we will get one now. It would be great if we did, but it seems more likely that we will not.

I will give an example of how many allocations in our Budget processes in the past year were ad-libbed and fairly incoherent. If you go back to the Budget document that was produced in March, you will see that many of the chapters relating to individual Departments referred to Programme for Government headings. In the bizarre situation where we did not have an agreed Programme for Government, some Departments' introductory preambles, which, presumably, they had sent to the Department of Finance in a pro forma way, listed their 2016 draft Programme for Government outcomes as headings that they were matching their spending priorities to. That is, clearly, to use a slightly wonkish term, a suboptimal situation. We need to do better.

As I said, it is unlikely that we will have a new Programme for Government before the end of the mandate. However, that does not mean that we have to continue to proceed without a real, clear and joined-up indication from not just the Finance Minister but the entire Executive of the plan to which allocations are being made. That includes in quite a big way — this is something that we and, I know, other parties have called for today — much more clarity from the Economy Department about what it sees as the interventions that it needs to make over the medium and long term for our economic recovery and the longer-term rebuilding of our economy.

A former senior special adviser for the DUP famously described the process of government between the two bigger parties — I do not want to make this about the two big parties, but there is a relevant point here — as being akin to a "sausage machine". Unfortunately, too often recently we have seen evidence of that old sausage machine being cranked back into action. It took more than two months, for example, for a £29 million Barnett consequential that was announced for the arts to finally be allocated to the sector. When it was announced, it was of course welcomed, but too often we are welcoming funding without any sense of prioritisation or, indeed, a clear sense of where that money is going once it has been allocated. We have headline announcements, but we then have very little detail.

The other day in the Public Accounts Committee, which I sit on, we were taking evidence on an allocation that had been made to the University of Ulster, where, essentially, an FTC loan was turned into a capital spending

allocation. That might be a correct conversion of an allocation, as it were, that was made, but when it was made we got very little clarity from the Finance Minister or the Economy Department about the context and exactly why that allocation was being made in the way that it was. It was not as transparent as it could be, and that kind of thing needs to improve.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: Yes. I will give way.

Mr Humphrey: It is important that, since the Member invoked the evidence that we took at the PAC —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Will the Member speak into the microphone so that Hansard can pick up what is being said?

Mr Humphrey: It is important that, since the Member invoked the evidence that we took at the PAC last week, he then mentioned the Finance Minister and the Economy Minister, neither of whom gave evidence to the Committee. He may have heard that at another Committee, but he did not hear it at the Public Accounts Committee. I want that to be put on the record for the House.

Mr O'Toole: I am happy to acknowledge what the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee said. I should say that I am referring to when the allocation was made earlier this year. My comment is that there could have been more clarity about that, not the evidence that was given to a Committee by either Minister.

Without prioritisation and certainly without a Programme for Government or anything approaching it, we are robbing the public, not just MLAs, of any real opportunity to judge how well the Executive are doing. That includes my party and all of us — I do not mean all of us; there are a few non-Executive MLAs here, and Mr Allister would probably have asked for an intervention if I had not made that clear. Simply acting as a transmission mechanism for funds with some interruption for arguing about allocations is not what this place was set up to do.

Aneurin Bevan, the Labour Minister who founded the NHS, which we have all rightly been talking about over the last number of months, said:

"The language of priorities is the religion of Socialism".

It should be the religion of power-sharing too, because without agreed priorities, whatever our ideological or constitutional inclinations are, it is hard to get very much done.

I will ask the Finance Minister this: before our next Budget Bill or Estimates debate, can we please have some kind of strategic document to judge our plans against? It would also be helpful to hear from him specifically on the £2.3 billion total in allocations that has been made because of COVID. Can he clarify whether that includes the additional, I think, £400 million that was announced last week? It would be helpful to clarify whether there an additional Barnett consequential came from the UK Treasury.

I recognise that the fairly contemptuous attitude of the UK Treasury to the devolved Administrations has not helped the task for him or his officials when preparing spending plans. We would be in a better position to produce a credible long-term strategy for this place if there was a longer-term Budget. Others referred to that. In the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there was widespread agreement. There is agreement throughout this place that we need to move to a system of multi-year Budgets. Clearly, the Treasury's decision to cancel the spending review that was due this year has thrown that into some jeopardy.

In Northern Ireland specifically, we face an unusually acute short term, with weeks and months of profound, but at least partly, predictable challenge. We know that our businesses will face huge disruption on 1 January, whatever the outcome of the EU-UK trade talks. We know that there is a bewildering range of knock-on effects in areas from law enforcement to cross-border healthcare to agriculture. We know that we will be managing the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19 for months, even if there is now some hope that a vaccine may be deployed amongst our vulnerable population sooner rather than later.

12.15 pm

We face all of these things in the immediate months. All of them are, at least to some extent, known. We know that spending is happening to prepare for Brexit, but we do not know how it is being prioritised or what the greatest need is, based on a reasonable worst-case scenario. We know that hundreds of millions is being held for the health service, but we do not know the volume of it that is directly contingent on the path of the virus or how much of it is mapped against transformation plans. It would be helpful to understand exactly how the Executive are

planning to approach the next few months based on those two great challenges.

Some, including Paul Frew, have talked about the need for an exit plan and exit strategy in relation to restrictions. We certainly need an exit strategy in relation to this virus overall. We are seeing signs of hope. We need to give businesses, workers and people clarity. We cannot give them exact clarity over when people's lives will be back to normal and when they will be able to jump on a plane or go to a football match. However, we should be able to do our best to sit down and think about the next six months and what the key challenges are. They are pretty overwhelming. I have a suspicion sometimes that, unfortunately, some of these discussions do not happen and some of this work is not done simply because the challenge feels too overwhelming. I respect that; I can understand that. There is a pretty overwhelming, daunting task facing our Executive with both COVID and Brexit, but we owe it to people here.

We also owe it to them to be public about it. Lots of this work is going on, but MLAs are not even told, let alone the broader public. There is nothing stopping us from producing some sort of spending plan for the months ahead. This is not a long-term, multi-year Budget. This is about clarity for people, businesses and workers in Northern Ireland for the next three to six months about how outstanding money to the end of this financial year is being prioritised to get us through the acute challenges of COVID and Brexit — the Samson and Goliath, if you like, of the weeks and months ahead. Otherwise, we will simply be coming back to demean ourselves and this Assembly by debating a Budget Bill and Estimates which most people have barely read and allocations that have simply been spat out after haggling matches at the Executive.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Frew: I am interested in what the Member has to say. Does the Member agree with me, albeit it is a very primitive thought at present, that we should be looking at some sort of statutory duty being placed on Ministers to come to the House with regard to the financial process?

Mr O'Toole: There is obviously already a statutory duty for the Finance Minister to come. I should say that, in many ways, the Finance Minister has been very good in coming to the

Assembly a lot. The problem is the overall level of detail that we have had from the Executive on how priorities are matched to what the Finance Minister is announcing. We have not had enough clarity. I ask for specific updates from the Finance Minister on the flexibilities that he asked the UK Treasury for, many of which I support. I also ask for clarity on where we are with borrowing this year. As many of us have said, we are in a situation where borrowing costs are lower than they have ever been. Lots of us have rightly talked over the last number of years about the impact of austerity on this place. The global economic consensus is that we have moved away from the age of austerity now. No one in the International Monetary Fund or the economics profession anywhere is telling Governments to worry about their precise level of debt or deficit this year. They are saying, "Spend more money". That includes this devolved Administration.

I agree with the Finance Minister when it comes to pressing for more powers, and I disagree with Mr Frew when it comes to his scepticism around how we spend money. It has been made clear by Westminster and Whitehall's approach to managing this virus that the public policy priority will always be not just England but the south of England, where most Tory MPs are. That is a blunt, hard truth. I am not unfamiliar with a lot of the priorities of Whitehall and Westminster, so you can take it from me that, bluntly, the priorities will always be in the south of England.

That is part of the reason that, whatever our constitutional perspective, we need more flexibility here, so I ask the Finance Minister for an update on the fiscal council and the fiscal commission, which are two slightly different things. One is a specific commitment in NDNA, while the other is a slightly more forward-looking, one-off commission. I also ask him for specific updates on the allocations for Brexit. Is there a global allocation that the Executive or his Department have earmarked for Brexit preparedness? How much delta is there between outcomes?

Finally, I ask the Finance Minister, as I said, to work with Executive colleagues, particularly, to be blunt, the Economy Minister, and to think about how we can have a three- to six-month plan or statement to the Assembly — something — about how we are matching the allocations in our financial plans to the big challenges that we face in the months to come.

Mr Muir: As we consider and vote on the Budget (No. 3) Bill's Final Stage, it is important to reflect on the unprecedented circumstances

that Northern Ireland's public finances have faced this year. We continue to live through a global pandemic that endangers lives and livelihoods. We have a health and social care system that is under unprecedented and incredible strain, coupled with the worst economic downturn in history, with many businesses closing for good, resulting in jobs lost and workers in search of support and re-employment.

I look at the COVID-19 dashboard on the Department of Health website every day. Today, there are 426 confirmed COVID-19 inpatients and 55 people in intensive care. Those are stark statistics, and we should be grateful forever to the staff who are caring for people in hospital. Coupled with those statistics is the grief and suffering endured by those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. There has been lots of talk about the evidence base for decisions, but the figures for confirmed inpatients, those in intensive care and those who have passed away is plenty of evidence.

Although an additional £2.8 billion in Barnett consequential has flowed to the Northern Ireland Executive, the scale of the damage inflicted by COVID-19 means that it has been impossible to protect every person, every community, every business and every organisation from its impact. To date, Departments have taken many actions to assist. Those are to be welcomed, and I thank the officials for the work undertaken. Some initiatives have been bold and ambitious and have made a real difference, whereas others have been limited and slow, leaving many feeling frustrated, ignored and tipped into financial ruin.

As we endure the second wave and look towards a potential vaccine, it is important that lessons be learned and everything be done to better support people across Northern Ireland to get through the awful experience that is COVID-19. To do that, we must ensure that moneys are made available and well spent. The granting of additional financial flexibilities to the Northern Ireland Executive by Her Majesty's Treasury is essential, whether they be new borrowing powers for resource expenditure or the ability to carry over capital and resource funds into the next financial year. Although more Barnett consequential have been made available in recent weeks, local Departments have been demonstrating a slowness in delivering support on the ground. We really need the power to be able to carry over funds into the next financial year. To have to surrender those moneys back to Treasury

would be an unforgivable scandal when so many are in need right across Northern Ireland.

Providing moneys to spend is vital, but arguably of more importance is ensuring that every single penny is well spent. That is why I again raise the issue of a fiscal council. A commitment in page 12 of 'New Decade, New Approach' states that the purpose of such a council is to:

"assess and report on the sustainability of the Executive's finances and spending proposals."

At a time that we are spending billions more than was envisaged when the New Decade, New Approach deal was struck, it is imperative that the fiscal council be established without any more delay. Failure to get a fiscal council in place before we start another budgetary process would be wrong and a matter of real concern. In closing, I therefore ask the Finance Minister this: what is the reason for the delay and what are the definitive, confirmed timescales for recruiting members, making appointments and getting the council up and running?

The Alliance Party will support the Bill today, but, with over £800 million wasted every year to the cost of division, we can ill afford to continue without the oversight and reform that is needed as we look to the current and future needs to support and rebuild our communities, our economy and our public services over the months and years ahead.

Mrs Cameron: The passing of the Budget Bill is a lengthy process and, by the time the Final Stage is reached, most of us have probably covered the issues that are of importance to us. For fear of repetition, I will, therefore, keep my remarks short.

I have sat through debates on the passage of the Budget Bill, and, indeed, through many other debates. Throughout each debate, we see a recurring theme in Members' contributions: the need to transform our health service. Never has that been more acute than it is now in the wake of the devastation that COVID-19 has had on our health service, and the ticking time bomb that awaits us due to the interventions that have been missed. That should tell us that the time for talking has long gone and that the time to transform our health service is now.

We face a cancer crisis, a diabetes crisis, a heart crisis and a mental health crisis. Those are a few crises among the many in the health

service. Add to them our longstanding failure to address the needs of those with autism and other disabilities. If we are honest, we will admit that we cannot do what needs to be done without a radical change in how we do things. We have the Bengoa report and the political endorsement of it. I take on board the comments of Members in the past. I think that it was the Member for South Down Mr Wells who, rightly, said that a problem always arises when it comes to closing a local hospital, for instance, and then we, as public representatives, lose our nerve. That is not always the case. I remember well that my colleague Edwin Poots reduced A&E in his constituency when he was Health Minister. That took guts, and guts is what we need to have at this time. We need to have a serious public conversation based on facts, not populism or playing to the gallery.

The Budget does not go anywhere near to addressing the needs of our health service. The needs of an older population will further stretch the purse strings, but we cannot ignore that need; we need to meet it. COVID-19 has changed everything, but if any good is to come from it, let it be that it is the catalyst for change that saves our health service before it is too late. I end my comments there.

Mr Gildernew: I have already addressed the Assembly on the Health Committee's considerations, so I will not go over those comments again today. I make these remarks in my role as Sinn Féin health spokesperson.

The backdrop to our discussion today on the Budget is an unprecedented health crisis with which we continue to struggle. We face the economic uncertainties that have been brought about by the pandemic and by the instability that is hurtling towards us in the form of Brexit. We are not in a good place — there is no question about that — but we could make progress towards a better place if we had the political will.

The pandemic has afforded us lessons that we will, hopefully, learn from. First, we learned how much we depend on what we formerly categorised as low-skilled workers: those who sell us our groceries; serve our food; drive our buses; clean our buildings; and, crucially, form part of the system that delivers health and social care from the ground up. Surely, part of the lesson, apart from the gratitude that we should and, undoubtedly, do feel, is that those workers deserve better working conditions and fair pay. Those who staff the front lines are the most needed and valuable workers in our communities.

Any economy planning must address the deep infrastructural inequalities west of the Bann. Connectivity is regarded by many as an essential utility — a basic utility in any modern society — and we need to provide it across all areas of the North. During the COVID-19 crisis, we learned of students who could not access learning materials because they did not have the broadband access. There are 97,000 poorly served premises across the North, largely in rural Fermanagh, Tyrone and south Derry.

Poor broadband and mobile-data services continue to marginalise our rural communities and create another deep inequality in our society. If that is not addressed, it will contribute to increasing problems in dealing with health and the use of technology that could provide benefit in the areas of health and the economy. Students, patients, businesses and families who live in rural communities are entitled to, and must have, equal access to technology as their success is vital to sustaining those rural areas.

12.30 pm

Many sacrifices have been made during the pandemic by our health and social care workers, to whom we are indebted. It is not enough to applaud on a Thursday evening, even though they are richly deserving of applause; we need to make every effort to rebuild our health and social care system, to recruit substantial and appropriate numbers of health professionals and to pay them fair wages. I once again urge the Minister of Health to address the issue of strike pay for health and social care staff. That money has been allocated by the Finance Minister; it should be paid immediately to provide staff with the recognition of our appreciation for their efforts on behalf of us all, during and prior to the COVID pandemic, and in recognition of the serious staffing concerns that their strike action highlighted. That remains a key area of concern that adds to pressure on staff each and every day.

As we navigate our way through the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been challenged by the deep structural problems in our economy and, in particular, in our health and social care system. We must now invest in and resource a properly functioning public health system that is able to deal with the pandemic. That will require investment in find, test, trace, isolate and support systems to a level that will operate at any given time and will be able to flex to meet the needs of positive cases that we see in the community in order to build in the protections for the health system.

The structural difficulties did not start with COVID-19, but they have been cruelly exposed by it. They are a consequence of deep Tory cuts to the NHS over time. When the pandemic arrived, the devastation was worsened by the catastrophic cuts that we have all been talking about for 10 years and which, cruelly, came home to roost. Those are the same cuts that have caused workforce shortages, a lack of equipment and a crumbling health and social care system that is barely fit for purpose. We now urgently need to invest in and rebuild an effective public health system. That will require longer term planning, transformation and longer term funding. In that respect, I, too, am disappointed at the retraction from the commitment to longer term planning; health, in particular, requires longer term planning and budgeting to allow it to transform and deliver the service.

Surely the lesson of COVID is that we must endeavour to do things differently. Perhaps, for a moment, we should be more optimistic and look at where society is now as a blank canvas, where we can be creative, thoughtful and humane in the policy decisions that we make from this point and build in the lessons and the understanding of inequality that we have developed as a result of everything in recent times. Although we do not have all the money that we would like to have, surely we owe it to our communities to create a new, more equal society by addressing the deep inequalities that confront us every day and returning hope for the future to all our people, but especially our young people, who have suffered so much at this time. Austerity is not the way forward. We must now invest in our people's education, health, prosperity and well-being for the future and return that hope for the future to all of our communities and, in particular, our young people.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): During the debate on the Supply resolution, I outlined some of the work that the Committee has undertaken throughout the year on the DAERA budget. I also articulated some of the Committee's main concerns, including the cost of EU exit and the cost to the agri-food industry of COVID-19. It is those aspects that I will focus on today. I will take the opportunity to update the Assembly on the latest financial information on the EU exit and COVID-19.

I will start by referring to the additional agri-food COVID-19 funding that DAERA bid for and was successful in obtaining. We have every reason to be very proud of the agri-food industry; it has

kept operating and kept the food supply chain going seamlessly during the worst of the lockdown and in to this new phase. We have every confidence that it will continue to do that in the coming months.

We have an industry here that produces the highest-quality food, which is exported all over the world. It has also been supplying the hospitality and catering industries, and that aspect has taken the direct hit.

The DAERA Minister made a bid and received an additional £25 million for the agri-food sector, and this was with the full support of the Committee; in fact, we in the Committee held a mini-inquiry to help to inform the Minister and the Department about how the farmers and, indeed, the stakeholders wanted to see the money spent. After our quick call for evidence, we heard from a large number of farmers and rural sector groups about what was happening in their businesses and what support was needed.

There are two schemes for the distribution of the £25 million. The first, making up the bulk of the money, went to dairy, beef, sheep and potato farmers and accounts for £21.4 million. The dairy sector got up to £11 million, while the beef sector got £7 million. That scheme is closed. The Committee was clear with the Department that it wanted to see the funding targeted at those most in need and who had suffered the most loss and that it would be equitable in its distribution. Some members still have concerns about funding for beef cattle and about whether enough was given to sheep farmers. However, we are well aware that we are not out of the woods yet when it comes to the financial impact on our farmers. Further support may be needed in this financial year.

The second scheme is aimed at the ornamental horticulture sector, and it accounts for around £1.6 million. That sector produces many of our vegetables, soft fruits and garden plants. When the secondary legislation came to the AERA Committee to provide the authority for the Department to spend the money, the Committee had concerns with the requirement for those businesses to be VAT-registered. The ornamental horticulture sector has lots of small businesses, and many are not VAT-registered and, therefore, are not eligible for the scheme. I am glad to say that the Committee made strong representation to DAERA on that aspect and the requirement for VAT registration has been removed. That funding scheme was recently opened, and it closes on 15 November. Applications are now being received by DAERA.

There is residual funding from the £25 million of £3.6 million, plus there has been a reprioritisation within the Department of another £3.6 million. That funding is being held by DAERA for potential allocations of support should COVID continue to throw up challenges in the coming months. Other COVID funding has been allocated, including an additional £145,000 for environmental NGOs, and that was allocated in September.

The fishing industry has also received funding to support it through the crisis. The Committee recently wrote to the Department to get an update on that funding. We considered that update at our meeting last week and noted that, in April, £1.32 million had been paid to 171 vessels under the fishing support scheme. Under the aquaculture scheme, the vast majority of the money, around £125,000, has been paid.

There is a further scheme — the extended fishing support scheme — for trawlers and dredgers. It is a tie-up scheme. It is to support the sector to help with the continuation of depressed markets and prices for landings of fish. Under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) programme, £1.3 million has been allocated, and that was launched on 5 October, with the first payments expected in December. During the period from 19 October to 27 November, 38 vessels will be tied up, and a further 23, to date, will be tied up from 16 November to 31 December.

Finally, there will be a fixed cost scheme for static fishers, with an allocation of £390,000, and the Committee will consider the SL1 on the scheme at our next meeting. We also understand that there will be a scheme for the Lough Neagh eel fishermen. It has not been launched yet, but the Committee understands that it will be funded under the EMFF, and the Minister is still considering the scheme's eligibility criteria.

The Main Estimates and Supply resolution will also show that £3.8 million of COVID funding has been allocated to waste. Most of that was to help local authorities cope with the closure of public amenity sites during lockdown, with the resulting increase in fly-tipping. A further bid of £11.4 million for the period from July to March 2021 was approved in September. That funding will help to support the additional cost of implementing social-distancing measures and ensure that staff across the council are able to fulfil crucial waste-management roles in a safe manner. The Minister of Finance announced the allocation on 24 September as part of the

Executive's COVID-19 allocations of £165 million, which will see a funding injection for business, infrastructure, culture, schools and councils.

Some £2 million has been allocated by the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme to support the Department for Communities revitalisation programme.

I will now move on to the next major area of financial concern to which the Committee has recently turned its attention: the financial impact to DAERA of the preparation and delivery of EU exit at the end of the transition period. It also covers the contingency planning that DAERA is doing for the possibility of a no-deal outcome. The AERA Committee is getting regular written and oral briefings on the preparations, which, as most Members know, are essential to allow us to trade with Britain and to ensure that food can be brought in for our population. For Members who want information or details, I refer them to the Hansard report of the oral briefing that we received on 5 November from the DAERA permanent secretary and his senior team.

On the EU withdrawal Act and the protocol, DAERA is required to implement the EU official controls regulation. That includes sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks on regulated goods arriving at points of entry into this jurisdiction. The preparedness work includes physical facilities, IT systems and staff training. It also requires the reprioritisation of DAERA work programme and the staff resource required to deliver official controls post transition. We know that, in connection with EU exit, DAERA has recently activated its major emergency response plan and has indicated that it will not be able to deliver a full-day service on day one after exit.

DAERA recently awarded major contracts to three companies for the new inspection facilities to be built at Larne harbour, Belfast harbour and Warrenpoint harbour. Contractors have been asked to deliver the design and build on the required facilities and the contingency arrangements.

I asked the Department about the staffing arrangements that needed to be put in place to deal with EU exit. We know that a recruitment process is ongoing, and the Department has increased its staffing capacity from 2,900 to around 3,200. It is estimated that, to operate 24/7 at Larne and Belfast, 25 vets, 75 port inspectors and 12 administration staff will be needed to undertake the required work. In addition to that, local authorities estimate that

they will require some 30 additional environmental health officers, 18 plant officers and three fish officers. The Committee has been informed that most of the local authority staff are in place, but DAERA is still recruiting or redeploying staff from other business areas.

The Chief Veterinary Officer has just recruited 14 new vets, nine of whom are for the ports. He already has five in place, so that brings him to 15 of the 25 vets needed. The Committee heard welcome news from the Chief Veterinary Officer last week when he confirmed that there had been substantial and positive progress in the discussions with Queen's University and Ulster University about creating a veterinary faculty in the North. For years, many of our vets have been trained in the EU, and, unfortunately, many do not come back and continue to work overseas, which results in a brain drain. Vets are absolutely crucial in facilitating east-west trade and, indeed, maintaining the epidemiological unit of the island of Ireland. I spoke to the AERA Minister yesterday about it and wrote to the Economy Minister today for an update. It is a good news story about the possibility of having our own veterinary faculty in the North.

As I said, there is a price tag for EU exit. This year, it will cost £45 million, which includes £5 million of contingency costs. The money has come from the Treasury, and the Committee clarified that with the permanent secretary and the senior team last week. I have asked for a detailed breakdown of the costs for staffing, IT and infrastructure at the three ports of Larne, Belfast and Foyle.

Another major issue with EU exit is future funding to replace current EU funding. Members are aware that the bulk of the EU funding that comes to DAERA is paid out as direct payments to farmers. Whilst the Committee welcomes the fact that £293 million has been secured for 2020-21, it still has concerns about what will happen beyond that. The Committee is doing focused work on that aspect, and, as we start that, there will, no doubt, be a series of sessions on the future agricultural strategy, including the payment of support to farmers.

12.45 pm

I note that the Paymaster General, Penny Mordaunt MP, wrote to the devolved Administrations on 13 July confirming the British Government's manifesto commitment to maintain the current budgets for farming and fishing for the duration of the Parliament. That confirmation is a welcome starting point.

However, the Committee recently received a copy of a letter on EU funding from the Minister of Finance to the Chair of the Committee for Finance. In the letter, the Finance Minister notes that, regarding replacements for agricultural funding where a guarantee has been received from the British Government, there are concerns about how elements of the funding for that guarantee have been calculated and that it may lead to a cut in support for rural communities. The Committee has asked DAERA for clarity on that.

The Committee has also expressed concerns about replacement funding for rural development. Currently, funding derives largely from CAP pillar II. Earlier in the year, we discussed with officials the resources and capital budgets that had been set aside for the rural development programme. The Committee noted that it is intended that the replacement for EU funding for rural development will come from the Shared Prosperity Fund. The fact that there has been very little progress or clarity on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund has been raised here today, and I raised it during Question Time with the Finance Minister a number of weeks ago.

Stakeholders from rural communities indicated to DAERA that, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, they had already begun work on a new rural development policy framework, which is welcome. When I spoke informally to the Minister yesterday, he said that there would be a consultation on the new rural policy in the very near future, and we all look forward to that.

Clarity on the Shared Prosperity Fund is long overdue, but I am hopeful that the Committee will wish to examine that aspect in detail in the near future. That is all that I want to say.

Mr Catney: I thank the Department and the staff for the work that has gone into developing the Budget. I thank the Minister for coming to the Assembly, answering our questions and providing clarity on a wide range of points. I also thank him for all his help when the all-party group on fair banking was being set up in response to COVID-19. That will be used more and needed more in the future.

I agree with the Minister that MLAs treat this debate as an opportunity to highlight projects in their area for which they would like funding. I am as guilty as any: dare I mention Maze/Long Kesh? Really, this is not the stage at which to do that. I welcome his commitment to a review of the budgetary process as it will give help and clear direction on how best to input into the process. There have been delays, but, as this is

such important work, I hope that the Minister will commit to making sure that there are no further delays.

I also welcome the Minister's continued work on trying to get flexibility in budgetary exchange. Given COVID and all the talk about Brexit in the last few days, it is vital that flexibility is put into our Budget so that we can deal with pressures that do not conform to a financial year. We all agree that giving back unspent money should be avoided at all costs, and I know that the Minister has the support of the Committee on that.

On the Budget itself, I hope that recent announcements on housing associations will help them to access FTC. For a long time, the lack of use of that function has been staggering, and I hope that a credible option is now available. Continual monitoring of the available COVID-related funds is needed. New announcements are welcome, but, as the Minister is aware, there are still those without support.

Continuous pressure must be put on the Treasury to solidify its commitment to meet Brexit costs.

The burden on our economy, on our agriculture sector and on our trade will be difficult enough. We will not front the bill for a Tory vanity project.

In the last debate, Minister, you made a point of monitoring the increase in the capital budget for the Department for Infrastructure and, specifically, the £15 million for Northern Ireland Water. I appreciate your point, but I am sure that you are well aware that that is far less than what is required to save our water and sewerage infrastructure. Northern Ireland Water has been to each council area describing how developments will have to be put on hold because of the issues. I hope that you will sit down with the Minister for Infrastructure as a matter of urgency to discuss what can be done.

Going forward to the next Budget, we have a number of issues that are already apparent. First, we need an announcement from the Treasury to kick off the process that is pushing any consultation period on the new Budget into the festive season. That is not ideal, and I hope that the Minister will continue to push the Treasury. We also know that a £350 million hole has been left by the New Decade, New Approach funding, which will need to be found from somewhere. Consultation with Departments must start as early as possible so that pressure can be identified and sensible

decisions made. Ultimately, work must continue on a fiscal commission to give greater scrutiny into and expertise on our budgetary process. Maybe then some of the projects that we develop can begin to be checked off rather than gather dust in a report somewhere.

I sit on the Finance Committee, and the onus is on us to come forward with solutions. I thank the Minister and the Department for listening to the solutions that we try to bring forward. It is not always about scrutiny; it is about trying to help and bring forward solutions to get us to where we want to be.

Mr O'Dowd: Unfortunately, I do not think that I will have my remarks finished before the 1.00 pm break, but I will try my best to assist in moving the debate on.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Budget Bill. As I have said in the House before, while it is welcome that we have a Finance Minister, an Executive and an Assembly in place, our Budget Bill is unique in many ways, as we are not here today discussing a taxation policy or revenue policies; rather, we are divvying up what is, ungraciously, in my opinion, called the block grant, plus our rates and a few other earnings, among our Departments to spend in the year ahead. As an Executive, an Assembly and a society, we have to reach the stage where we have politically matured to the point where we have a Budget Bill that is based on taxation and other matters and fiscal powers, because that is where the real decisions are made.

If anyone watched 'The View' last Thursday night, they will have heard the paediatric consultant from the Royal Victoria Hospital talking about child poverty, which was quite horrific. She talked about how children on the wards stuffed toast down their nappies because they did not know when they would get their next feed at home and how children ate bowls upon bowls of cereal because they knew that, when they went home, they would not get any more food. What has brought that about? I cannot judge each case, but poverty has brought that about. What creates poverty? Poverty is not a natural phenomenon. Poverty is created because policies, legislation and decisions have been made that ensure that trends continue. In our society, down through the decades, you can pinpoint where the trends of poverty have existed and which communities those trends exist in. There is a higher level of poverty in the Catholic community but not exclusively. There is poverty in working-class communities across this society. As an Executive, an Assembly and a society, if we

want to tackle that, we should not look towards charity or food banks. Look towards policy and legislation, and redirect much-needed funds towards ensuring that we do not have children stuffing toast into their nappies to bring home with them because they do not know when they will be fed again. That is what Budgets have to be about, and that is what our Executive and our legislation have to be about. We have to eradicate poverty, and we have to give communities that have been left behind for decades, if not centuries, an opportunity to create the change that is needed.

There are ways of doing that, as I have said. Education is one of them; in fact, education is key to it. Education is key to eradicating poverty in our society. Let us make sure that we invest in our education system and that we have the community infrastructure in place to ensure that there is a strong sense of community in our society. Let us make sure that the Executive have the spending power to redirect the extra resources into those communities. I recall, as Education Minister, redirecting millions of pounds away from some schools to others to tackle educational underachievement and poverty. Quite rightly, I was challenged. We were in austere times, and I was taking money off schools that were surviving and giving it to others to make sure that they had a leg-up. Those are the difficult choices that have to be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am conscious of the time. I think I have another five minutes, if that is OK. I am just waiting for the break.

That brings me on to Mr Frew's commentary. It is understandable that the debate has entered the realm of COVID, which dominates everything. The economic impact of COVID has been as devastating, in many ways, as the health impact, setting it aside, of course, that over 1,000 people have died of COVID-19, many more have been ill and many more will face the consequences of that illness for a long time. I listened with interest, when I was in my room, to Mr Frew's commentary on this. I was not sure whether I was listening to a resignation speech from the DUP or to the continued feud between him and his party leader in relation to the role of the Executive. We have COVID-19 deniers, and now, to add to that list, we have Executive deniers. Five parties in the Chamber are members of the Executive, and it is right and proper that MLAs hold the Executive to account. That is our function; that is what we are here for. However, if I was of Mr Frew's belief that the Executive have been criminal, have led to killing people and are involved in wanton vandalism against businesses, I would

sit in that corner, not on a party Bench. I would get up, leave that party and sit in that corner over there. If someone solemnly believes those statements about the Executive, they have to act on it.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will.

Mr Frew: Does the Member recognise that even members of the very Executive that he talks about have spoken in those terms? Even this morning, the First Minister, from this very Bench, spoke of the impact on businesses. This is not an issue in-house; it is the Assembly performing its function, using its power to hold the Executive to account. That is our job. When will the party opposite realise that its function is to challenge, not to be led like some troop through the Lobbies?

Mr O'Dowd: At no stage have I heard the First Minister refer to the Executive as being criminal, killing people or doing wanton vandalism: never. I have not heard the First Minister say, "Who is going to save us from this Executive?".

There are mixed views in the business community around what the Executive should do next. I have listened to different views in my constituency and on the air waves about what should happen next. I have met businesspeople who are angry and frustrated with the Executive. The majority of businesspeople whom I have met want the Executive to take a leading role in tackling COVID-19, to protect themselves, their families and their loved ones, but in the recognition that, on the other side of this, we have to have an economy. At the start of the pandemic, many businesses were grateful and thankful for the interventions of the Executive — the Finance Minister in particular — and the funds that were distributed. What is clearly breeding frustration in the business community at this stage is this: three weeks into the current lockdown, many of the businesses affected have not received the financial interventions that they were promised, not by the Finance Minister but by the Economy Minister. I have concerns about the record and role of the Economy Minister, even if there was not COVID-19, because there has been —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Excuse me. I ask the Member to clarify whether he will have finished his speech in a couple of minutes. If not, we will bring him back in after the break.

Mr O'Dowd: I think that I will have to come back in after the break.

There has been dithering from the Economy Minister throughout the process. She has had one eye on Westminster and one eye on what happens in the Assembly. She needs to have both eyes on our local economy to ensure that our business community is supported. I will end there for now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be questions to the Minister of Finance. We will return to this debate at 3.30 pm, when the next scheduled Member to speak will be Mr O'Dowd resuming his speech.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.01 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 2, in the name of Alex Easton, and 11, in the name of John Blair, have been grouped.

RHI Inquiry: Recommendations

1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the work of the Executive Subcommittee on Reform following the RHI Inquiry, on the implementation of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry report recommendations. (AQO 1053/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): In line with the NDNA commitment, the Executive subcommittee on reform was established to consider the recommendations of the RHI report in full and to oversee their implementation. The subcommittee met for the first time in July 2020 and was scheduled to meet again on 5 November. That meeting was postponed and will be rearranged in the coming weeks.

The report's recommendations have been brigaded under seven key themes, and at the next meeting the subcommittee will hear from each theme lead. The leads will outline the significant work that has already been done and present for approval an action plan detailing the work ahead. The Executive subcommittee plans to bring a full report on the actions taken and proposed for each recommendation to the full Executive and Assembly before the Christmas recess.

Ms Armstrong: Can the Minister provide an update on the independent panel set up to examine the role of civil servants in the RHI scheme, and on the independent panel that is to be established to investigate breaches of the ministerial code?

Mr Murphy: With regard to the panel's work to look into the disciplinary process, some of those cases have been concluded, some have been stayed, either due to legal action or ill health, and some are ongoing, with their time frames to be confirmed. I am limited in what I can say about that process because there is ongoing

litigation that seeks to challenge it. As I said, four cases have been heard and concluded, four have been stayed, either due to legal action or ill health, and two are ongoing. Legal correspondence has been received in respect of one of those cases. Therefore, as I said, I am very limited in what I can say in relation to them. Nonetheless, I would like to see them concluded as quickly as possible. I hope that whatever legal issues are involved are resolved as quickly as possible to bring this chapter to a close.

Mr McGuigan: Can the Minister provide an update on the RHI scheme itself as per commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement?

Mr Murphy: There was a commitment to bring the RHI scheme to a close. Of course, that is the responsibility of the Department for the Economy. I know that the Minister for the Economy has brought discussion of the issue to the Executive on a number of occasions. Like, I am sure, many other Ministers, I share an ambition to see the scheme closed. Of course, there are outstanding issues to be addressed as a consequence of that, and I look forward to hearing the Economy Minister's propositions for them.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Can he update the House on whether the delay in the founding of the RHI committee and its work has led to the delay in recruitment to senior positions, such as head of the Civil Service? I understand that, at the moment, we are also still waiting for new permanent secretaries to be appointed or to go through the process for Justice, Education and Economy.

Mr Murphy: No, there is no relationship between the two issues at all.

Mr O'Toole: Further to his answers about the Executive subcommittee and panel meetings, can the Minister confirm whether any discussion or consideration has been given to underpinning any of the reforms in legislation? Thus far, the Executive are insistent that reforms should go through via codes and guidance. Can the Minister also tell the House whether any members of his party referred themselves to the Commissioner for Standards in relation to business assistance schemes?

Mr Murphy: First, it is not a matter of the Executive's being insistent: the work informing the RHI subcommittee was conducted by the five parties over a long period, in which the Member's party was a participant. The

recommendations that the Executive and their subcommittee are following through come from that area of work, in which the Member's party was a participant. If the Member is advocating a different approach with regard to legislation now, that is a departure from what his party had agreed all along on the matter.

I have no idea whether anyone has been referred, or has referred themselves, to the Commissioner for Standards.

COVID-19: Centrally Held Funding

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the COVID-19-related funding being held centrally. (AQO 1054/17-22)

11. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance what financial reserves are available to fund future economic interventions needed as a result of changes to the public health regulations. (AQO 1063/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Following the October monitoring round, the Executive held £100.6 million in reserve. Last Thursday, 5 November, the Executive were informed by Treasury that we would receive an additional £400 million.

COVID-19 continues to present many challenges, and the Executive will consider how to best use that £500 million for targeted support in the coming weeks and months.

In addition, the following funding is also held centrally: £0.4 million is being held for transfer to the Department for Transport in England for the ferry operator scheme; £6 million is being held pending the finalisation of the bus, coach and taxi support scheme; £22.9 million is being held for further sectoral support and for any unforeseen PPE requirements; and £60 million is being held pending the Department for the Economy's development of COVID restrictions business support measures.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that all funding is not held centrally and that it gets out to the Departments, especially Health and Finance, so that we can tackle the COVID-19 pandemic? Can the Minister also tell us what he is doing to ensure that none of that money gets handed back to the Treasury?

Mr Murphy: Some £600 million was ring-fenced for Health and held for a time — probably since the end of the summer and into early autumn — and Health was assessing how

much of that it could spend. It has come back to the Executive in the last number of weeks to say that it will spend, roughly, £524 million of that. That left an additional amount of money, then, to go into a central pot for the Executive. All of that money was allocated in the last week or two, with £100 million being held in reserve in case further interventions were necessary; the Executive considered that prudent, and it was my recommendation to them. We learned only last Thursday that we have an additional £400 million. I am partly drifting into today's debate on the Budget Bill, but we have been getting a drip feed of allocations, which we are trying to respond to. If we had had a full sense of the entire £2.8 billion at the start of the year, it would have allowed us to plan much better, but we have been on a drip feed.

The greatest sin of all is not spending some of the money. Of course, there will be a challenge ahead. We learned only last Thursday that we have an additional amount of money. We were holding some back. Along with some of the other areas that I have outlined, that amounts to roughly £0.5 billion that we need to spend in the time ahead. I want to see schemes brought forward, money on the ground as quickly as we can possibly get it there, and that money being directed where it is needed. Of course, as I said, Health has already taken a share of the money, which it has said that it needs for the rest of the financial year.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister provide an update on whether there is likely to be increased borrowing powers for the Northern Ireland Executive to try to tackle COVID-19 and to assist in recovery measures?

Mr Murphy: I think that the first priority will be to spend the money that we have. As I said, we were operating, until last Thursday morning, on the basis that we had set aside an additional £100 million to look at unforeseen circumstances in the rest of the financial year and that has now been bumped up to almost £0.5 billion. The priority will be to spend that. We have, along with Scotland and Wales, been pressing the Treasury for, in principle, flexibilities around borrowing, carry over, the conversion of capital to resource — all those issues. We have not yet had confirmation of any agreement on all that. However, I think that the Executive's priority will be to spend the money that we have and to look for, in principle, flexibilities around a range of other matters.

Mr Allister: To know that there is £0.5 billion at the centre is discomfiting in one sense for

many businesses that are on their uppers and have not been able to access money. However, more specifically, the businesses that were closed down three weeks ago, and which were expecting to open again this week, were promised money. I am sure that I am not the only MLA to be in receipt of multiple representations from such businesses, which ask the simple question, "Where is it?". So, on their behalf, I ask, "Where is it?".

Mr Murphy: My Department is responsible for rolling out the Land and Property Services (LPS) scheme. The issue over the last number of weeks has been the fact that, in earlier schemes, the entirety of businesses were getting support, which is when we were operating off the LPS database. When it is restricted to hospitality that means that a differentiation has to be provided, and that requires additional data from other sources, such as council environmental health sources, to differentiate between what is a shop as in retail and what is a shop as in a hairdresser, beauty salon or various cafes and other aspects of that. That is how they are characterised by LPS, and that has added another layer of difficulty. As of this morning, £7.84 million has been allocated from the scheme to over 2,290 businesses. The money is being rolled out. That is not happening as fast as I want it to happen, but it is going out. I am told that there have been over 11,300 applications and that those are being worked through as quickly as possible.

Mr McGlone: Can the Minister provide an update on how centrally held COVID-related funding will be utilised to specifically increase support for the hospitality sector in the run up to the Christmas period?

Mr Murphy: A number of schemes have been put forward. As I said, my Department received £35 million for the scheme that I just talked about, and that is to get money on the ground for hospitality and people in close-contact services who have business premises, because it is based on the property model. Sixty million pounds is being held centrally for Economy to roll out schemes for other people in close-contact services and other hospitality support. I look forward to seeing the details of that and early applications for it. Of course, given the discussions that we are currently having and the possibility of an extension to the restrictions, the Executive will consider and act very quickly to get further support to anyone who has been affected by the restrictions.

Victims' Pension

3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the discussions he has had with HM Treasury regarding funding for the victims' pension. (AQO 1055/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My engagement in the case has been with the NIO, because, in my view and in line with the statement of funding policy, it is for the Department that has constructed the policy to deal with funding in the first instance. I and other Ministers have raised that issue with the Secretary of State on a number of occasions and will continue to do so. A request was recently made to the Secretary of State by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to meet with him, alongside myself and the Justice Minister, to discuss the matter. He has yet to agree to a meeting. However, I am determined to pursue the necessary funding.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his update. It is a moral stain on the history of Ireland that those innocent people, who suffered the most heinous injuries and injustice, have waited a lifetime for the victims' pension. Indeed, many have died and are dying waiting for it. I welcome the commitment given by the Justice Minister to administer the scheme. When will the Finance Minister meet the UK Government to secure the funding necessary to deliver that unacceptably overdue assistance for victims?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my original answer, we have requested a meeting with the Secretary of State. It was the Northern Ireland Office that created the policy. It differed and departed from the agreement that the parties had reached at Stormont House. Under its rules and statement of funding policy, those who create the policy and legislate for it are responsible for funding it. We have been trying to have a discussion with the Secretary of State. Even though the request came from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, alongside myself and the Minister of Justice, we have yet to secure such a meeting, but we will continue to pursue that.

Ms Dillon: As you have already outlined, Minister, the British Government, by their own rules, say that, if you create a policy, you must pay for it. As Mr Lyttle outlined, the victims have waited far too long. Can you ask, when you have that meeting, the NIO and, indeed, the British Secretary of State to meet the victims' groups? They have all requested meetings with him, and yet, to date, he has not responded to them.

Mr Murphy: What the Member outlines is another extension of the unsatisfactory nature of the way that the scheme has been developed and taken forward by the Northern Ireland Office. I was part of the discussions at Stormont House to reach an agreement on that. Those were not easily done, and the agreement required a lot of accommodation by all five parties. The fact that the British Government unilaterally took off in their own direction and substantially changed that agreement is unsatisfactory. Their handling of it since they did that has compounded not only the political problems that they have created for all the parties in the Executive but the problems for the victims. I hope that they address all those issues in the very near future.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister will be aware that three months ago, in August, the Executive appointed the Department of Justice to run the scheme. Has his Department had any indication from the Department of Justice on the resource requirements, the business plan or any other preparatory work for running the scheme?

2.15 pm

Mr Murphy: No, not as yet. My understanding is that work on the costings is ongoing. There has been a huge variation in some of the public expression of what the costings might be, but we have had no detail on that. The absence of a discussion with the Northern Ireland Office in the middle of all this is not assisting in the development of that process.

Spending Flexibilities

4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Finance what update he has received from HM Treasury on his requested spending flexibilities. (AQO 1056/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have been pressing the Treasury to agree to a suite of Budget flexibilities for the Executive, specifically, the ability to switch from capital to resource; a loosening of restrictions on how much the Executive can carry forward from one year to the next; and for a pragmatic approach to budget overspends.

With the Finance Ministers from the other devolved Administrations, I raised that issue again with the Treasury on 21 October. The Treasury is still considering the request, and I will continue to press for a positive outcome.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for his answer. What I was really trying to get at was the

specific amount that you want to carry over and in which Departments.

Mr Murphy: We are yet to come to the end of the budgetary phase. We have to go through another monitoring round in January in terms of reallocation, so it is really later in the year when you realise that.

What we and the Finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales want to establish is the principle that we have a small percentage of the Budget that can be carried over and that that be extended. We may not need to use it all. We may have the ability to spend out everything that we require, although, with the additional COVID allocations this year, that will be a challenge. With the experience of COVID, that will be a challenge for departmental spending, but it is about establishing in principle those conditions that allow us to carry over.

We have not as yet identified which Departments may need that or how much they may need.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give an update on the establishment of a fiscal commission that would consider the Executive's ability to raise revenue for public services?

Mr Murphy: Work on a fiscal commission and a fiscal council, which was part of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments, had been slowed as a consequence of the overall Executive response to COVID. That work continues, and I hope to be able to bring a paper to the Executive in the very near future with propositions for a fiscal commission.

Mr Butler: Will the Minister outline any Northern Ireland-specific conversations that he has had with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on specific asks, and any commonalities with the other devolved regions?

Mr Murphy: We will have specific asks for the Treasury. We have been raising the issue of payments to cover the protocol for Brexit, the loss of funding here as a consequence of leaving the European Union, and the replacement of all that. Those are specific to here.

We have common positions with Scotland and Wales on a lot of these issues, and we have quite a lot of dialogue with the Welsh and Scottish Finance Ministers. We have been developing common asks on flexibilities, early sight of the comprehensive spending review and early information on what our funding

envelope will be for next year, all of which are essential for planning.

While Barnett consequentials have been very welcome over the past year with additional money, they have come with little or no notification and very much as a drip feed. The Executive are responding all the time to try to get that money out quickly and to get support to where it is needed. It has not been ideal, albeit the funding itself is very welcome.

Those are the conversations that we have been having regularly, more specifically for here on Brexit issues and the spending that we require for that.

Belfast Region City Deal

5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Belfast region city deal. (AQO 1057/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Belfast region city deal is finalising a number of outline business cases in preparation for signing deal documents. Local partners and Departments continue to work closely to achieve that. I am fully supportive of the city/growth deals initiative, which signals our desire to build a productive, regionally balanced and inclusive economy, and will provide investment and much-needed jobs in local areas, offering hope for the future.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. While I am disappointed that my constituency will largely miss out on the capital spend of the proposed city deal, I am hopeful that there will be spin-off benefits.

There are concerns, with the focus on COVID-19, that projects will be delayed. Can the Minister give an assurance that there will be no undue delay to the commencement of schemes?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that a number of Departments and councils are involved in those projects, so there are a lot of moving parts.

Our clear intention, however, is to drive those schemes on and get them completed as quickly as possible. As part of our discussions on economic recovery, we recognise that city deals are a key component in stimulating economic activity, construction jobs and all of the benefits that flow from major capital projects. There is a strong desire in the Executive to progress the projects, and we will continue to monitor and focus on that, as will the Department for the

Economy, which has been one of the major players in city deals and will work with our council colleagues to make sure that we do not experience any undue delays.

Ms Flynn: Will the Minister provide an update on any of the other city deals, please?

Mr Murphy: The city deal partners in Derry City and Strabane are working closely with officials to progress a deal to head of terms. The deal equates to £210 million. It combines city deals and includes future funding with equal contributions from the Executive and the British Government. It is a welcome investment in the north-west region, especially at this time. I will meet shortly with south-west councils to discuss the proposals attached to the funding that they have for the deals that reflect those council areas.

Mr Blair: Will the Minister confirm whether the £100 million city deal complementary fund is open and, if so, how many bids have been received?

Mr Murphy: I am afraid that I do not have those details at the moment. The Member will know that this involves a range of Departments and a number of council areas. I know that councils have been working up proposals for some of their projects and having discussions across the Belfast city deal area about the complementary fund and what might flow from it. I do not believe that any bids for that have been received. I am sure that councils are aware of it. He will know that any bids must complement the city deal projects, and councils in other areas will be looking very closely at what they can bid for. The process of allocation, or the consideration of allocation, from that complementary fund has yet to be developed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Going by Mr Thomas Buchanan's new place in the Chamber, I should congratulate him on his promotion.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Funding

6. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance what engagement his Department has had with the Department for Communities to ensure that the necessary funding is made available for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQO 1058/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Neither my officials nor I, in my current role as Finance Minister, have had any specific engagement with the Department for

Communities to discuss progress on the funding for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. It will be for the Department for Communities to initiate engagement at an appropriate time.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, I am sure that you are aware that, for many years, soccer has been underfunded and underdeveloped in comparison with the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Will you, as Minister, give an undertaking that you will do what you can to reverse that so that soccer is funded on a par with the GAA?

Mr Murphy: I want all sports to be adequately funded. Sport is hugely beneficial to young people in particular and to society in general. You can see the effect that the inability to attend football matches and other sporting events has on society.

I disagree, absolutely, with his contention that the funding of the GAA has disadvantaged soccer. Take, for example, the number of council pitches that have been built for soccer as opposed to GAA over the years. As a lifelong member of the GAA living in a rural area, I know that any provisions for GAA that were made over the years were funded by GAA members, not by the state, Departments or council funds. GAA members funded the vast bulk of those provisions themselves. I do not think that it serves the debate well to try to get into comparative figures as if this was a political issue. We need to try to develop as much money as we can for sport. Sport makes a positive contribution, and we need to ensure that facilities and supporting arrangements for sport are as well funded as possible.

Mr Allen: As the Minister will be aware, the subregional stadia programme is a commitment that sat alongside the regional stadia programme, for which a potential increase in the final budget has been forecast. The Department for Communities carried out a budgetary exercise recently. From that, can the Minister advise whether the Minister for Communities forecasts an increased spend on the subregional stadia programme?

Mr Murphy: I have to say that, from my perspective and from my understanding from talking to officials, there is no correlation between funding for the two. Clearly, any increase in the regional stadia programme has happened as a consequence of things that are beyond the control of the people who are providing regional stadiums. Issues have held up the delivery of that programme, and that

was, obviously, not planned for by those who were developing the plans. I have not had discussions on that. I have had a preliminary meeting, as I have with most, but not all, other Ministers on budgetary matters. We cannot really decide how we allocate budgets until we know the amount that we are getting. We are dependent on the comprehensive spending review and on getting as early as possible an announcement from the Treasury on what our budgets look like, and then we will be able to finalise discussions on what is required for all programmes.

Mr Lyttle: The subregional association football stadia funding programme was to be allocated as long ago as 2016. What funding has been allocated for that programme for the financial year 2021-22? Is this not the time to make a vital capital investment in not only sport but in construction?

Mr Murphy: I do not disagree with his last point on investment. Where we can get capital programmes done, they contribute to economic recovery. The funding for 2021-22 will be allocated as part of the Budget. As yet, we are not aware what our Budget will be for 2021-22. We do not know the funding envelope that we will have. While we have been able to have preliminary discussions with Departments on their budgetary requirements, we will not be able to allocate an actual spend until we know that amount ourselves. When we are aware of what we have, we will be able to take decisions on how we spend it.

Mr McNulty: Does the Minister agree that sport plays an incredibly important role in the well-being of our society and that it is greatly missed at grassroots level? We are lucky that we have elite-level sport. We are sorry that we cannot go and cheer on our team this weekend, Minister. Armagh are playing Donegal at Breffni Park, and we would both love to be there. We cannot be there, but we will be shouting them on on the TV.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The question relates to the subregional stadia programme for soccer.

Mr McNulty: I am getting there. The GAA wants only its fair share. Casement Park can be a catalyst for rebooting our economy. Can the Minister confirm that he is committed to providing all the funding to enable the construction of Casement Park and to helping to reboot our economy?

Mr Murphy: First, I agree with his outlook on sport and, specifically, Armagh GAA. The commitment to Casement is an Executive commitment. It is a flagship project. It is a key project commitment, and I expect the Executive to live up to that commitment. I will certainly play my role in helping the Executive to live up to that commitment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We know that the Minister and Mr McNulty are two Orangemen [*Laughter.*] I call Órlaithí Flynn.

Ms Flynn: My question has been covered. Thank you, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Arm's-length Bodies: NDNA Review

7. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment to review arm's-length bodies (ALBs). (AQO 1059/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed the terms of reference for the review on 18 June 2020. It is a two-stage review. The first stage is about gathering background information from Departments, and it is complete. The second stage is desk-based in the Department of Finance and involves looking at the rationale for an arm's-length body and considering whether the functions that it carries out can be delivered in the Department. Does it require political impartiality? Does it have a technical function that it would be inappropriate for a Department to carry out? Are there overlaps with other arm's-length bodies? Has it outlived its purpose? Should it be abolished? Does it have sufficient transparency to the public on its activities, and could that be improved? That work is almost complete and will be brought to the Executive when it is finalised. It will include proposals for the rationalisation, efficiency and effectiveness of the arm's-length bodies that are considered in the review.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister provide us with an update on Civil Service reform?

Mr Murphy: The two issues are linked. They are part of the broad NDNA commitments to reform the Civil Service. I have been developing propositions on Civil Service reform, and I hope to bring a paper to the Executive in the not-too-distant future outlining a process for initiating a very wide-ranging reform of the Civil Service.

Mr O'Toole: Given what the Minister just said about the importance of Civil Service reform,

when will a head of the Civil Service be appointed?

Mr Murphy: The issue of a non-appointment was in TEO, and I know that it is looking at interim measures. I want to see a head of the Civil Service appointed as soon as possible. We obviously have to look at the process in the interim and then look for a more permanent replacement at the head of the Civil Service. I hope that that will be done as quickly as possible.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

COVID-19: Financial Support during Self-isolation

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Finance what, if any, financial support packages have been discussed for those who might be required to self-isolate. (AQT 641/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Under the leadership of Deirdre Hargey, before she went off with illness, further developed by Carál Ní Chuilín in the Department for Communities, there had been an extension of support for those who have to isolate. Financial support packages have been discussed at almost every Executive meeting. The issue of compliance is clearly about people following the message and following regulations, but it is also about people being able to do that. If we have a situation where people who are required to isolate cannot afford to do so or the consequences of that become difficult for them and their families, the Executive will need to make sure that we provide sufficient support. The Department for Communities has been focused on that, and there is already a support mechanism there. We want to ensure that that is as good as it can be and that, when we get to this crucial stage of the year when compliance will be more important than ever, we assist people in complying. It is not just a matter of enforcing things; we have to provide assistance to do that.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has finance been set aside to do that work, or are we still just discussing it?

Mr Murphy: As I say, there already is a scheme in the Department for Communities.

There are finances available, and I have said to Executive colleagues, including the Communities Minister, that, if additional support measures need to be brought in to assist people in isolation and assist with compliance, I am happy to consider them. As of last Thursday, we have additional money, and I think that compliance will be a key issue over the next number of months. I agree, and I will support any proposition that assists people in isolating and ensures that they can afford to do so.

Procurement Board: Social Value

T2. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance how the new Procurement Board will promote social value, so that government spending addresses issues such as poverty and deprivation, particularly in her constituency in Derry. (AQT 642/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We have put forward propositions for the Procurement Board. It had intended to meet recently, but, because the proposals to revamp the Procurement Board were put in place, we need to seek additional personnel to go on to that and to change the make-up of the Procurement Board. Clearly, social value is a key part of that, and procurement can be used as an effective tool in achieving social outcomes. We have had discussions with them, and I know that the procurement people in the Department have been working on policies in relation to that. If the time frame allows it, we will also consider legislation, if that is required, in the next year before the end of the mandate, to enforce social value in procurement. Procurement by the Executive is a huge amount of money. It can be used not only to stimulate economic growth but in social value, and we want to ensure that that is a key part of government procurement and that of all public bodies.

Ms Anderson: Minister, most people will be glad to hear you say that you want a social value Act taken forward in this mandate. I believe that something in the region of £3 million is spent year-on-year on procurement, so, in the propositions that you mentioned, are you engaging or will that board be able to engage with other Departments to ensure that they embrace social value?

Mr Murphy: It is £3 billion, actually. Procurement has an overarching function for the entire Executive and giving advice to public bodies generally, so any policies that the Procurement Board adopts will be decided by the Executive and therefore will apply across

Departments. It is one thing to have policies agreed and the Procurement Board pursuing them, but it is about implementation and making sure that Departments follow through, right down through all levels of their responsibilities and those of their arm's-length bodies, and, indeed, influence other public bodies. There will be a key focus on those policies but also on implementation to make sure that that is carried through.

COVID-19: Data Review

T3. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Finance, since he will be aware that, in August, the COVID-19 death toll across the United Kingdom was reduced by 5,377 after a data review in England because people were being counted as having died from COVID-19 regardless of when they tested positive and that there seems to be some indication that people can even test positive in absentia — a question to the Minister of Health tabled by her colleague Ms Bradley refers — whether such a data review has been conducted in Northern Ireland and what the findings were. (AQT 643/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NISRA continuously ensures that its statistics and processes are as up-to-date as possible. The Member will be aware that it is a difficult area, because there are people who die from COVID and there are people who die with COVID. There are people who maybe had a terminal condition and acquired COVID while being treated for it. It is a complex area. The issues that are identified on a death certificate have to be followed through on so that there is statistical representation. It is a complex and sensitive area.

Undoubtedly, COVID is a new experience for our Health Department and for statistical agencies, and trying to develop a response to it has been challenging. I am not surprised that issues have arisen in other areas. I want to ensure that NISRA, which does that statistical work here for us, is as on top of it as it can be, because I recognise that there is a sensitivity for families if someone has been incorrectly identified as having died of something when that is not the case. I know that NISRA is conscious of that complexity and sensitivity, and we need to ensure that that continues as we go forward.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. In response to a question for written answer, he advised me that, as of June 2020, for which he had the most up-to-date figures, data showed that, in Northern Ireland, 754 of the 830 people who had COVID

mentioned on their death certificate were subsequently coded by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as having died from it. Given the different treatment of the remains of those who are cited as having died as a result of COVID, the lack of dignity and the considerable distress that it causes to their loved ones, what is being done to ensure much greater accuracy on death certificates?

Mr Murphy: Primarily, the responsibility for that when someone has died lies with the certifying doctor. The job of the statistics agency is to transfer that into data. In the initial circumstances, the certification of death identifies how a person has died. I agree with the Member: these are hugely sensitive issues. The death of a relative is difficult enough to cope with without the additional pain of the restrictions affecting how the death is dealt with by the family and how funeral arrangements are made. It is very challenging for a lot of families. It has to be done as sensitively and accurately as possible, but not just one element is involved. There is the recording of the data and the transferring of it into statistical arrangements. In the first instance, how a funeral will operate is dictated by whoever certifies the death and how that is done.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Robin Newton is not in his place.

COVID-19 Restrictions Business Support Scheme

T5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance, since it has been reported that 2,170 applications have been made to the COVID restrictions business support scheme, to advise the House how many of those have been paid, because people are finding it extremely hard at the moment even to feed their family, about which all of us are receiving emails and messages; to assure the House that those grants will get out; and to say how many have got out so far. (AQT 645/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is not happening as fast as I want it to, because more than one set of data is required. The initial roll-out of support through Land and Property Services (LPS) was much more straightforward, because it happened across a range of business premises. The business support scheme is specific to some sectors: hospitality and close-contact services. There have been over 11,300 applications for support. Almost £8 million has been paid out so far to 2,290 businesses. About 300 applications have been identified thus far as not meeting the criteria, and that number will probably grow as

assessments continue. The initial hold-ups with data processing and getting the correct data from other sources seem to have been addressed, and I now expect the payments to roll out much more quickly.

I do not have the detail of how many have applied to the Department for the Economy schemes, for instance, or how quickly that money is getting out. The detail that I have provided relates to the scheme that is being managed by LPS.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. Will he assure us that, if there is an extension to close-down for specific businesses or sectors, money will be applied to support those sectors? Will he also assure us that the money will be sent out as efficiently as humanly possible? People are really feeling the bite.

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member of that. I absolutely understand the difficulties for businesses. I hear from them; I am an elected representative, the same as everybody else. The intention is to get that money onto the ground as quickly as we can. As I said, there have been hold-ups in the verification of other sources of data, but that seems to have been addressed. The scheme has been rolling out and gathering pace ever since those issues were addressed. I absolutely understand the necessity of that. If there are extensions to restrictions for some businesses, we need to ensure that the payments go out; people are struggling to keep their businesses afloat. We have set aside money to support them; we need to make sure that that money gets to them as quickly as possible.

Brexit: Cost

T6. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance, with the end of the implementation period fast approaching, what certainty the British Government have provided with regard to meeting the cost of Brexit. (AQT 646/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We have gathered from a number of Departments the cost of the protocol. Primarily, they have to do with some of the arrangements at the ports from DAERA, but there are other costs. We have recently had confirmation from the British Treasury that it will accept the costs that the Department of Finance presented to it.

Of course, as we look through budgets with Departments, there are an awful lot of other costs associated with Europe that we do not

necessarily identify. They are not about the implementation of the protocol and do not cost individual Departments huge amounts, but, added together, they are significant. Outside the big headline figures for the European social fund and others, such as the agriculture funds, there is a range of smaller costs for Departments for which Europe has provided support over the years. We want to identify all those. The priority is making sure that we can implement the protocol and that the effects of Brexit are as reduced as they can be, although we know that they will be bad, no matter how we reduce them. However, there are costs still to be bottomed out in terms of a loss to Departments. We also have no certainty about the Shared Prosperity Fund, what it will look like or how it will be delivered. It is unacceptable that, at this stage, we are still seeking answers to those questions.

Mr McGuigan: Minister, thanks very much for your response. Given that the North is being pulled out of the EU against its will and given that you referred to additional costs that still have to be bottomed out, do you think that the British Government should meet the broader economic costs of Brexit in lost trade and employment?

Mr Murphy: I am party to the Brexit discussions that the Executive have every week. There will clearly be a cost from the implementation of the protocol and a cost to businesses as they try to meet whatever new requirements there may be. Those are not factored in and have not been calculated yet. I share the Member's point: we have been taken into a situation against our democratic wishes. The British Government have said that we will be better off as a consequence of leaving the European Union. I, as Finance Minister, have yet to see much evidence of that. We should do our best to identify not only the cost to the Executive and the loss of funds from Europe but the cost to businesses and other sectors of society of trying to cope with the abrupt exit from Europe, and we should present those to Treasury.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We have probably just enough time for one more question and answer.

Finance: Moneys Returned to Treasury

T7. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of all moneys and funds at risk of being returned to the Treasury come financial year end. (AQT 647/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I said, we have yet to have another monitoring round to reallocate Executive budgets. This time last week, we were discussing the £100 million that the Executive had held over in a prudent fashion to meet any unforeseen challenges or any repetition of some of the current challenges that we face. That is now almost £500 million. That is a significant amount that we have to ensure is spent before the end of the financial year, on top of the budgets that Departments already have. That is a challenge, and I will talk to Executive colleagues about it this week.

I think that we need to ensure that we do that. We have had a range of issues raised with us, including support for isolation and for people who are forced to be at home over the winter and some additional fuel payments and things like that. I think that there are a range of issues that can be met. From that, we need to ensure that that money is spent, because, as always with this place, the greatest sin is in returning money. Sometimes, that does not lead to the right type of planning or long-term strategic thinking, as the priority is just to get that money spent. There are a lot of challenges out there in society. We need to identify where they are, and the primary thing is to get money to support people quickly. We have four months to do that, and I think that we should be attempting to do that very quickly.

2.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Finance Minister. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments. The next item of business will be questions to the Minister of Health. Do not forget to clean the surfaces as you leave the Chamber.

Health

COVID-19: Rural Domiciliary Care

1. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the availability of domiciliary care in rural areas. (AQO 1068/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):

Domiciliary care workers provide a vital service to over 23,000 people in Northern Ireland, allowing them to continue to live independently. While there are sometimes particular challenges in rural areas, given the longer travel distances, we have seen increasing pressures right across our domiciliary care service provision for a number of years.

I am pleased to say that, over the past 12 months, the social care workforce has expanded significantly, with an increase of 3,409 registered workers since 2019. While that is very welcome, more staff are clearly still needed. That is not least because the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the ability of domiciliary care providers to deliver services. One impact was the number of staff unable to work because they were required to self-isolate. However, at the onset of the pandemic, many service users and their families opted to suspend their existing domiciliary care package. My Department moved quickly to put in place a guarantee of income for domiciliary care providers to ensure that there was no loss of capacity in that critical service at that time. In return for that guarantee, we asked providers to improve their sick pay for staff unable to work for COVID-19-related reasons.

Power to People was clear, and I am clear, that the only way to make the service sustainable in the long term is through improved terms and conditions. My officials are finalising a business case that sets out some of the costs for achieving that. It will be challenging, given the current financial pressures and uncertainties, to meet those costs and it will need Executive support, but I am determined to do my best to make it happen. Throughout the pandemic, we have also made sure that domiciliary care providers have access to PPE where they need it and that the health and social care trusts continue to provide millions of items free of charge.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I am sure that you will be aware of the extreme sensitivity of this subject, and I do not want in any way to understate that. Domiciliary care workers, as you outlined, are probably one of the most stretched of all groups of workers across our health service. The issue of unavailability of care packages in rural areas such as my constituency of Mid Ulster is a massive pressure point, for the workers on the ground and for the families that are affected. I have been informed in the past that your Department does not keep a record of the number of care packages that never get fulfilled because the person requiring a care package passes in hospital before they are allowed to enter their home with a care package. Can you start to record that, so that its high incidence and the great need is recorded properly?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that very specific follow-up question. She asked that in a question for written answer, and I am aware of the reply, but we will look into it, now that she

has asked for it, and see whether that is feasible and to make sure that there is a useful outcome should that information be gathered.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Alan Chambers, I must say that I do not wish to curtail any Member or the Minister, but, given the current climate, so many people have questions that they want to ask about Health that we need to use the half hour that we have judiciously.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister detail what measures he has taken to shore up and support domiciliary care providers during the pandemic?

Mr Swann: I covered that point briefly in my initial answer. I introduced financial support measures, which covered the period from June until the end of October, for domiciliary care providers who were contracted to the health and social care trusts. Under those arrangements, providers had their incomes supplemented to a level that was 100% of an average of the three months prior to the pandemic. In return for that support, providers are expected to ensure that workers were paid at least 80% of their normal earnings above statutory sick pay when they are on sick leave for reasons related to COVID-19.

I have also recently agreed a fund of £5 million for providers to claim against reasonable expenses incurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, health and social care trusts continue to support providers with millions of items of free PPE every month.

Mr McGrath: The Minister mentioned PPE for domiciliary care workers. What assurances can the Minister give us that those care workers on the front line have the necessary PPE, rather than merely accepting employers saying that they have the correct amounts?

Mr Swann: One of the things that we did through the first wave of the pandemic was to make sure that every provider, every care supplier and every employer had a direct line into the trust. Those supply chains are established through our Business Services Organisation into trusts, and any care supplier can draw down PPE as and when needed.

Mr Lyttle: Many family carers are at the end of their resilience due to the disruption of not only domiciliary care but respite care and day services. Will the Minister give an update on the publication of a plan for the resumption of those services, as voted for by the Assembly on 7 July?

Mr Swann: It is one of those areas that is continually under pressure due to the reallocation of some of our staff. It is a piece of work that is being done on a regional basis to ensure that there is equity of service across the entirety of Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley: As someone who worked in the health service, I understand what unmet need is, and it has been around for many years. Will the Minister tell the House how his Department is capturing that unmet need?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point that it has always been there. With domiciliary care, the demand far outstrips the supply that we currently have. That is why it is a significant step that we have increased the number of registered workers since 2009 by more than 3,400. Demand is currently outstripping the provision that we have due to members of that profession being off due to COVID and the community incidence. It is about putting in that support package for employers but also making it a profession that people want to go into. As the Member will know, many individuals who work in the sector are there by vocation because they want to support people in their communities. They do that to a very high standard and are currently under very extreme pressures.

COVID-19: International Best Practice

2. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Health what work his Department is undertaking on the interpretation of data and learning from international best practice in relation to COVID-19. (AQO 1069/17-22)

Mr Swann: COVID-19 continues to have a devastating impact right across the globe, with the recent surge of cases in Northern Ireland highlighting the need for ongoing vigilance. In order that our health and social care sector is in the best possible position to respond to the virus, and to reduce the impact on local people, it is essential that we take expert advice and learn from international practice.

Throughout the pandemic to date, the Northern Ireland Executive have received expert advice and recommendations from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser in respect of the most appropriate public health response. That advice has been based on the emerging evidence from the rest of the UK and from the rest of the world. For example, the Chief Scientific Adviser attends the Scientific

Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and reviews evidence from the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M), which examines the data on the trajectory of the virus, nationally and internationally. In addition to that, evidence from UK Government analysis and published scientific papers are regularly reviewed with regard to international experience.

The need to consider the best evidence and practice applies not only to the strategic public health response but to all parts of the health and social care sector in responding to COVID-19. That can be seen in the reduction in mortality rates for those diagnosed with COVID-19, as experience has provided enhanced insight into the best form of treatment. However, as a novel virus, it is important to recognise that the evidence on COVID-19 is changing over time, and there is often no consensus on the most appropriate response.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is data being shared effectively, North and South, with the Minister's counterparts in the South in line with the agreed memorandum of understanding?

Mr Swann: The memorandum of understanding is working well, although there are areas where it needs enhancement. One challenge that was evident over the weekend was the reaction to travel restrictions from Denmark. It took engagement from us with the Health Minister and engagement from the Westminster Transport Minister with the Transport Minister in the Republic of Ireland to make sure that information was shared on anyone who had been in or travelled through Denmark and who then entered the Irish Republic through Dublin Airport while we put in those restrictions. That engagement is ongoing. The Chief Medical Officer and senior colleagues meet their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland weekly to discuss their approach to COVID-19 and their experience of responding to the pandemic.

Mr Allister: In the first wave of the virus, it was quite clear that the impact on our care homes was catastrophic. Why, then, in the intervening period, until, I think, last week, were staff tested only once every fortnight? The Minister now says that it will be once a week. Surely it should be every day or every other day. What is the international standard, because, yesterday, there were 139 outbreaks in our care homes? Did we learn nothing from the first wave about testing in care homes?

Mr Swann: We have increased testing. The recommendation was that we tested staff every fortnight and tested residents once a month, unless the home tested positive or showed a confirmed case, in which case we increased the testing capacity.

When a home does not have an identified case, we use pillar 2. Once a home has an identified case, either a resident or a member of staff, it moves to pillar 1, which is the Northern Ireland-based testing programme, so that we can get a response to those test results more quickly. Testing has been increased to once every two weeks in order to upscale the frequency.

The Member referred to the number of care homes that are rated as having confirmed cases. About 46% of those homes are confirmed as being positive because of staff, not residents, testing positive. The increased testing programme has proved beneficial in indicating and identifying staff who may be asymptomatic so that they do not take the virus into care homes, where residents are more vulnerable to the virus.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Minister accept that other countries have much more stringent test and trace processing? Will he update the House on improvements to the test and trace system and on when they will be delivered?

Mr Swann: One thing that often happens with our test, trace and protect system is that the failings of other systems are pointed towards our system.

In our current system, in the past week, we have transferred 4,450 cases to test, trace and protect. Of the cases transferred, 4,023 were successfully detected.

That is a success rate of over 90%. By any international standard, 80% is what should be reached. From the 4,023 cases that were identified and contacted a further 9,267 contacts were identified, and 9,173 of those were eventually contacted. That is a success rate of 99%. When it comes to the failings that have been pointed out about the test, trace and protect system, often, people look at the criticism of the Westminster system and then apply those aspersions to our system.

3.00 pm

The improvements that we made over the summer were brought forward when we saw the dramatic increase in positive cases. We went to a text alert service for some people who

had tested positive. We also introduced a "digital first" system whereby people could go online and identify their contacts. That made it easier for someone who tested positive to interact, whether they wanted to talk to someone on the phone, do it online or respond by text message. That is what we have done in the past number of weeks.

Often, we look to Germany for best practice. One thing that should be noted is that Germany has said that, when you get a case rate of over 50 cases per 100,000 of the population, there is no way that any test, trace and protect system can keep on top of that. It is vital that we bring down the case rate so that the real benefits of test, trace, protect and isolate can come to the fore. It is all part of the overall package. The fewer cases there are, the more impact and effect test, trace and protect has.

Mrs Cameron: Who will look after the administrative burden of testing in the care sector, given that the independent care sector has said that it cannot cope with the increase in testing, which, in going from two weeks to one week, is, effectively, doubling?

Mr Swann: We took a strategic approach. A fortnight before we announced that we were increasing the testing frequency, we put additional funding into the care home sector so that money could be drawn down and used to supply the administrative support that those homes need. It could also provide additional staff, if needs be, to come in and do those tests, which can take up to 10 or 15 minutes to perform, of residents or staff. My Department has already put in place additional financial supports for the care home sector.

Ms Bailey: In response to the original question, the Minister referred to advice that he had received from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. Does the Minister have the authority to act alone in implementing the experts' recommendations or does he need the approval of the whole Executive?

Mr Swann: The current regulations 9 and 10 fall at midnight on Thursday, so it would take the support of the Executive to bring forward further recommendations. If they fall at that point, I think, we will move back to the bare basics in regulation 2, which still stands and is current.

Mr Carroll: Does the Minister have any concern that the phrase "living with COVID" is being used by some Ministers? It appears to be completely out of step with international best

practice and more in line with that of countries that have had a very high death toll and economic ruin.

Mr Swann: Since the outbreak and the first wave, every politician has had to be careful of the challenge around the phraseology and language used, because of the impression that can be given. I have been clear that the phrase "living with COVID" may be useful at the point at which we have a vaccine and the virus is under control. At this minute in time, because of the increased rate in Northern Ireland, we are not at that point. As for the phrase "living with COVID", one thing that I do not want to see is more people dying from COVID.

COVID-19: Missed Test Appointments

3. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Health to outline the number of individuals that received positive COVID-19 test results for a test they booked and did not attend. (AQO 1070/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Testing through the national testing programme is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London. I am advised that a few such incidents have been reported through the Public Health Agency (PHA), and my officials have been made aware of that. Upon investigation by the Public Health Agency and the DHSC, they have advised that no specific details have been received to enable the issue to be investigated further. My officials will continue to liaise with DHSC on the matter as required, and DHSC has advised that individuals who have been impacted by such an incident should contact the 119 helpline to provide their specific details for further investigation.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, this is a little bit concerning. I have been advised by three individuals whom I know personally — one is an accountant, another is a solicitor and the other is a social worker — that they all got positive test results for tests that they were not able to attend. We know that a lot of good has been done during the pandemic, but there are also people out there who want to do mischief. We know that discretionary support grants are available for people who test positive for them or their family members. I would like you to look at that further and to look at those figures to see whether there have been any patterns, changes or increases in recent weeks. It is public knowledge, certainly in the area that I represent, that that can be done.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. It is something that her party leader, the First Minister, raised with me earlier in the week. We contacted DHSC to see whether that is a possibility. It is looking into its systems to make sure that it does not and cannot happen. It would be unthinkable for somebody to fake a positive COVID test for the sake of a payment, because that puts pressure not only on other individuals and their family members but on our health service by making it look as though we have a higher incidence than we actually do.

Fortunately, when we see the number of positive cases compared with the number of hospitalisations and people who are in an intensive care unit (ICU), it does not seem to be a widespread practice. One of the difficulties that PHA and DHSC had was that, although the Member said that she was aware of three such individuals, no one was prepared to give their contact details, name, address or identification so that it could be followed through the system to see whether it was happening. However, it is something that the DHSC and the PHA are aware of.

Mr Nesbitt: My question to the Minister concerns what is happening in Liverpool with rapid and mass testing, and I wonder whether he has any thoughts on whether those mechanisms could be deployed in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: We are observing in Liverpool a pilot of mass testing, and I think that it will be useful. However, in being part of the observation group that is overseeing what happens and learning the lessons from it, we want to make sure that that sort of mass testing can be utilised to its best and most effective use and that any individual who tests positive receives the correct support and advice. It is easy, when we look at Liverpool, to put it in the context of being a large city, but when you put it in another context, you see that Liverpool has a population that is actually larger than Northern Ireland's. It is about using mass testing most effectively for the region. We will look at a number of pilots once the testing system, should it be lateral flow, proves efficient. Whether we do that by a sectoral rather than a geographical basis is still something that my expert advisory group on testing is exploring.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, the DHSC in England is issuing new guidance for clinically extremely vulnerable people to patients, who are provided with a formal shielding notification that can act as guidance for employers. Will you reintroduce shielding letters here?

Mr Swann: The Chief Medical Officer is meeting his shielding advisory group tomorrow to see what steps we need to take and whether those should replicate what England is doing. That guidance and updated advice will be considered in the context of where we are in Northern Ireland with the spread of COVID-19, R and the direct affect that they would have on that specific group of individuals in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I know that Mr Gildernew and Mr McCrossan have indicated that they want to ask a question, but we have only eight minutes left. I see that Mr Gildernew is number one on the topical questions list and that Mr McCrossan is number four, so I hope that they will forgive me if I move on to the next question.

Mental Health Services: Funding

4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health what additional funding will be made available for mental health services. (AQO 1071/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question.

With the Principal Deputy Speaker's indulgence, I may take more than two minutes for the answer, because of the nature of the issue.

Since taking up my post as Minister of Health, I have been very clear that mental health is one of my key priorities. I have created a mental health champion, and I have published the mental health action plan, which includes a dedicated COVID-19 mental health response plan. My officials are also working on developing a new 10-year mental health strategy that I intend to publish for consultation by the end of the year. Also, since taking up the post of Minister, I have provided additional funding for mental health. That includes £1.5 million for the implementation of the mental health action plan secured through June monitoring; an additional £300,000 approximately, also secured through June monitoring, for mental health co-production work; and an additional £180,000 secured through June monitoring for suicide prevention. There is £1.5 million for my Department to support the Department of Education in its work on mental health in schools. To assist suicide prevention in 2020-21, £649,000 has been allocated to zero-suicide initiatives in HSC trusts. An additional £190,000 has been allocated to enable the continued delivery of the multi-agency triage team project, and a further

£60,000 has been allocated to the Derry crisis intervention service to allow its continuation to the end of the year. The Executive have also jointly agreed to fund the mental health champion with £500,000 per year. Furthermore, over the last couple years, a programme of capital investment to provide immediate improvements to the old mental health facilities has seen around £3.5 million in funding, which will directly benefit mental health patients.

I welcome the additional COVID funding made available for the Department of Health through the HSC during this particularly challenging time, including funding to support mental health services. From that funding, I am seeking to make available up to £2.6 million to ensure capacity across mental health services, including support for the adult acute mental health bed management network, the provision of additional nurses and funding for psychology therapies and waiting lists. The new mental health strategy will, going forward, provide the strategic direction for mental health services when the full strategy is published in July 2021. I intend to also publish a 10-year funding plan, and that will provide a comprehensive outline of the funding required for future mental health services.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The focus is currently on COVID and rightly so. However, the strains on other conditions and the pressures on people's personal lives are putting pressure on the mental health of the population across Northern Ireland. Is the attention to the pandemic outweighing attention to other conditions and putting strains on people's mental health?

Mr Swann: The Member raises the point of the additional mental health strains that COVID has put on the population of Northern Ireland and on our health professionals because of the stresses and strains that they cope with. That is why, when we produced the mental health action plan, we included a specific section on COVID-19 to pick up on the specific additional points that are being brought to bear because of additional pressures, be they from self-isolation or the loss of a loved one due to COVID, which is affecting many people across Northern Ireland.

The additional pressures on our mental health service are being compounded by COVID. It is also a part of our health and social care system that needed additional funding. It needed additional support pre COVID, and I am pleased that, due to the support that we have across the Executive and even in the New Decade, New Approach commitments, that

support is now coming forward and that work is being championed by our interim mental health champion, Professor Siobhán O'Neill.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for all those really positive mental health initiatives. They are greatly appreciated by the sector. I am conscious that the mental health action plan that was announced six months ago contained specialist community perinatal services, and I know that the sector and the perinatal mental health campaigners are waiting in suspense. Can the Minister confirm when funding will be made available for those services?

Mr Swann: The business case for specialist community perinatal mental health services was received by the PHA. Officials in the mental health and capacity unit reviewed the document and consulted professional colleagues before requesting further evidence from the PHA to support the proposals. Following a further review of the amended business case, there remained several minor discrepancies, and the PHA has agreed to complete those amendments as soon as possible. The PHA has noted that its response to the current COVID pandemic has added substantial pressures to this workload.

Recurrent costs associated with the business case are significant, with high costs apportioned to the extensive multidisciplinary team complement proposed for each trust.

3.15 pm

In the June monitoring round, I approved funding for 2020-21 for perinatal mental health as part of the mental health action plan. That action requires recurrent funding and so creates an inescapable pressure of £4.7 million recurrently. The business case proposes a phased implementation, with the first phase requiring £3.4 million and the second phase an additional £1.3 million. A submission seeking approval of the business case and the recurrent funding will be sent to me on receipt of the finalised business case from the PHA.

I had that answer prepared. I knew that it was something that the Member would raise, because it is an issue that she has championed in her time in the House.

Ms Hunter: I am mindful of the time, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, so I will be quick. Can the Minister identify whether any additional funding from his Department will go towards those with mental health issues who are

struggling with addiction and those who face a dual diagnosis?

Mr Swann: The increase in the level of dual diagnoses has been brought to the fore, especially during lockdown. The Assembly all-party group on dual diagnosis and addiction has raised the issue, and it is something that my Department is working on.

Initially, the issue was brought to the House and debated. What often was happening was that the dual diagnosis fell as two diagnoses rather than be brought together in one place. The challenge that my Department and the trusts face in their work is for people to receive the appropriate support, guidance and help that they need.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ten seconds for Mr Beggs, followed by 10 seconds for the Minister.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his update and for his detailed response on COVID and additional mental health pressures. Can he provide an update on the mental health and suicide prevention group?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Contrary to media reports suggesting an increase, suicide rates in Northern Ireland have remained relatively stable over the past decade. That mental health funding is in place. As I detailed earlier, it is approximately £300 million a year, which is only 5% to 6% of total HSC funding. It is accepted that that is significantly lower than funding in other places, and that is why I continue to put in bids and to increase the finance to make sure that we get a support package, and not just one that provides finance but one that provides personnel to support those who need it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

COVID-19: Vaccine

T1. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to secure a COVID-19 vaccine for people here. (AQT 651/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question, which is very topical. The UK Government, acting on behalf of the whole of the UK, have access to six potential COVID-19

vaccine candidates. That reflects a national strategy to ensure that we have a supply of vaccines, should any of them prove to be safe and effective.

The vaccines are at various stages. There was an announcement about one yesterday. It still has to undergo rigorous testing and complete the development process that vaccines must complete before they can be considered for use in a vaccination programme.

The United Kingdom would be eligible for the one announced yesterday and has pre-bought over 20 million vaccination doses, which will be distributed across the devolved Administrations using the Barnett formula. That would leave us with 575,000 doses, which would be the equivalent of initially vaccinating 255,000 people. I stress to the Member that it is one out of six potential vaccine candidates. It is the first to be brought forward.

Mr Gildernew: We have, as you said, heard from one company that has made progress. Can the Minister explain how that vaccine will be rolled out for those 255,000 people and what priority groups he is considering for it? Would it be for care home residents, Health and Social Care staff or those who were previously advised to shield?

Mr Swann: That is one of those decisions that is taken out of my hands. One of the things that the Department of Health does, and this is the case across all four nations, is to ensure continuity of supply. The decision on any vaccination programme is handed over to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

It decides what flu vaccines we should prepare and buy in advance, the groups that they should be allocated to, and in what order. It has already done an initial trawl as to where it sees the priority for a COVID-19 vaccine. One of its main thrusts is by age and by working sector. The first sector that it is looking at is those in care homes and the care home working sector. The next sector will be for those over 85. It will then move down into those working in the health and social care systems and will then be ratified by age group.

The JCVI is undergoing the stratification of who will be accessible. I will write to the Member with that because it is accessible. I will also inform the Committee and update the House, should that be useful.

COVID-19: Testing

T2. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health whether, given the difficulties witnessed with COVID-19 testing, he believes that the current test, trace and protect approach is fit for purpose. (AQT 652/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Earlier, I gave a few statistics for our current test, trace and protect system. At times, it does come under criticism because of what happens in other places. At the Committee a couple of weeks ago, some of the management team came under unfair criticism and personal attack, which was unfortunate. In that dedicated team there are now 220 tracers working under three different employment contracts — full-time, part-time or on-call bank — so that they can flex up.

We made advances over the summer in being able to contact people by text message and online. The digital ability to test, trace and protect is being enhanced continually. As I said in response to another question, even the best system in the world, when we get those large numbers, does not simply rely on a test, trace and protect system to bring it under control. COVID-19 takes a multitude of tools to bring it under control. In Germany, whose test, trace and protect system has often been lauded as the most efficient, they are saying that, once you get over 50 cases per 100,000, no test, trace and protect system can effectively manage that. We are sitting at 200 per 100,000, so we have a long way to go. I would rather see us dropping the incidence of COVID-19 and then rely on test, trace and protect, isolation and support to provide the enhanced service that manages and keeps COVID-19 under control.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister. You touched on this briefly in your answer, but we heard earlier that the World Health Organization and others stress the need for a find, test, trace, isolate and support strategy. Do you have any plans to renew the approach to cover all those elements?

Mr Swann: It is a conversation that is ongoing between my Department and the Department for Communities, which is held by the Member's colleague Minister Carál Ní Chuilín, about how we can provide additional supports. There is a non-refundable payment loan that can be drawn down. The conversation that has been raised is that our system is means-tested so that anyone who earns over £21,000 per annum is not eligible for it because it is being handled

through the Department for Communities and social services. It is something that the Minister for Communities and I are looking at to ensure that anyone who does test positive, or becomes a contact to someone who is positive, is supported and encouraged to self-isolate and to remain at home so that they are not put under a financial burden to get back to work or out into the community. It is a holistic approach that we are taking forward to make sure that the support is there.

COVID-19: Shielding

T3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health if he would expand on the assessment given by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) on 23 September that COVID-19 shielding advice should not change. (AQT 653/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his update. I know that he was not in for the initial part of Question Time due to the COVID-19 seating arrangements in the House, but I informed Ms Bradshaw that the CMO is meeting the shielding advisory group tomorrow to review where we are. One of our concerns is that we have seen an increase in the number of over-60s who are testing positive. The test rate that we have shows that roughly 23% of tests are for someone in that over-60 age group. We all know that they are the most vulnerable section of our community should they contract COVID, because there is a high incidence of it ending in hospitalisation. It is a piece of work that the CMO is looking at. He is meeting the shielding advisory group tomorrow to update recommendations to me and the Executive.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. I apologise. I met Paula Bradshaw, and hopefully I will not repeat her supplementary. Somewhere in the region of 95,000 people got the original shielding letter. Some of them have been in touch with me. There are a huge number of families involved. They are under greater threat. Will the Minister commit to sending an updated letter to those who were shielding to at least give them reassurance and any more information that is there?

Mr Swann: The CMO issued updated guidance about two and a half weeks ago, although it was done online and through social media and we did not post it out to everyone. The Member underestimates it. By the time that we finished issuing shielding letters, there were 208,000. The number of people who finished up in that shielding group far outweighed our initial expectations. That updated guidance is online. I

will send it to the Member so that he can forward it to his constituents. It is an area of concern for many. When that group meets tomorrow and the additional advice comes out, I will make sure that it is shared with all MLAs and across all Health and Social Care sectors. We can then inform each of our constituents who have those concerns, should they fall under renewed advice or into renewed categories that we are concerned about.

COVID-19: Restrictions

T4. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health whether, given the frustration of many at the lack of decision-making by the Executive in recent days and the impact of uncertainty on the business community, he can confirm that further restrictions are likely in the month of Christmas if there is any easement in the restrictions currently in place. (AQT 654/17-22)

Mr Swann: If there are any further easements, I cannot give a guarantee.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Minister. You also mentioned that the vaccine is forthcoming. It is a game changer, particularly for the restrictions that affect every aspect of our society. You mentioned that the roll-out will happen by age, but there are many in our community, from a variance of age groups, who have underlying health conditions, some very serious. Can the Minister give any assurance to the House that his Department will prioritise those with underlying health conditions to ensure that they get access to the vaccine as quickly and swiftly as possible on its release, hopefully this year?

Mr Swann: As I said in response to the initial topical question from the Committee Chair, prioritisation of who receives that vaccine is managed by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation so that there is equity and equality across the United Kingdom and we do not get drawn into a political sphere where politicians get to decide who gets access to a vaccine and who does not. It is left in the hands of medical professionals who can best decide, when the vaccine becomes available, what groups need to have it and in what order.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Clare Bailey.

Ms Bailey: I did not know that I had a question, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Do you want to take it? No?

Ms Bailey: No. Sorry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Dead on.

Flu Vaccination

T6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, after thanking Ms Bailey for the opportunity, for an update on the flu vaccination programme. (AQT 656/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The one before was easier to answer. The flu vaccination programme is proceeding at pace. One of the things that we have done is to increase the order of flu vaccinations. We did that in the summer. The initial batch that arrived was in the region of 665,000. Our vaccination programme usually runs from 1 October into December, and then the second batch arrives for times of need. This time, we increased the number of people who will get the flu vaccine, and we increased its promotion. That initial batch of 665,000 was distributed.

The majority of that was administered within 26 days, and the highly proficient system that we put in place outstripped our supplies of flu vaccine. The other batch is due in the next couple of weeks, so that should allow us to pick up on those who missed out — they did not miss out, but they thought that they were going to be vaccinated at an earlier stage.

Arrangements for the schoolchildren's vaccine were in place and remain so, but we very much got ahead of ourselves with those in the adult ranges. One of the things that it has proved to us is that, when a COVID vaccine becomes available, we know that the systems will work very efficiently.

3.30 pm

By way of an update to the Member, one GP sent out flu vaccination letters to 500 patients and 499 turned up. That is unheard of anywhere else. They were able to trace the one remaining person and realised that he or she did not receive the letter. The initial uptake far outstretched any of our expectations of a vaccine programme. It was also beneficial that we took the time in the summer to order additional vaccines, because they will supplement the cohort that was missed during the first phase.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Bradley.

Ms P Bradley: Oh, I am getting to ask a supplementary question. Even better.

Minister, following on from what Ms Bradshaw said about possible shielding letters being sent out, we have heard from various people that they have not yet received their flu vaccine. Will those who are required to shield and their family members be treated as a priority in the next tranche?

Mr Swann: That was one of the pieces of advice and guidance that were sent out. Shielding letters were often based on those who were eligible for a flu vaccine, so the counter works. One of the things that we did was to expand it so that anyone who was a carer of someone in receipt of a flu vaccine was also eligible. That is why we saw that massive uptake at the start.

I know that many saw it as a criticism, but it delivered far in excess of our expectations, and I must congratulate our GPs, community pharmacists and all the peer vaccinators across our health and social care system. They went out of their way to deliver what is usually a three-month programme in 26 days.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McGuigan and Mr Durkan are not here. Ms Armstrong can have one question if she and the Minister are brief.

Child Poverty

T9. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health, after hearing Dr Julie-Ann Maney from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children talk about children hiding toast in their nappies, what actions are being taken to ensure that children are not living without food and that benefits are allocated by the Department for Communities to those families identified by social services as living in poverty. (AQT 659/17-22)

Mr Swann: The story that the Member raised broke many a heart and brought a tear to many an eye when people realised that that was happening in our community and sector.

The work that is being done by social services in identifying and supporting those families that need that help is crucial. There is also an onus on us, as elected politicians, to make sure that those individuals know what help is available and how to access it. We should also make it as easy as possible to access for the people who need it. It is heartbreaking to think of the reliance on food banks that we now have in Northern Irish society.

The step that the Minister of Education took to support the expansion of free school meals in school holidays was welcome, but it was an embarrassment that we had to do that and that we do not have support mechanisms across our society that prevent people being driven into those situations. There is a partial responsibility among us all in the Executive and the House to make sure that children do not have to hide toast in their nappies because they do not know when they will get their next meal.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Health. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments. Please also do not forget to wipe down the surfaces etc on your way out of the Chamber.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Final Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22] do now pass. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will resume the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill, and, at this stage, we will look to Mr O'Dowd to continue his contribution.

Mr O'Dowd: Before we broke for lunch and for Question Time, I was responding to some comments from Mr Frew about his opinion of the Executive, the role of the Executive and the passage of the Budget Bill. I commented on what I see as dithering in the Department for the Economy and dithering by the Minister for the Economy, not only in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has crippled our economy and, indeed, had a huge impact on the world economy, but in bringing forward proposals for the economic recovery on the other side of this. I also mentioned the frustration in sections of the business sector that, although they were promised funding when they were closed down by the Executive, there has been a delay in getting that funding out. Facts speak louder than words on many occasions, and, on this occasion, the facts speak for themselves.

Some grants are the responsibility of the Department for the Economy, and 51 were paid out during the most recent lockdown. The Department of Finance has paid out 2,142 grants; £7 million has been paid out and that is still progressing. That is comforting news to the 2,000 businesses on one side and the 51 businesses on the other, but we need to continue to get that money out the door. If we are to close businesses down — there will be occasions when we have to — and if everybody wants to work towards a position where our economy is opened up again in a safe way, we have to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to get the money to those businesses, and the key to that is having a Minister at the front of it leading and making sure that it happens.

I want to end with a few comments on the budgetary position. It is worth noting that, before COVID-19 hit, our economy was going into recession. In fact, it was in recession. That is the basis from which we are starting. We were in recession before COVID-19 came along. COVID-19 has hit us and Brexit has hit us. Brexit was part of the reason that we were in recession before COVID-19, but Brexit is having a huge impact on our economy, on our ability to recover from COVID-19 and, indeed, on putting a Budget in place that will meet the needs of our society moving forward.

Declan McAleer made an interesting point during his speech. He said that some of the measures being put in place at the ports would cost around £45 million a year. Those are just some of the measures. That is about £800,000 a week. What could our farmers do with £800,000 a week? Quite rightly, Members have been talking about the needs of restaurateurs, the hospitality sector, care and beauty therapists etc, but £800,000 a week is being paid out on infrastructure and staff because of Brexit. When we look in the round at the damage being done to the economy, we have to look at it in its totality.

In the Chamber last week — the Minister read out some of the figures earlier — the Minister for Infrastructure was answering questions on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in transport sectoral format, and she said:

"It is no secret in the House that the Department for Infrastructure often struggles to secure funding, but I am willing to talk to anybody [to see what we can bring about]" — [Official Report (Hansard), 2 November 2020, p8, col 1].

That statement stuck with me. Then, today, I heard the Finance Minister say that the Department for Infrastructure received £180 million in the most recent funding package. That matches the Department of Education, and I suspect that the highest funding has, deservedly, gone to Health. Therefore, it is not the case that the Department for Infrastructure is struggling to find funding. It is no secret that it received up to £180 million in the most recent financial packages.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will end on this point. I started off by talking about one of the subjects that was mentioned during questions to the Health Minister: children who are so hungry that they hide toast down their nappy. The Budget and other policies are key to tackling poverty. Quite rightly, people ask, "What are the Executive doing? What have you done?". Let us

look at some of the positive measures that have been taken across the Executive, as a collective. They are not Sinn Féin initiatives, DUP initiatives or SDLP initiatives. When the Executive act together, they make a difference. In England, there was a recent debate, as there was in the summer, about free school meals. It is worth noting that there is a more generous free school meals scheme in place here in the North than there is in England. In this society, you can be in a higher earning bracket and still receive free school meals than is the case in England. Why? It is because the Executive and the Finance Minister, then and now, funded it.

Look at our welfare reform system — the infamous universal credit — and what the Executive did. They put hundreds of millions of pounds in place to mitigate the effects. Scotland is one of the most progressive Administrations on these islands, and people often point towards Scotland and say, "Look at what the Scottish are doing". Scotland has not put hundreds of millions of pounds into a mitigation scheme for welfare reform. The Executive have, and the Finance Minister backed it, as did other Ministers. There are numerous examples across Departments of where Ministers have put in place funding packages to mitigate the impact of poverty or bring people out of poverty, and that has to be welcomed.

Our Executive make a difference. The question is this: do we have enough money or the fiscal powers to make a significant difference — the change in tempo that we need? My answer is that we do not. If we are to stop children hiding toast down their nappy because they are so hungry, we need to have the fiscal powers that have been talked about in this and other debates. We also need to have a matching economic strategy that will create well-paid jobs and wealth and ensure that our young people, our older people, and everyone in between, are able to contribute to society and earn a proper wage. I will leave it at that.

Mr Allister: I will strive to be mercifully brief, but I want to make a number of miscellaneous points. Of course, we all need to recognise that, when it comes to Budget procedures, this year is, undoubtedly, a year apart. The circumstances, so unforeseen in many regards, have, of necessity, produced not one but three Budget Acts. Who knows? There might be another before we are finished. So, this year is to be treated as something apart.

One of the factors that emerges from the urgencies of this year is that this sort of crisis demonstrates that, if ever you needed to be nimble in government — to have a system

capable of being swift of foot — an occasion like this is it. However, what we have, by virtue of our system of government, is probably the most clumsy system imaginable. Yes, I make lots of criticisms about that system but, in making that statement, I am simply making a statement of fact. This is an inherently clumsy system, and it is therefore one that does not lend itself to the swiftness of action that might otherwise be desirable.

3.45 pm

This system of government and process does not emerge well from the present crisis. We have had many people in considerable desperation contacting us all, I am sure, saying, "Government have closed us down and have promised us assistance". However, as I put it to the Minister during Question Time, many of them are asking about the current schemes, "Where is it?". The Minister gave an explanation about that, but that does not detract from the reality that there is a considerable time lag between the promise of assistance and its delivery.

I am reading a message that was sent by one self-employed person this afternoon. She is in the beauty industry and has been shut down for four weeks. She has not had a penny. If she is to reopen on Friday, and she does not know that, she does not have any money to buy in what she needs. That drag in the compensation and matching the reality to the promise are compounding many difficulties. Is she opening on Friday? Who knows? It is pretty clear that the Executive have been unable to reach agreement about that. Indeed, it seems that they have not even met today to deal with it.

A circuit breaker was brought in three weeks ago. As I said this morning, we do not need a circuit breaker now but a circus breaker. It really is a circus, but it is not funny for those who are at the receiving end; they do not even know whether their doors will open again on Friday. That is so unfair. That is a physical manifestation of the clumsiness and lack of nimbleness that attends our system of government. That is something that, for many, is quite appalling. Someone, rightly, made the point on the radio this morning that it is OK for the public sector — we are all paid out of the public purse — that it is the private sector that is really paying the price in all this and that employees in the private sector are in desperation as a result.

We had some interesting contributions to the debate. Probably the most interesting was the one from the Deputy Chair of the Finance

Committee, Paul Frew. He made a number of very pertinent and challenging points. One of the points that he made is sometimes forgotten in the House: the House is meant to be a forum of challenge. It is meant to be the forum that holds to account the Executive. You would think, from listening to some, that we are here only to back up, sustain, support and, where necessary, cover up for the Executive. We are not. We should not be. We should be here to challenge. That is something that has been substantially underrated and underprovided in the House.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that we have a five-party coalition Executive, that those five parties all come from different directions and go to different places and that we have no Opposition in this place, is it not right and proper that we, as MLAs, should all challenge where we can? Whilst we have members on the Executive, no one has a majority on the Executive. It is vital that we, as an Assembly, do not become compliant and that we challenge where we see the need arise.

Mr Allister: I largely agree with that; there needs to be challenge. Of course, fundamentally, there needs to be an official Opposition. It is beyond farcical that we are in circumstances where they do not exist. Even when they existed, they had their hands tied behind their back because of a lack of provision.

I will pick up on one of Mr Frew's points about the monitoring rounds. We set a Budget and allocate various provisions. One of the points that I made last week at the Finance Committee was that, when we set those allocations, we set them at such a high level that, frankly, they mean very little. We set, for example, £2 billion for the Department of Education. We do not specify in the Estimates or in the Budget how much of that is for primary, preschool, secondary etc; we simply set a global figure. That does not invite or permit an avenue of proper scrutiny, and I think that it is done because Ministers like the luxury of being able to move money around. I am sorry, but that is not really what it should be about. It should be about tabulating what Ministers need according to each sector in their Department, and those on scrutiny Committees should be able to see that. It should not just be £5 billion for Health and £2 billion for Education: we should be able to see the composition of all of that, and we should be able to interrogate that and find answers to that. I think that that information is held in each Department and in the Department of Finance, but it is not conveyed to the House.

That is why we get pretty meaningless global figures in our Estimates etc.

Mr Frew made a point about our monitoring rounds. We set all of these figures, and, three times a year, we have an arbitrary — "arbitrary" in the sense that there is no input from the House — distribution by the Executive of reallocations within that. The House is simply told. The House, according to the theory of Budget, is supposed to be the authoriser of spend. It is supposed to be the House that authorises the spending of public money, yet, when it comes to the monitoring rounds, we have no function whatever. We are simply told what the allocations are. As Mr Frew suggested, why cannot the House be in a position where the allocations are subject to a vote of the House? Why can we not ascribe to that some democratic accountability? Why can we not have the monitoring rounds discussed, as they are to a degree, with the Committees and then brought to the House and a resolution of the House required to implement them? That is the fundamental principle of distributing money to Departments, but it certainly does not operate in respect of monitoring rounds. That is something that could properly be addressed.

I heard much talk of a fiscal council. I have a couple of questions about that. What would a fiscal council do that the Office for Budget Responsibility cannot do? Every day, the Department of Finance sends its Consolidated Fund figures to London: every day. That information is fed to a source where the Office for Budget Responsibility can assess it and make recommendations and do as it does elsewhere. What would a fiscal council do that the Office for Budget Responsibility cannot do? Are we in the business of reinventing the wheel? There was a question earlier about quangos and arm's-length bodies. Are we just going to create for the sake of creating, or is there something there to adapt and to work with?

Someone suggested that it was all about fiscal powers. I am sorry, but I have to say to the House that the thought of letting this Executive put their hand into the pocket of business and taxpayers in this Province is, for me, a most frightening proposition.

I, for one, do not want to see fiscal powers be given to this House. This House has grown up with the mentality that you just spend. You spend, spend, spend, and then you whinge and complain when you do not get more to spend. The thought therefore of giving this House fiscal powers, considering how it has exercised many of its current powers, is, for me, a very

frightening proposition. For some, perhaps that would be a reason to do it, but there it is. I do not think that it is a sensible proposition whatsoever.

I said that my comments would be miscellaneous, and they are. I will leave them there.

Mr Carroll: It has been referred to already, but a video circulated online last week from Dr Julie-Ann Maney, a paediatrician who works in the children's hospital at the Royal in my constituency of West Belfast. She was being interviewed about an article that she wrote on 'Medium', in which she said:

"Years of austerity have had a devastating impact on the one in three children in Northern Ireland living in poverty."

Many in this Chamber would do well to read what she has written. Mr O'Dowd referred to her comments. He should reflect on what his party did to increase poverty and implement austerity in previous Executives, alongside other parties.

In the interview, she spoke of 14-month-old children who are so hungry that they store food in their nappy; seven-year-old children who are eating three portions or more because they are so hungry; and children with deficiencies whose short lives have been plagued by malnourishment because of poverty. It is heartbreaking stuff. She spoke of dental decay. Her quote that:

"Between 10 and 12 teeth are cleared out of children's mouths every day"

across the North has stayed with me since I heard it. The outpouring of heartbreak and rage on behalf of those children is something that I felt as I watched that caregiver, health worker and doctor being forced to speak out because the impoverished children in our communities are being failed by this Assembly. We are supposed to be living in a civilised part of the world, but that does not sound like civilisation to me.

Every time that I could rise to speak at each stage of this Bill, during the debate on the Estimates and at every stage of the previous Budget Bill, I said that they do nothing to challenge the state-maintained poverty in our communities. This Budget Bill is a continuation of the kind of politics that has deepened poverty rather than alleviated it in our communities.

We hear much about the increased investment in the Budget to alleviate the COVID crisis. It would be quite astounding if there were less money invested in tackling the crisis. As with almost everything that comes before the House, however, that investment has been predominantly aimed at businesses. Far too many people and workers have been forced to struggle throughout this pandemic.

I said something similar a few months ago, but little did we know that £10,000 was rushing into the accounts of some, including accounts that were connected to, or in the control of, public representatives who did not ask for it or did not qualify for it. All the while, I and my colleagues and every community service across the North have been inundated with pleas from people in working-class communities to help them dig around somewhere or barter with someone to get what money or food they need to tide them over. How many hospitality workers would welcome or, indeed, need £10,000 in their account to get them through this crisis? Quite a lot, I would say.

Unite the Union has had to design a financial bailout package because support for workers that it represents is severely lacking, despite those workers being expected to get back on the front line every time that this Executive click their fingers or change their mind and before the virus is under control or a proper testing system is in place.

It is also worth asking this: if, as a result of a universal credit overpayment, sums of £10,000 had been rushed into the accounts of social security claimants, many of whom are new claimants, having lost their job during COVID and facing a Christmas that they never imagined, how quickly would the relevant Department and agencies come down on them to pay it back? I guarantee that it would be done very quickly indeed. That people who hold or who previously held public office chose not to pay back that money is disgraceful, and I am glad that some of them have walked. That the Stormont Executive did not move immediately to claim back the rest of the money taken wrongly from the public purse at a time when people are suffering is completely unacceptable.

4.00 pm

The Finance Minister has been quick to say that Tory austerity has tied the hands and the purse strings of this place and has deepened poverty. Few in this Chamber hate the rotten Tories more than I do. I believe firmly that the Tory Party's influence has made people here worse

off, not to mention people in England, Scotland and Wales. I hope that one day we can consign them to the dustbin of history, along with the rotten system that they thrive under and want to maintain.

However, it is plainly false to say that the Assembly could not have done more. The last Executive, of the DUP and the Finance Minister's party, Sinn Féin, spent a decade begging the Tories to let them reduce corporation tax to harmonise our levels with the South, in an ugly game of race-to-the-bottom economics to give multinational corporations a tax break and to send up a flare to other corporations to fill their boots here at the expense of our block grant. To this day, I do not think that the Sinn Féin Finance Minister can pledge that he would champion an increase in corporation tax to make those who profit from workers in the North pay their way and fund our services. Perhaps he can correct me.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. On the topic of corporation tax, does the Member think that it is fair to describe a policy that could have brought thousands of jobs to Northern Ireland as a strategy of "filling your boots"?

Mr Carroll: I remind the Member that no evidence exists that reducing corporation tax would bring a single additional job into the North. However, if he can supply me with such evidence, I will happily share it online. However, I know that it does not exist; it is fantasy economics.

We do not even need to push Westminster for further powers to make the wealthiest pay. People Before Profit has, for years, pushed the idea of lifting the rates cap, so that those with the broadest shoulders carry the heaviest burden. It is worth noting that billionaires have increased their collective wealth by an estimated £25 billion to £30 billion solely during the pandemic. I have been calling on Governments, North and South and across these islands, to consider a wealth tax to bail out ordinary people.

I am not alone in that; progressive economists and activists have raised the idea too. Not only are those Governments not implementing a wealth tax, but, just today, I asked the First Minister whether a COVID-19 wealth tax was discussed at the recent British-Irish Council meeting. She told me that it was not even on the agenda. If we needed another reminder that we are not all in this together and that Governments continue to work with those with

the deepest pockets, a vivid example of it is right there.

Finally, I find it galling that some in this Government are going above and beyond to present an image of themselves as mould-breakers, as shakers of institutions, and as champions of social security claimants and those in public housing. The big parties in this House set the mould, built up the institutions and ran them, in large part, as a gravy train.

It was never good enough that parties like Sinn Féin played good cop against the will of the big, bad DUP or the wolves across the water. However, it is particularly exasperating when they stand over this Budget today; when they stand over the approach of this Executive to the COVID-19 pandemic; when they harp on about Bengoa being the solution to our health service underfunding shambles; when they allowed health workers to strike in the cold and still refused to pay them the lost pay that they had promised would be paid; when they continue to stand over the decision to do the Tories' bidding by introducing and defending welfare reform, the mitigations to which have cost more than it would have done to avoid introducing them in the first place, and when there are so many cracks that people are struggling to pay the bedroom tax that we were told was never coming to the North.

They should scrap welfare reform; they should raise the rates on the wealthiest; they should shout and scream about raising corporation tax and not be shy about it; and they should radically shake up the priorities of this —.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. The Member talks about raising people's rates, but can I outline a scenario for him? The Member will know that in my constituency there are places such as Stranmillis, where people bought their houses 40 or 50 years ago. They are now pensioners who may be asset-rich but who are cash-poor. If he places them in the bracket of the wealthy, how does he intend to extract the money from them? Will they be forced to sell their homes?

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am advocating that the wealthy pay more, but I believe that the Member probably disagrees with that, given his comments yesterday.

How else can parties claim to stand on the side of people in working-class communities who will always feel the sharp edge of their budgets and never seem to benefit from the scandal-laden

schemes, of which there are too many to name, that have come from this Building?

I am very well aware that this kind of speech will be received, particularly by Mr Stalford —.

Mr Stalford: With the contempt that it deserves.

Mr Carroll: "With the contempt that it deserves", he says. I am well aware of that, given yesterday's comments and optics, with his side of the House having a meltdown with the talk of basic socialist policies. I think that he is still hurting from Trump's defeat in America [*Laughter.*] Indeed, I have enough experience of having radical ideas about the redistribution of wealth being met with sneering and arrogant disdain from several sides of the Chamber and, sometimes, even laughs from across the way. We have had plenty of them today. However, it is not my job to present politics that is acceptable to Establishment politicians; it is quite the opposite. I know that the Budget is likely to be passed, and there will probably be no Division in the Chamber. However, I want to put on record my opposition to it for the reasons that I have outlined.

Mr Nesbitt: I listened to Mr O'Dowd's speech earlier. His remarks focused on children who were so frightened that they would go hungry again that they hid food in their nappies in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. We are a First World country. Of course, there are many measures of how successful a Government, an Executive and a society are, one of which is how well we look after children. Another is how well we look after elderly people, and, another, the most vulnerable in society. In fact, section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 specifies nine categories of people to whom we must pay particular attention.

I am sure that I have said this before: Mr O'Dowd and I could go now to the maternity unit of the Ulster Hospital round the corner and ask to see the latest child to be born into this country. I imagine that we could agree that, in that child, there is a spark of ability, creativity and talent. Our job as politicians is to create the environment where that child can explore that spark and find out what it is.

As a former Minister of Education, Mr O'Dowd might actually agree that our education system, which provides the schools that are the environment where children find out who they are, perhaps, puts too much emphasis on one particular form of intelligence: the academic.

We know that there are multiple intelligences. In this country, we produce people who are brilliant at all sorts of things; great artists, musicians, actors, scientists and sportspeople. A lot of people will recognise that George Best was the best footballer of his generation; a man who was born in east Belfast in the 1940s. What a lot of people fail to recognise is that, within two years of George Best's birth and two miles from where he was born, another sportsman was born. He was Mike Gibson, who the All Blacks, the best rugby players in the world, said was the best rugby footballer of his generation. Those men were born not only in a small regional capital city of the UK but in one quarter of that city.

I, certainly, commend to Members the thinking of the late professor of creativity Ken Robinson, who recognised that spark, which he called "the element", in children. We need to allow children to find that spark or element. We have to use the Budget to produce positive outcomes for people. We are debating the Budget in isolation. As I have said before and will say again, it should be a multi-annual Budget and should be linked very carefully and closely to a Programme for Government. The Programme for Government, which still sits in draft form, has an overarching purpose to improve the well-being of all our people. That is what we need to do.

The architect of outcomes-based accountability in programmes for government, Mark Friedman, makes it clear that trying hard is not good enough.

I know that the Minister is trying hard, and maybe all of the Ministers in the Executive and everybody in the House is trying hard, but that does not mean that we are succeeding. I think that, if you were to ask the hospitality sector, it would say that we are failing. Much more widely, there are many people in our society who are looking at us today and saying, "You are failing", and some may be even going as far as to say, "You have failed. There is no way back".

Mr Frew makes the point that we need to scrutinise, particularly because there is no Opposition in the Chamber and no second revising Chamber, as there is in London and Dublin. The media may play a much more important scrutinising role in this country than they do in the Republic, England, Scotland and Wales because there is no Opposition or second Chamber. This morning, I heard a well-known radio host deride the Executive because they went home at 9.00 pm last night without an agreement. He made the point that, if his team

were working on an investigation, it would work through the night until it was resolved. Well, there is a problem with the analogy because I do not think that his team splits in two, with one half saying, "We are taking the investigation down this road", and the other half of the investigative team saying, "Oh no, we are going in exactly the opposite direction". Unfortunately, that seems to be what is happening with our Executive today. As Mr Allister has said, it appears that there is not even agreement on when to meet, never mind agreement on the substantive points on the agenda.

I hear a fear expressed that at least one party of the Executive is trying to run down the clock until Thursday night at midnight, which is when some of the regulations fall. If the clock runs down, the pubs reopen. Well, the Finance Minister and I could agree to go to lunch in a pub on Friday in his constituency or mine. There is just one problem: there will be no food. The pubs, hotels and restaurants need lead-in times, and the lead-in times have gone for reopening on Friday.

I say, as a final thought — one that, I think, is reflective of how many people are thinking about us in the Chamber today — that the two parties that run the Executive out of Stormont Castle have had 13 and a half years to find a way to rub along together. That is 13 and a half unbroken years to put their differences aside and to recognise that, when the votes are counted, they are not opponents any more but partners in government. Coming to a point where, after 13 and a half years, they still cannot overcome difficulties for the greater good of the people, difficult as it is, is not good enough.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I thank all of the Members who have spoken today in the debate and all of those who contributed to earlier debates. We have had a number of debates on the Estimates and at the earlier stages of this Budget Bill. I have listened with interest, and, while I do not agree with all of the arguments that were presented, it is useful for me, as Finance Minister, to hear those arguments. There are points that have been made that I would like to come back to.

A number of people mentioned the fiscal council; indeed, Mr Allister questioned the need for it. The fiscal council is part of the NDNA agreement, so it is a five-party Executive agreement that we will have a fiscal council. Therefore, as the Minister responsible, it is my obligation to provide a fiscal council, and that is what I intend to do. As I said — I think that it was during Question Time — I intended to bring

a paper to the Executive in the not-too-distant future and had been working on it. Of course, that work, like a lot of normal Executive work, was held up because of the response to COVID issues, but that is clearly the intention.

My colleague John O'Dowd took Mr Frew to task on a number of issues, but there is clearly an internal issue with regard to his party leadership being worked out, once again, in his speech. I have no desire to get into that. Suffice it to say that we have given over £428 million to the Department for the Economy to support businesses. Of course, my Department has provided support to businesses as well. Mr Frew's attitude to additional fiscal powers is similar, given his kind of COVID-denying speech here, to that of his colleague Sammy Wilson.

4.15 pm

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Let me finish my point.

I remember that, when, as Finance Minister, he was asked about additional fiscal powers for the Assembly, he said, "I don't want any more fiscal powers because I'm a unionist". That, to me, betrays a colonial mindset where you think that people in Whitehall know better than us natives and therefore should take responsibility for our decisions. That is as well as being someone who —

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I will in a second, if you will allow me to finish my point.

That is as well as being somebody who is clearly opposed to the strategy that the Executive are taking in response to COVID. His remarks were not about the current restrictions and getting support out on the ground but about the entirety of the approach to the restrictions. It was in pointed language, but, as I say, that is more to do with a challenge to his party's leadership. The idea that he does not want fiscal powers falls into that category as well. I am happy to give way.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. Mr Deputy Speaker, is it right that the Minister would misinterpret my wording? I have never denied COVID; in fact, in my speech, I talked about it being a dangerous disease and virus. The reason that I would not want further fiscal powers for the House is that in front of me is

one of the most dangerous political parties in western Europe.

Mr Murphy: In relation to COVID, clearly, the remarks that the Member has made consistently in the last number of debates have challenged the whole approach of the Executive, whose priority is to protect public health and protect lives. Clearly, he considers the necessary, if very difficult, choices that we have made — all five parties collectively in the Executive — as something with which he fundamentally disagrees.

Mr Frew also raised the issue of the delay in LPS payments. I accept that there was a delay, and I would have much preferred that the payments were out much more quickly. I answered the question at Question Time. There were issues because the scheme was perhaps not quite as straightforward as the one for the first round of payments. There were other data issues attached to that, but I am told that those have been resolved. As of yesterday, over 2,000 payments of over £7 million in support had been issued on the ground, and more will go out today. I am hopeful that that will then start to roll out accordingly.

Caoimhe Archibald raised the case of multi-annual Budgets, as did a number of Members. We have had that discussion here on a number of occasions. Members will know not only my desire but the Executive's desire for multi-annual Budgets, given the planning that we wish to do and the certainty that we wish to have about our finances. She also mentioned the issue of those excluded, particularly travel agents. The First Minister, the deputy First Minister and I met that sector a week or so ago, and we have undertaken to do some work with them. We recognise that they, like a number of other sectors, have not yet received support and that a way should have been found for them to receive support some time back. We have given a commitment to try to do that.

Dr Archibald raised questions about the funding held at the centre. Just for clarity, as I said, again at Question Time, we had held back £100 million for further interventions, and, as of last Thursday, we have an additional £400 million. That is a significant amount of money. The Executive will want to get down fairly quickly to ensure that the schemes that we have started to roll out get on the ground where they are needed and that other schemes and supports can get out where they are required in the next four months, because that money has to be spent in the current financial year.

Dr Archibald asked about the Shared Prosperity Fund. I regret that we still have no certainty about how much that will be. Of equal concern to us is the fact that the legislation being brought through Westminster — I note that it ran into some hiccup yesterday in the House of Lords — seems to give Whitehall the power to decide on and allocate programmes in relation to what would have been European funding. That is clearly not what was agreed or expected not just by us but by Scotland and Wales, and it is a matter of some concern for those Administrations also.

Dr Archibald asked about flexibilities, as did other Members, including Pat Catney and, perhaps, Matthew O'Toole and Andrew Muir.

Again, that issue is common to Scotland, Wales and us. We have pressed the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to agree additional flexibilities, including carrying forward unspent funding and the ability to switch capital to resource. That would allow us to manage our budgets more effectively within our overall funding. It is not about asking for additional funding; it is about managing the funding that we have. We have yet to hear from the Treasury on its consideration of that.

Dr Archibald asked a pertinent question about mental health funding. That is a key concern of the Executive as a whole, which is why we supported the establishment of a mental health champion. In June, the Executive allocated £1.5 million for the implementation of the mental health action plan. That includes a dedicated COVID-19 mental health response plan. There is collective concern across the Executive about that.

Matthew O'Toole has just arrived in the Chamber. I had written a series of responses to him. However, he must be a good man for an each-way bet in the bookies. Having outlined all his criticisms of the Executive, he tempered them by recognising all the challenges and the fact that the SDLP is very much part of the Executive, so I had to retreat from some of the areas of contention that I was going to raise with him in relation to that. He recognises that there are challenges. We have now had £2.8 billion of additional spend this year. We did not get that money at the start of the financial year and told to spend it over the financial year. We got it in chunks, unannounced. Sometimes, we learned from the media that we were getting additional money. Had we had this debate this time last week, we would have been operating on the basis that we had £100 million set aside to spend. Within two days, we have £500 million set aside. Matthew O'Toole argues for

much more planning and foresight — a strategic approach. I am not complaining about the additional money; I am happy to have it. The problem of trying to spend it is much better than the problem of not having enough. However, he has to understand, as others do, that that makes strategic planning almost impossible. We want to allocate the money to where it is needed most.

After Mr O'Toole had spoken, Mr Muir raised the point that the most unforgivable thing that we can do is have money unspent. Those two things compete: strategic, long-term planning; and ensuring that you spend the additional tranches of money that come at you unexpectedly. I have no doubt that, if I stand here on 1 April talking about money that we have returned to the Treasury, there will be a litany of criticism of the Executive. That is not an excuse; it is a recognition of the circumstances. I agree that, in the longer term, we need budgetary plans attached to an agreed Programme for Government. That is why we have argued, as the Member knows, for multi-annual Budgets that will fit with more long-term, strategic planning. In the circumstances that we find ourselves in, it has been practically impossible to do that. I agree, as I have said to him on many occasions, that we need a fiscal commission as well as the fiscal council. We have been working side by side on those. Propositions for both are well worked up, and we intend to bring them forward very soon.

Matthew O'Toole raised questions about borrowing. We have not yet utilised the RRI borrowing in 2020-21. It can be used only for capital expenditure, and the current assessment is that the existing capital budget will be sufficient for Departments this year. He will know that we lost at least the first quarter — arguably, the first six months — of construction. If we asked to borrow but were unable to spend the capital that we have, questions would be asked, but we will continue to monitor that position.

I thank Pat Catney for some of the points that he made in relation to the Department, and, indeed, the work of the Committee. He asked about NIW and its funding. I agree that every Department is challenged. The £15 million was, I am sure, welcome to NIW. However, the Department for Infrastructure has had an increase of almost 19% in its capital budget this year, which is substantial. It is for the Minister to prioritise how to spend that within her Department. I have no doubt that she is challenged. John O'Dowd remarked that the Infrastructure Minister had said that it was no

secret that her Department does not get the allocations that she wants.

No Department gets the allocation that they want. A 19% increase in capital with an almost 10% increase in resource and £180 million given to it over this year on top of that is a substantial amount of money for any Minister to be going along with. You then get to the question of what they decide to do with that money and how they prioritise that.

John O'Dowd raised questions about the certainty that we want for next year's funding envelope. He knows that we will continue to press the Treasury for that amount. We are waiting on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review. It should have happened over the summer, but it has been pushed back into the autumn. The later it comes, the more difficult it becomes for us to do our consultation exercise that we want to do in order to afford effective scrutiny to next year's Budget. That did not happen this year, and we recognise that. The later it is that that amount is revealed to us, the more compressed that consultation exercise becomes.

Jim Allister raised a number of points. He criticised the need to be nimble. I agree with him. This emergency has highlighted that. In certain circumstances, it has highlighted weaknesses that we probably always knew were there. He referred to one business that was in touch with him, but he also has to recognise that we were able to turn schemes around in days to get them out, albeit there were delays in getting the data to get the money paid, and that under previous Executives those schemes would have taken months to turn around and get out the door. There has been a degree of nimbleness and a responsiveness, certainly in some Departments. Undoubtedly, a five-party coalition has made that more difficult, but I can look at the Scottish Government, which have a single-party government, and see that they have some of the same difficulties and criticisms that we have about getting support out on the ground. Wales is the same. In the South, a three-party coalition is having its difficulties. That is not unique to our system of government, to be quite honest.

If we can get this all spent by the end of the financial year, and we have the bulk of it spent, we will spend £2.8 billion on top of the budgets that we already had to spend. That is a significant challenge. To get schemes out in the middle of that, with people off work, working from home and all the disruption that that brings is a significant challenge.

I agree with him and with Paul Frew about the challenge role of the MLAs. He does not have to do this, but some people try to present themselves as being opposed to the decisions that the Executive make while not recognising that, in fact, their party in the Executive voted for the very decisions that are being taken. Absolutely, there should be a challenge function in Committees and in the Chamber, but people cannot ride two horses at the one time.

I recognise that there is a challenge in the scrutiny of the monitoring rounds because you have a bidding process coming in very late from Departments, and that money has to be turned around within a certain time and allocated. The Committees have an ability to ask departmental officials for details on spending areas in not only the Budget allocation but in the monitoring round allocations. While that does not, perhaps, allow the entire Assembly to do that prior to a monitoring round, it can nonetheless be carried out by Committees.

He is also an opponent of fiscal power. It is fair enough if he thinks that he would not like to see the Executive put their hands in the pockets of businesses, but he is quite content for Tories such as Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and all those characters to put their hands in the pockets of businesses here and decide what to do with it in order to give tax breaks to their friends over there. He is content for that to happen.

Gerry Carroll again raised questions. He made the point that he is not here to present acceptable politics. I absolutely get that, and he should challenge as much as he wants to, but he also has to present accuracy. When he says that the Executive have spent much more on businesses than we have on workers, that is not true. Setting aside the furlough scheme, which was done by Westminster, was for workers and probably outweighs all that we have spent —.

Mr Stalford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I will just finish this point, and then I will give way. The Health budget, the budget that is going through Communities for vulnerable people and the Education budget far outweigh the money that we have given to given to Economy. If he thinks that it is his responsibility to present unacceptable politics, and I congratulate him on that, he has a responsibility to present accurate figures.

I will give way on that point.

Mr Stalford: I thank the Minister for giving way. On that point, the Member from West Belfast talks about giving money to businesses. Businesses do not exist in isolation; they are made up of people. They provide jobs for people that those people will have to go back to.

Does the Minister agree that, if we were to follow the logic of the Member for West Belfast of permanent or semi-permanent lockdown, that would make it more and more difficult to revive those jobs once we come out of the crisis?

4.30 pm

Mr Murphy: There are difficult challenges to be faced by any Executive. Obviously, we have to act on the basis of health advice. The vast majority of our businesses are small enterprises that employ very few people. They are not multi-property stores. They are not huge businesses. The vast bulk of the businesses that we have in this part of the world are small businesses.

The fact is that Mr Carroll is not correct. The fact is that the last Executive did not spend 10 years begging for a reduction in corporation tax; it was part of a one-off agreement at Stormont House. The fact is that the health workers' strike pay is not being held up by the Executive. I allocated that money to the Health Department months ago, and it has not been paid by the Health Department. As I say, the Member can present the politics that he wants to present. He is absolutely entitled to do so, and I support him in doing that. I support his challenge in relation to austerity and other matters, but he has to be accurate when he speaks about that.

On Mike Nesbitt's points, I am old enough to remember Mike Gibson. He was a very classy full back, as I recall.

Mr Nesbitt: A centre.

Mr Murphy: A centre, yes. I remember him playing. Mr Nesbitt characterises the difficulties that we have in the Executive as being simply the product of the DUP and Sinn Féin. That is fair enough; he is in a different party. A lot of parties here present themselves as being in opposition and in the Executive at the same time. I always think that the danger of trying to ride two horses is that you fall off in between. I was prepared and ready to have an Executive meeting at 9.00 pm last night. My party or the other parties in the Executive did not call off an Executive meeting at 9.00 pm last night. I have

been prepared all day, even though I have been on duty on the Chamber, to go into an Executive meeting. I have not been able to get an Executive meeting. I am ready to do business in the Executive any time soon.

I will finish with this point, which is probably a more optimistic note. Mr Nesbitt referred to children who might be born today: as I was answering questions in the Chamber earlier, I learnt that I had a grandson born today *[Applause.]* I am very conscious of our responsibility not just to the next generation but to the one beyond that. I ask Members to continue to support the legislation so that we can address all of the key issues, not only now but into the future. I ask Members to support the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you. It would be remiss of me if we did not put on record our congratulations to you and the family, Minister. I hope that mother and baby are very well.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22] do now pass.

Adjourned at 4.33 pm.

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