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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 May 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr John Dallat MLA

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Speaker would normally seek for tributes to be paid at the earliest opportunity after the passing of one of our colleagues. Members will be aware that he was planning to do so for us to pay our respects to the late Mr John Dallat, Member for East Londonderry. However, the Dallat family, understandably, expressed a desire to attend and to observe those proceedings, and clearly that is difficult for them at the moment, given the wider restrictions that are in place. Following discussion with the Speaker's Office and the SDLP, on behalf of the Dallat family, it has been agreed that the formal tributes will be postponed until a later date. I am sure that Members will agree that this is the right thing to do in the circumstances. We do not wish to make it any more difficult for the family, and the Speaker would like to express to the SDLP and to the Dallat family his thanks and appreciation for how they have approached this sensitive matter at this time.

Standing Order 18A(5): Suspension

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is a motion to suspend Standing Order 18A(5). It will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate on the matter.

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move

That Standing Order 18A(5) be suspended for 12 May 2020.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 18A(5) be suspended for 12 May 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As there were Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. The motion is, therefore, agreed.

Executive Committee Business

The Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I beg to move

That the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to bring —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry to interrupt, Minister. I just need to make a bit of a business announcement.

Ms Mallon: Sorry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is all right. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I now call the Minister to open the debate.

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. As you can see, I am very excited to have this opportunity to bring before the Assembly this statutory rule, which will remove electrically assisted pedal cycles (EAPCs) in Northern Ireland from the regulatory process and bring us into line with the Republic of Ireland and Britain, as well as many other

countries in Europe. Northern Ireland is currently the only region within these islands that requires this type of electric bike to be registered, licensed and insured as a motor vehicle. The rule is made under powers contained in the Road Traffic Order 1995, and I will briefly set out the background to this rule.

An electrically assisted pedal cycle — or e-bike, as it is more commonly referred to — is a bicycle with an integrated motor that can provide assistance to a rider whilst they are pedalling. Currently, such e-bikes are, by law, considered to be motor vehicles and, therefore, require registration and licensing before they can be used on public roads in Northern Ireland. However, they have been exempt from registration and licensing in GB since 1995, and these new regulations will finally bring us into line with that position. The difference in approach has been highlighted by a number of MLA colleagues and many members of the public. I share their desire to make it easier for people to use e-bikes and their frustration as to why we have been left out of kilter with the legislative position in GB and the Republic of Ireland for so long. The regulations set out the requirements that bicycles, tandem bicycles and tricycles must meet in order to be classified as an electrically assisted pedal cycle for use on public roads. They are being made under powers in primary legislation and state that compliant EAPCs are not legally considered to be motor vehicles. This means that an e-bike is no longer required to be registered, licensed or insured as a motor vehicle, and that riders of these vehicles will no longer be required to hold a valid driving licence. As is the case with ordinary bicycles, legally, riders are not required to wear a safety helmet, but our clear advice is that, whatever sort of bike you are on, you should always wear a helmet.

The principal objective of these regulations is to simplify and reduce the regulatory burden on the public whilst maintaining safety standards. The second objective is to promote cycling as a mode of transport, which is an important one in helping us to achieve the modal shift to a greener, cleaner, healthier society. Since taking up my ministerial post in January, I have been keen to encourage our people to embrace active travel. That is even more important today as we battle the COVID-19 emergency. Whilst we must continue to do all that we can to protect our community from the pandemic, I have set out in recent days how my Department can contribute to the recovery phase by encouraging more of our people to walk and cycle. Last week, I announced in the Assembly that I am creating a walking and cycling champion within my Department. An important

role of the champion will be to ensure that we deliver our commitment to increase the percentage of journeys made by walking and cycling. To help achieve that, it is really important that we work collaboratively across the Executive and with councils, communities and citizens right across the North. I am pleased to confirm to Members that the walking and cycling champion has already set up an action-focused group of stakeholders, from both within and outside government, to provide advice and act in a challenge role to my Department. We have also been in touch with several of our local councils, and I am pleased at the level of encouragement and support that we are receiving from them. By working together, we can achieve the change that we desire. We also must not lose sight of the environmental and social justice benefits to our community of people switching from bus or car use to e-bike use. A reduction in car use leads to less congestion on our roads, less damage to our road infrastructure and a decrease in air and noise pollution and greenhouse gases. There is also the potential for fewer road traffic collisions as a result of having fewer cars on our roads. Importantly, an e-bike is more affordable for many more homes than a car.

To summarise, the main objectives of the regulations are to simplify and reduce the legislative burden on those people who wish to ride an e-bike, to promote cycling as a mode of transport that has health and environmental benefits and to reduce congestion in our cities and towns. A lot of change has been forced on us by the challenges of COVID-19 but this can also be the start of a time of change, if we choose it. There is an opportunity to build a better future and I believe that we should seize it. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly and ask Members to affirm the regulations.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure on the statutory rule relating to the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The Committee considered the proposal for the statutory rule at its meeting on 4 March 2020 and welcomed its introduction by the Department. At that time, I made a public statement on behalf of the Committee that we would give the Department all the assistance that it might need in bringing the legislation forward as it promotes people getting out on their bikes, which is of greater benefit to the wider promotion of health and of ending reliance on cars.

The Committee considered and approved the statutory rule at its meeting on Wednesday 29 April 2020. During our consideration, it was the Committee's general consensus that this debate should be scheduled at the earliest opportunity. As a result, and unusually, the Committee wrote to the Business Committee requesting that today's motion be tabled as soon as possible.

The Committee would like to note that the legislation has been a long time in the making, with the initial consultation having been carried out from 16 March 2016 to 11 May 2016. There is no need to rehearse the reasons why there was such a significant break between then and now, but the Committee recognises that the statutory rule could have been transformational over the last few years in the Executive's plans for carbon reduction. That being said, the Committee is very pleased that we now have the opportunity to approve the statutory rule in the motion. The Committee for Infrastructure is content with the rule.

I would like to add some further remarks on the matter. I welcome the legislation that is being brought before the House today; it is long overdue. The fact that it became law in 1995 in the rest of the United Kingdom and we are only addressing it today is quite incredible and quite embarrassing. As a constituency representative, I have received numerous enquiries from constituents who purchased e-bikes quite some time ago and have been using them in ignorance that they required a motorcycle licence to ride them and could face a hefty fine as a consequence. Once that became known, many e-bikes ended up in sheds and garages across Northern Ireland so, no doubt, cobwebs will be dusted off and batteries will be charged in anticipation of the new regulations. I may even be tempted to trade in my road bike for one.

Given the current health crisis and the need for physical activity for the sake of our mental health, making exercise more accessible, as e-bikes do, can only be encouraged. In closing, I want to take this opportunity to ask the Minister, while she is doing some spring cleaning — and perhaps she could do a little more in her Department — to address another anomaly where Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the United Kingdom, which is in respect of MOT exemptions for vehicles that are over 40 years old. The Department has already consulted on that and, given the current situation with regard to MOTs, it would be timely to address it sooner rather than later. I welcome and support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin seo. I wish to speak in favour of the motion. I welcome the opportunity to do so, obviously, because of the situation that we are in. This is a good opportunity for us to conduct some of our business. As MLAs we have a scrutiny role and I want to, with your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, use this opportunity to discuss some of those things.

I welcome the motion. The Minister knows that we have discussed it in the Committee on a number of occasions. I see this as part of the broader activity in relation to bringing forward legislation and everything else. I welcome the deregulation, which will assist in facilitating a shift towards a more sustainable transport culture in the North. We have seen people out using their bikes during the crisis for essential travel as well as for exercise.

As the Member who has just spoken said about her constituency, I have seen people in Armagh dusting off their bikes, dust flying out the door and cobwebs flying down the roads. I welcome seeing people out. If we are serious about a shift and change, and tackling congestion, air pollution and everything else, this is the start of the process. I welcome that. Making e-bikes more accessible will reach out to a wider audience. E-bikes are better than conventional bikes for travelling longer distances. People may not consider that, but that is something that we need to encourage. I would like to see the Minister talk a wee bit more about that and encourage that.

10.45 am

This an opportunity to step up our commitment to sustainable transport. Other countries are setting up pop-up cycle lanes. Dublin, for instance, is extending pavements and cycle lanes. I would like to see us follow suit.

I also welcome the introduction of the walking and cycling champion that the Minister mentioned last week. Will the Minister expand on how we are going to deliver on that? Who can engage in that process? I welcome local council involvement, but I think that there is a broader programme: there is a large cycling fraternity out there, and I would like it to be given the opportunity.

One of the key deterrents to active travel and using bikes is safety. Will the Minister consider best practice in other countries? Perhaps the introduction of physical infrastructure, such as bollards, would give people more confidence to use bikes and to be on the road, especially in

cities. I ask the Minister to prioritise the uptake of walking and cycling, and their sustainability.

We have talked about congestion and air pollution. Perhaps the Minister will expand on some of the things that she would like to introduce as part of the legislation to tackle those issues.

I look forward to working with the Department and the Minister in the future. Whilst we welcome the legislation, which is COVID-related in the sense that it is a consequence of what is happening socially and what we are trying to do, will the Minister talk about her departmental legislative framework or what she has in mind? Will she expand on where that is?

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the regulations. They were initiated, I think, by our former Minister Mark H Durkan. Unfortunately, we have had the hiatus of the past three years. I am not sure what Mr Hazzard did in his time, but, thankfully, we are here now.

I welcome Mr Boylan's remarks in relation to this being COVID-related, because it is strange to me, and to many observers, that the Infrastructure Department is the only Department that has not received any COVID-19 funding. I ask Mr Boylan to use his good influences with his party colleague the Minister for Finance, Mr Murphy, because for this to be successful and to play a part in the reduction of carbon emissions, as the Committee Chair referred to, infrastructure will be required to encourage more people to feel safe on the roads, as Mr Boylan rightly said.

There has been a substantial increase in the number of cyclists on our roads, but e-bikes will open up the opportunity for cycling as a pastime and hobby, and as a method of travel to and from work and shops. They will also allow cycling to be much more inclusive for people with disabilities, older people and people who find some of the hilly landscapes in our towns and cities a wee bit more challenging than others. They will, therefore, be of great benefit for a variety of reasons.

The Minister is to be congratulated for bringing forward these regulations so early in her tenure. I ask that the cycling champion is empowered and enabled to campaign ferociously for councils and planning departments to take on board the needs of cyclists, in general, and e-bike users and others, in particular, when designing open spaces and putting regeneration moneys into our towns, cities and rural villages. Therefore, Minister, we are very

supportive, as you can imagine, of these regulations. We look forward to seeing many people out and about, enjoying the fresh air and having a safer and more sustainable method of travel, that is much more inclusive and open to all.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome this change in our legislation. It is badly overdue.

Battery technology has changed hugely over this last number of years, but our regulations were stuck in the past and, as a result, those who had bought an e-bike found themselves in a ridiculous situation where they had to register it with the DVLA, almost like a moped, and have vehicle insurance. Like other Members, I had constituents coming to me, surprised that they were breaking the law when they used their e-bike. Yet, to all intents and purposes, and to most reasonable people, it was just a bike with a very small battery to assist those who may need assistance to cycle and to enable them to travel further.

It is ridiculous that this legislation was not in place some time ago. I understand that, in England, the current legislation was passed in 2016. We have wasted some four years, and it is regrettable that the absence of the Assembly meant that we could not modernise our legislation to provide what the public needs, meet their demands and remove unnecessary bureaucracy. I thank the Minister for dealing with this issue early after taking up the reins at the Department for Infrastructure.

Cycling is important as a means of travel, to reduce congestion and pollution, particularly in our cities, and for the health of individuals. My colleague Danny Kennedy was perhaps the first Minister to take the issue seriously. He recognised that there are multiple benefits to cycling, and he encouraged the development of cycling lanes and networks widely throughout Northern Ireland. Cycling needs to be developed further, and this is a small marker along the way. Hopefully, we will see other developments.

On the Committee, we picked up the impression that this legislation may be delayed. I do not know whether that was from the Executive or the Business Committee. I was very concerned. That would have been unnecessary, and indeed there was a failure to recognise that it might help during the COVID crisis in which we now find ourselves. It is another means for people to travel to work safely and avoid difficulties in social distancing. It is important that we recognise that, along with the other multiple benefits that come from the

use of e-bikes. They allow people who can cycle a little to cycle more, and those who can cycle a considerable distance to cycle even further. I suspect that even more people will use e-bikes to cycle to their place of work.

I am thankful that this anomaly, whereby Northern Ireland was the only place in these islands where all that bureaucracy governed the purchase of e-bikes, will finally be rectified, and the e-bike will be treated as it should have been, as essentially a bicycle with a small battery-assisted mechanism for travel.

I am pleased that we have finally reached this point and I expect, as every Member does, that the whole Assembly will support this and, very shortly, it will be approved. Those who thought they had bought a new bike and could use it, will now be able to do so legally and without unnecessary bureaucracy.

I support the Minister in bringing forward the legislation.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister and her Department for the statement and for bringing these regulations before the Assembly.

As the infrastructure spokesperson for the Alliance Party, I welcome the statutory rule. The only regret I have is that the collapse of the previous Executive prevented this legislation from coming into place many years ago.

E-bikes are an important cog in the active travel wheel. My party and, in particular, my colleague Chris Lyttle, who is the chairperson of the all-party group on cycling, have called consistently for Government support for active travel. Chris and others put the wheels in motion a number of years ago to release the brakes on that legislation, which will, hopefully, freewheel through the House today. I would like to thank Chris and others for their dogged determination to ensure that we have, now, reached the moment when we will finally resolve the farcical situation, which has been outlined by other Members, whereby e-bikes currently need to be registered, licensed and insured. The legislation will change that at last.

Northern Ireland's rolling hills are a source of great natural beauty, but they also put off many people who would otherwise like to cycle. E-bikes would go a considerable way towards making cycling a viable option for commuters and tourists of all ages and abilities. That is why the legislation is to be welcomed.

The COVID-19 pandemic gives us more reason than ever to make serious inroads in promoting

active travel. Today's legislation on e-bikes must be only the start of that journey. More people would cycle if bikes were affordable. That is why, last week, I called on the Minister to investigate discount vouchers in order to encourage people to invest in cycling. More people would cycle if there were cycle lanes that made them feel safe. That is why I call on the Minister to bring forward plans for pop-up cycle lanes as soon as possible. Finally, more people would cycle if there were somewhere secure to store their bike when they arrive at their destination. I urge the Minister to follow up on the motion by investing more of her capital budget in cycling infrastructure and properly funding the Belfast bicycle network plan, Northern Ireland greenway strategy, and other key infrastructure, not just in main cities but to reach beyond those areas in order to make cycling a viable option in towns and rural areas across Northern Ireland.

With regard to the greenway strategy, at this point, I should declare that I am a former member of Ards and North Down Borough Council. The council has developed greenway schemes that are ready to be progressed, but are still waiting on funding. I urge the Minister to release that funding and enable those schemes to proceed, linking Kinnegar to Donaghadee and the Comber greenway to Comber town centre, Newtownards and, then, onto Bangor.

Two further points need to be addressed. It is welcome that the regulations will be passed. Can the Minister for Infrastructure detail when the changes will actually come into effect? Many people have asked me when they will actually become legal. Furthermore, are plans afoot to enact legislation to cover electric scooters and skateboards? Whilst I cannot imagine myself on the latter, both are increasingly popular and viable commuting alternatives for people in Northern Ireland. Legislation to deal with those issues should be brought to the House at the earliest opportunity, whilst also safeguarding other road users and pedestrians. With e-scooter trials now due to commence next month in parts of England, and public-hire schemes already up and running in places such as Munich, which I visited last year, we need to ensure that Northern Ireland is not left behind again as it was with e-bikes.

Change is happening to how we travel. We ought to embrace and enable it with the necessary legal safeguards. Otherwise, people may end up literally moving faster than this place can keep up.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Chris and others are due to speak in the debate. Chief amongst them is Mrs Martina Anderson.

Ms Anderson: I welcome that we are, now, at the point to give approval to the statutory rule. I welcome the comments that were made by my colleague Cathal Boylan and, indeed, the Chairperson and others. Look: this moment is not the time to rehearse why the Assembly collapsed — I will not do that — and why there will not be a return to the way things were. Now, we need to encourage more people to cycle. I certainly concur with some of the comments that have been made. E-bikes are one way in which to encourage that.

It is no secret, as the Minister said, that our cities have become heavily polluted as our car-dependency culture has led to severe congestion. For example, research indicates that drivers in Derry, my hometown, lose an average of 58 hours a year in traffic. Unfortunately, too many people in Derry have to travel to work — even to Belfast — but that is another matter. You will be glad that I will not go into that issue today. Having listened to the comments that have been made in the Chamber, I believe that, generally speaking, most people experience the negative effects of congestion.

That is not only frustrating and time consuming, but it also hurts our health — as has been indicated — it hurts the environment and it hurts the economy. We do need to adapt to a better and a healthier way to get around, and the e-bikes will contribute to that.

11.00 am

On the issue of health, transport emissions are a large cause of air pollution, especially in urban and built-up areas, and contribute to many deaths throughout the year. My home town, Derry, was one of the cities that the World Health Organization identified as having excessively safe levels of particle pollution — they did not reach that safety level. Those particles, as we all know, contribute to strokes, heart disease, lung cancer and respiratory infections. So, with regard to the environment, as the Minister has said, transport emissions in 2019 represented 22% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the North.

It is clear that if we want to grow the economy in an equal, inclusive, healthy and sustainable way, then it is vital that we make all of the necessary changes. This statutory rule and e-bikes will help towards that. We can contribute

to growth by changing the way we travel and we can change that by changing our mindsets. We can also encourage that through this statutory rule and by working collaboratively across Departments, councils and with communities who, unfortunately, too often bear the brunt of bad decisions that contribute towards pollution.

This statutory rule facilitates a move towards a more sustainable transport culture, a healthier lifestyle and helps to create a cleaner air strategy that will be welcomed by everyone. I am sure that this statutory rule is going to be supported by all of the parties and independents. I thank the Minister for bringing the statutory rule to us.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Minister, for bringing this statutory rule before the Assembly at this time, when we are all clearly in agreement that one of the lessons — perhaps one of the few positives that has come out of the coronavirus crisis — is the fact that it has made us re-examine in quite profound ways how we live, how we work and the things that we value. It is worth saying, and like the Minister, I commend the Committee, which worked in order to ensure that this statutory rule came before the Assembly quickly.

We should not pat ourselves on the back too much given that it is a quarter of a century since this change was made in GB. We are behind the curve on the modal shift from driving, congesting our cities and making a move towards cleaner, more active travel. It is critical that we make that move and get ahead of the curve, and that is why I welcome everything the Minister has said and has done in her Department in the last few weeks, both before and during the COVID-19 crisis, in order to foment and make permanent some of the changes that we have seen.

We have seen a 70% reduction in congestion on our roads. Clearly, it is not realistic that when, hopefully, we get back to a slightly more normal run rate for our economy, congestion will continue to be down by 70% down. However, does anyone in Northern Ireland or in this Assembly seriously think that it is acceptable that we should go back to the levels of congestion that we experienced in our towns and cities before this crisis? I sincerely hope not.

It is encouraging to hear colleagues agree about the importance of moving towards greener, more active travel, and agree about the benefits of measures including wider pavements, pop-up cycle lanes, pedestrianised

streets and quiet streets — the Minister has been out in front calling and pushing for this. While it is good that others in the House are committed to this, it is important that we, as an Assembly, follow the warm words of today with real action. It is easy to stand up and say that we are in favour of cleaner, greener travel and that we are in favour of more cycling, cycle lanes, quiet streets and pedestrianisation. However, there will come a time when we seek to implement these changes, both at Assembly and local council level, when there will be interests who will tell us that a street cannot be pedestrianised or there are reasons why a pop-up cycle lane should not be imposed.

There are reasons why it is totally fine for cars to park in cycle lanes all around Belfast and in other towns and cities. There are reasons why we can get away with continuing to be behind the door — to use a local colloquialism — when it comes to moving towards active travel. I welcome the fact that we are doing this relatively quickly with the Assembly being reformed, but if we are going to do things properly, we need to get real about actually making changes. We also need to get real about funding those changes. I echo what my colleague Dolores Kelly said about funding the Department for Infrastructure because it is not just about cycling or walking, it is about public transport and long-term investment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the fact that the Principal Deputy Speaker has intervened, which gives me the opportunity to conclude my remarks in good time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Very good, because you were wandering far, far from the Minister's regulations. *[Laughter.]* It was more of a general overview on environmental policy than the regulations, but that is OK. It is on the record.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for bringing this statutory rule to the Assembly today. Like everyone else, I welcome it.

I want to respond to the comments from the Minister's colleague. It is important to note, and I am sure that the Minister is aware, that £95 million is being held centrally for transport issues related to COVID-19. The current allocations, in response to COVID-19, have been agreed by the Executive, which the Minister is part of, and are based on need

rather than departmental allocations. I just want to point that out.

Going back to the motion, and as others have said, the statutory rule will reduce congestion on our roads and get people out of cars and onto bikes. It will create more options, which is very welcome, for journeys in rural areas, where it is hillier and more difficult. Whilst this is a step in the right direction, the right infrastructure is needed to encourage more people to get out of cars and to cycle.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Kimmins: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: I know this is straying a bit, but I am just curious about why the Department of Infrastructure is treated differently from every other Department by the creation of a central fund. I am just curious around that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is straying very far from the Minister's regulations. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Kimmins: That is maybe a question for your colleague, because she is part of the Executive that agreed the budget. It is not really for me to answer.

I will go back to my point around infrastructure for cycles. Whilst that includes cycle lanes, it is important that we also look at the provision of proper cycle parking facilities that are safe and secure. It has been raised with me that there needs to be better provision in town centres. I ask the Minister to consider working more closely with the councils and maybe give them more authority to help to develop that. Again, I thank the Minister for bringing forward the statutory rule.

Mr Harvey: Minister, I noted a few points, when reading the legislation, that you could maybe clarify. This legislation requires a visible tag on e-cycles. Is this part of the frame or is it just a label on the motor to prove its legality? Can a consumer purchase a motor and fit it to their own bicycle without having to obtain a single-vehicle test from the Department if it is an approved kit? Is there an age restriction to riding one of these cycles or will the rules mirror that of other bicycles? The limit on power on the electric motors is 250 watts, which means you can do a maximum of 15 miles per hour. I assume that any power above that will mean that the bike is a normal motorcycle.

Mr Lyttle: As a member of the Alliance Party, which has a long-standing commitment to sustainable active travel, and as Chair of the all-party group on cycling, I welcome and support the introduction of this legislation to exempt e-bikes from licensing, registration and insurance.

The all-party group (APG) on cycling was established in 2013 to promote and improve cycling policy and provision. We have actively engaged with cycling organisations and government to advance this aim and to work on this particular issue. We were inspired and cajoled to do so by the late Tom McClelland who was the Northern Ireland representative of Cycling UK in the early days. I would like to put on record our ongoing recognition of his work on cycling in Northern Ireland.

I believe that the APG on cycling was one of the first, if not the only APG, to provide a written response and oral evidence to an Assembly Committee inquiry into the benefits of cycling. We have already facilitated early engagement between cycling organisations and the Minister on a wide range of issues, including this particular issue, which I am confident has encouraged the Minister to act decisively in support of active travel provision.

That we are celebrating the introduction of regulations that were first introduced in Great Britain in 1995 is, however, a stark reality check on the extent to which progress on the Northern Ireland bicycle strategy and cycling revolution has stalled. The cycling strategy was introduced by Danny Kennedy, with the assistance of Rodney McCune, and it does show how far we have to go to realise the full extent of the ambition and the provisions of that strategy. I believe that five Northern Ireland Executive Ministers have been in place since these regulations were introduced in Great Britain in 1995, so it is far from just the Executive hiatus that has stalled these provisions. Since then, the delay of these regulations has led to financial loss for providers that had invested in e-bikes and, most importantly, opportunity loss for people who need the extra help that e-bikes allow to enjoy the benefits of cycling and that they will gladly now have access to.

It is regrettable that it appears to have taken a global pandemic to inspire a tipping point in appreciation of the benefits of walking and cycling, but we must, as colleagues have said, positively embrace this opportunity. I welcome the national and regional Government statements in support of active travel, but it is vital that this leadership is now supported by decisive action and investment.

We look forward to hearing how much of the £2 billion and the initial £250 million of the UK investment that Northern Ireland will receive and allocate to active travel, and what specific actions the Minister will be taking on pedestrianising streets, new cycle lanes and in what timescales. I can suggest a few enhancements of the Comber greenway, including the Connswater Community Greenway, and a few other areas in east Belfast if the Minister needs any suggestions.

In closing, I ask the Executive, the Minister and the Assembly to work to ensure that the introduction of this legislation is merely the restart of the cycling revolution in Northern Ireland.

Miss Woods: I support the motion. It has been a long, long time coming. Indeed, as we have heard, it has been since the mid-90s, 25 years too late. It is also, as many have said, a crucial part of sustainable transport, helping to deal with congestion and air pollution, and it promotes active travel, exercise, well-being and leisure for those who can afford it. Mr O'Toole has done a great job of highlighting the issues outstanding, so I will not labour this point any further, but commitments and statements have been given. There is now a need for resourcing and funding as well as making what will be difficult decisions.

The Green Party's petition on this issue had over 2,000 people sign it, and, thanks to this and a certain Nolan programme, awareness of the differences between the regulations here and the rest of the UK and the EU increased publicly. We learnt that the PSNI could fine you up to £1,000 and issue you with six penalty points if you are found to be out for a cycle on the road on an e-bike not meeting the requirements. We even saw the suspension of the sale of e-bikes here a few years ago because of the confusion that arose due the absence of the legislation here, with some businesses unaware that when they sold an e-bike to a customer they had to treat it differently.

Shops did not know what to advise their customers or answer the queries on tax and insurance and sitting a test, and all of this occurred because the Executive and Assembly was not functioning.

The Department did want to change the regulations in 2016, as we have heard, but, without a Minister, that could not happen. So, whilst I welcome the regulations finally being laid here and thank the Minister for bringing them forward as well as responding to my letters and lobbying on this issue, I hope that

there will be some communication sent out to those suppliers and shops who sell and deal with e-bikes to confirm that the legislation is now finally up to date in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Department will continue to issue communication to that effect to the wider public.

I also support calls that, in light of the pandemic, have been made for a better and safer cycling infrastructure around Northern Ireland, for the pursuit of reallocation of road space and for changes in the way that we need to travel. I reiterate the importance of supporting greenway schemes and their roll-out in conjunction with communities and the councils, which had been planned, drawn up and consulted on in the past few years. As a recovering member of Ards and North Down Borough Council, I was involved in that, as was my colleague Andrew Muir.

11.15 am

I wish to give special mention to two constituents who have lobbied consistently for change here while the Executive were not sitting and thereafter. I know that they are very pleased to see this day come. Having bought their e-bikes in 2016 for a considerable amount of money, they put them in storage in October 2017. They have not been out since. So, to Sam and Anne Graham, I hope that you can fully enjoy your e-bikes now, knowing that you are not breaking the law, finally ending the farce of the past few years.

I welcome and support the motion as a small part of dealing with transport issues, getting around and climate breakdown.

Ms Mallon: I want to place on record my appreciation to the Committee for Infrastructure for its support and for the speed with which it reviewed and agreed the regulations. I also want to thank the all-party group on cycling, which has been pushing this agenda. I also wish to thank Members for their contributions.

I share the frustrations articulated by a number of Members, including Miss McIlveen, Mrs Kelly, Mr Beggs and Mr Lyttle, about the delay in introducing the regulations. As has been pointed out, the then Environment Minister, Mark H Durkan, tried to move on this issue in March 2016. However, it could not be progressed because of the suspension of the Assembly. I agree that, as I think Mr Lyttle put it, it has been an opportunity lost. Today, however, we are in a position to move the regulations, and all Members have indicated that they can support them. To answer Mr

Muir's question: if the House affirms the regulations, they will come into effect tomorrow.

All Members pointed out the range of health and environmental benefits of e-bikes. I agree with Miss McIlveen that the regulations are required now more than ever. During the COVID-19 crisis, we need to make exercise more accessible. As Cathal Boylan said, this is an important step forward in the shift to more accessible and active modes of transport. I agree with him, and with all Members, that this is the start of the process.

I also agree with Dolores Kelly, Cathal Boylan and others that the particular advantage of e-bikes is that they can be used for longer journeys, they can be used in hilly areas and they minimise the effort that people have to make when cycling. Therefore they are particularly advantageous to those who are older or who, whatever their age, are not as fit as they would like.

I also agree wholeheartedly with Roy Beggs and Ms Anderson about the importance of cycling and e-bikes in tackling traffic congestion, in lowering air pollution, and in reducing the damage to our roads. I also agree with Ms Anderson that cities are hit particularly hard by traffic congestion and air pollution. What this issue does is to reinforce the inextricable link between place shaping, the environment, the economy, health and social justice. One of the appealing things to me about these regulations, and about this agenda, is that more people can afford e-bikes than could ever afford a car. Therefore it is a very important issue for accessibility and social justice.

Responding to some of the technical questions from Mr Harvey, I can tell him that the age limit is 14 and over and that the plate has to state the power of the e-bike so that people can check. I assure him that, yes, the maximum speed is 15.5 miles an hour. However, as the vehicles cannot go above that speed, a safety element is built in. I agree with Miss Woods on the importance of communicating to retailers and the wider public the change in the regulations and the time frame for their coming into effect. I have done some posts to that effect, and I encourage Members to help me in getting the message across.

All Members spoke about the importance of active travel. I was committed to the active travel agenda before the outbreak of COVID-19. I recognise, as Mr O'Toole pointed out, that it is really important now. It is not just an environmental necessity; it is now a public

health necessity. As part of that process, Members will be aware that, this day last week, I announced that my Department was appointing a walking and cycling champion. I am pleased to confirm that, in that time frame, we have set up the group of stakeholders and that it has met. We have engaged with several councils around Northern Ireland and are getting very positive feedback.

I agree with Ms Kimmins that this will not work if we do not work in collaboration across the Executive, with the councils and with communities. I am committed to that agenda and will continue to do that. As part of that, this legislation is an important step forward. In the coming days, I will announce a number of interventions to try to get a quick change on the ground to facilitate, promote and drive this agenda. However, as Mr O'Toole pointed out, when you are advocating and bringing about change, you will meet with resistance. I need every Member and political party in the House to stand with me in advocating that change and to explain to people why it is important; indeed, why it is essential.

Infrastructure has shown that it is key to responding to the crisis. It has played a key role in the health fightback and it is key to the green recovery. As New Zealand is demonstrating and recognising, investment in infrastructure is critical to kick-starting an economy. We will continue to play our role in that, but it will require Executive support and endorsement. Members will see that that theme is clear in the pathway to recovery that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will announce shortly.

Mr Lyttle referred to the Barnett consequentials that could come across from active travel. I regret to inform the House that, as soon as that announcement was made, I made immediate enquiries. It is not new money. Unfortunately, as I understand it, there will be no Barnett consequentials, but I am committed to doing what I can in my Department, and I know that my Executive colleagues share that commitment.

Mr Muir raised the issue of scooters and Segways. This legislation does not cover those types of electrically propelled vehicles. I am looking closely at what is happening in England. The Department for Transport is running pilot schemes, but there have been a number of collisions and fatalities involving those vehicles. So, although I will continue to keep those vehicles under review, I have to be mindful of the need to promote the active travel agenda while maintaining road safety. I assure the

Member that I am watching the situation closely.

Mr Boylan asked about my legislative agenda. I have shared a number of the priorities with the Committee. These include: road safety, mobile phone use while driving and trying to do more on the issue of drink-driving. I have also said that I am actively exploring biennial MOT testing. If that is the direction in which we go, it will require legislative change. I am also very aware of the vehicles of historical interest that Miss McIlveen raised. I know that Mr Harvey is very passionate about those vehicles as well, and I am actively considering that issue. I recognise its importance. My approach will be to introduce legislation. I will also try to change policy where I can and bring about change on the ground. It is a three-pronged approach.

As I said, Infrastructure has played a key role in responding to the crisis. It is playing its part in the health fight by turning our MOT centres into COVID-19 centres and it is key to the green recovery. To deliver on that, we have to have ambition. We also have to have resource.

I want to acknowledge on the record that this journey was started by Danny Kennedy. Mr Beggs is absolutely right. Danny Kennedy drove this agenda when not many in the political world were doing so. He tried and he made some progress. The difference now is that the context is fundamentally changed. We all recognise that we will not go back to the way things were. To do so would be a failure. We are going to a new normal, and active travel will play a key role. I look forward to working with every Member in the House as we realise that agenda and improve the lives for citizens across the North.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

I propose, by leave of the Assembly, that we have a brief suspension in order to prepare the Chamber for the next item of business, which is a statement from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I ask Members to leave the Chamber briefly to enable the necessary changes to be made while social distancing is maintained.

The sitting was suspended at 11.24 am and resumed at 11.35 am.

On resuming —

Ministerial Statement

Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-making

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yesterday evening, the Speaker received correspondence from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in which they asked to make a statement to the Assembly on the Executive's approach to coronavirus decision-making. The First Minister and deputy First Minister said that, given the importance of the statement in setting out the way forward in relation to the current crisis, they would be grateful if Mr Speaker could give consideration to their making the statement under the same seating arrangements and question format as have been put in place for the Ad Hoc Committee. In light of the particular circumstances, Mr Speaker was content to put in place those arrangements on an exceptional basis. The Business Committee therefore agreed to table the motion to suspend Standing Order 18A(5) that the Assembly agreed to earlier today. That means that we have flexibility to go beyond an hour, which I may allow, depending on the number of Members wishing to ask a question.

Before I call the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I remind Members that, in light of the social distancing being observed by parties, I have relaxed the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they want to ask a question. Members must still make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, but they can do this by rising in their place or by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to, please, be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed. That is for fairness, to ensure that Members from smaller parties who are further down the list get an opportunity to ask questions too. As per the arrangements for the Ad Hoc Committee, Members who ask short, focused questions will be invited to ask a supplementary question.

Finally, I advise Members that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will make a joint statement and either or both may respond to a particular question, although I say to both of

them that they do not have to respond to all of them.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you very much for the opportunity to update the Assembly today. Since 7 April, updates have been provided by me and the deputy First Minister and by Executive Ministers, and the junior Ministers brought the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations to the Assembly for approval. The common themes and threads across all of our updates have been the devastating nature of COVID-19, the need to protect our health service, the interventions made by Departments and the need to follow the restrictions to keep safe and protect the NHS. Today, we wish to update you on our latest review of the restrictions and our decision-making process for coming reviews. They have been discussed in detail by the Executive, and we will publish 'Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-Making' later today. This is our five-step plan to aid recovery and renewal. Our discussions have been guided and assisted by inputs from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, and we have been grateful for their advice. The Economy Minister is working on a further document dedicated to economic recovery that will dovetail with this road map and will be published in the coming days.

The Executive agreed that now is not the time to lift restrictions, and we made that announcement on Thursday of last week. We also agreed that the time is right to set out our thinking and explain how we will approach decision-making, what we will take into account and how we see the restrictions easing. As of today, we remain subject to restrictions that no one wants to last a day longer than is absolutely necessary. They are measures that we would not contemplate in normal times. We know that they have a significant effect on people's ability to live their life the way they and we want, so, today, we wanted to set out for the Assembly our thoughts on how we might move forward when the time is right.

Just as there was no rule book for putting the restrictions in place, there is no set pathway for lifting the restrictions. Countries and jurisdictions are taking some tentative steps to lift restrictions. Some have published criteria and principles, and some have outlined a timetable. Each is different, and there are good reasons for that. Our decisions must be based on what is happening here, taking account of our particular circumstances within the four nations approach. Differences and nuances between the jurisdictions in the United Kingdom will emerge. The four nations discussions will,

however, continue, and, to that end, we welcome the announcement by the Prime Minister on the establishment of a new, joint biosecurity centre to monitor the levels of infection and identify specific actions in regions where spikes occur. The devolved Administrations will participate in and contribute to its work. We will also continue to engage, of course, with our counterparts in the Irish Republic.

We will remain focused on the health and well-being of our people, our society and our economy as a whole. We will be driven by science. We will be driven by the need to emerge from the current arrangements in the safest way possible, step by step. That will require a series of judgements and decisions as we move through. Last week, we considered very carefully the effect that restrictions are having on our people. We know that you want clarity on things that matter very much to you, such as visiting relatives, going to work and taking your children to school. We decided collectively that the time is not right for making major steps. We will continue to consider whether some modest steps can be taken, and, if they can, we will do that ahead of the next review. Against the background of last week's decisions, we fully appreciate that people want as much information as we can give on the next steps. That is why we are publishing our document today, and we will move forward with care, step by step, with a clear goal of emerging from the situation safely.

We must continue to avoid the health service being overwhelmed. COVID-19 spreads in a way that is not visible in real time. A person who catches it today may not have symptoms immediately but may well need hospital treatment in coming weeks. The things we do today, as citizens, have an impact in the near future, and, if restrictions are lifted too soon or in a way that we cannot control, we will see the negative results of that in the days and weeks ahead, so we will also keep our approach and document under review. As we move forward, we will address any oversights and make improvements to how we consider the issues that matter to our people — to their lives, families and livelihoods. We will not take a set-in-stone approach, if there are things we can do better and do differently.

COVID-19 spreads at a rate that is not visible in real time either. Before the restrictions were put in place, each person with COVID-19 was likely to pass it on to two to three people; the time it was taking for COVID-19 cases to double was shortening; and we were faced with a growth rate that could have overwhelmed the NHS.

The current transmission rate of each person infecting, on average, fewer than one has been achieved because of the restrictions being in place and the adherence to them. We cannot allow the transfer rate to rise to uncontrollable numbers, and that is why we cannot lift the restrictions too early and must continue to ask everyone to play their part every day. The transmission rate — "R", as it is more properly known — was key to the review last week. It will continue to be central to the judgements we will make in the coming weeks.

The Executive's document sets out the way in which we approach each review of the restrictions. We must work our way through on the basis of risk-assessed, incremental steps and judgements, but it is equally important that we develop a very clear vision of where we want to be as we emerge from the crisis. The document sets out an indication of how key aspects of life may progress through different stages as we emerge from this situation. They will not necessarily all move forward at the same time, and they will move forward only if it is safe to do so. In reaching our judgements, we will think about the outcomes that we need for the health and well-being of our people, the economy and our society. We will preserve, rebuild and develop aspects of our life that are most important to us. We will think about what our people have been through, their experiences over this last few weeks and how we can best assist with the adjustment to the "new normal".

There will be a new normal. COVID-19 will not be beaten through restrictions. We may be living with it while clinical interventions are being developed.

We may have to embed social distancing even further in how we live our lives and conduct our business as we emerge from the restrictions. We may need to take some steps forward and some steps back, but we will not return to the world as we knew it before COVID-19 for some time.

11.45 am

We were clear at the outset of the crisis that we could not entirely insulate ourselves or our economy. We have lost loved ones, and we have lost neighbours. Our health system has been under tremendous strain. We have lost livelihoods, and some businesses, tragically, will not survive this. We have to consider the impact that this dreadful disease has had on families, on communities and on the way we live and socialise. That is why our document

sets out very clearly the factors that we will take into account in forthcoming reviews of the restrictions that have been introduced and measures that have been taken so far. We will base our judgements on the health and well-being impacts of COVID-19, and we will have a clear focus on NHS capacity. We will take account of the impact that the restrictions have on non-COVID health and well-being outcomes, the societal impact arising from the restrictions and the impact that the restrictions have on our economy.

We know that some will want us to set a date for the lifting of restrictions, but we will not be driven by a timetable. We know that some will be disappointed by that. Many will want answers immediately around specific scenarios that impact on them most directly, but our road map will not answer every query. It provides an indication that people can use in looking ahead and anticipating how the next weeks and months might evolve. It is understandable to want as much certainty as possible, and the Executive agreed last week on the need to enhance messaging around what people are already permitted to do within the legal framework. There is scope for Departments to be more clear with different sectors of the economy, citing examples such as construction and manufacturing. It is not surprising that people err on the side of caution and are not engaging in activities that are, in fact, permissible, safe and beneficial. That is understandable, given the extremely unusual and challenging times that we are living through. The Executive supported messaging aimed at giving people the knowledge and the confidence to enable them to live their lives as freely as possible within the existing legislative constraints and in line with public health advice. The Department of Health has committed to taking this forward with other Departments.

I want to stress again, before handing over to the deputy First Minister, that our restrictions have worked. They have saved and are saving lives. We are asking a lot of our people, and we appreciate that the restrictions have health and well-being consequences too. We want everyone to be able to go out, visit relatives, socialise and enjoy everything that this place has to offer. We need to get people back to work when safe to do so, and we will get there. It will take time, but we will get there.

I end with a word of thanks for everyone who is working hard to keep us safe, including those in our blue-light services — the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service — and those who provide

our food, look after us in the NHS and care for the vulnerable. We are grateful. Thank you.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Just before my remarks, I put on record my condemnation of the threats made against Members of the Assembly in recent days. Those threats have no place in our society and should be condemned by each and every one of us.

We are grateful for the opportunity to come before Members today to set out the basis of Executive decision-making and our agreed pathway to recovery. We are, as we all know, in the midst of the biggest challenge of our lifetime. This invisible killer — this killer virus — is causing loss of life and great hardship to many people throughout our society, across this island and, indeed, across the world. Let me start by saying that we do not underestimate the impact that the severe restrictions have had on everyone across society. It is fair to say that, in general, public support for the unprecedented measures that have been introduced has held firm throughout recent weeks. There is public awareness and understanding that, by imposing these essential containment measures, we have collectively slowed down the spread of the virus and we have collectively saved thousands of lives. I acknowledge all those from across our communities who have lost their life to coronavirus and send our heartfelt sympathies to their loved ones from the Chamber today.

As when we went into the crisis, our pathway out of the coronavirus pandemic will require collective effort and working with the community. We appeal to the public, please, to be patient. We understand that you want your family life back; to visit and socialise with your friends and your family; and to give your grandchildren a hug. We know that you crave more leisure time and being able to get out and about and to exercise like you used to. We acknowledge the need for businesses to be able to open and operate safely so that we can all get back to our jobs. We understand that parents want their children to have the educational opportunities that they deserve and on which they thrive. We accept that many people rely on public transport for work and for socialising, and we totally understand the pressures on the vulnerable, who want to be more self-reliant.

The restrictions remain in place at this time because they are necessary and because they are working. Our top priority remains saving lives by combating the spread of the virus through staying at home, social distancing and regular hand and body hygiene to kill it. Our

biggest threat in the fight against COVID-19 remains complacency. Until a vaccine is found, we must co-exist with the virus and therefore radical change to how we live our daily lives for some time. Life as we know it has changed. We will have to continue to adjust. Going forward, our whole society will be proactive in targeting risk to reduce the spread of the virus or further outbreaks. That requires us all to change our behaviour. When we are in a position to move out of the lockdown slowly and carefully, we will keep you updated every step of the way, as we begin to restart community life and reboot the economy to keep people in work and keep society functioning.

While the restrictions are still absolutely necessary, it is important that we give people hope for the future. Today we set out our pathway for future recovery, which gives an indication of how the restrictions on different aspects of life may be eased at various stages. There are three elements that go hand in hand. First, the incremental five-step approach represents the risk evaluation that we will make at each stage in order to restart family, community, educational and economic activity. Secondly, those decisions will be evidenced by medical and scientific advice from our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser. Thirdly, that expert advice and evidence will be benchmarked against guiding principles or criteria and international best practice, including the World Health Organization's. We will then make risk-based assessments of the positive and negative effects of the restrictions in place and decide what restrictions to ease and when to ease them.

As we have said before, however, we will not keep the restrictions in place for a moment longer than they are required. We have built in the necessary flexibility to respond to the complex emerging situation on the basis of all relevant evidence. We have to be prepared to step forward and, if it is needed, to step back. We must take into account the evidence and the analysis relating to the pandemic. We must take into account the capacity of the health service and social care services to deal with COVID-19 but also that of the other health and social care services that are needed to look after our people. We must take into account the impacts on our society and our economy, which cannot remain in lockdown indefinitely. As we go forward, we cannot fight the pandemic blindfolded. Controlling the rate of transmission is absolutely critical. A restriction or requirement should be relaxed only when there is a reasonable prospect of maintaining R at or below one. That means that we need to have in place testing, tracking and tracing

arrangements to enable us to lift the restrictions safely. Our testing capacity has grown, and more sectors have been able to avail themselves of it, but it will be a cornerstone of our ability to lift the restrictions as we move forward.

The capacity of our health service to deal with coronavirus is vital. Outbreaks must be minimised in special settings, such as health facilities and our care homes. Preventative measures must be in place in workplaces, schools and other places to which it is essential for people to go. Importation risks must be managed also. We must ensure that communities are fully educated, engaged and empowered to adjust to the changing way of life as we co-exist with the virus until a vaccine is found.

Coronavirus respects no politics or borders, and I am glad to report that there is very good cooperation taking place North/South between the Executive and the Irish Government at all levels. The memorandum of understanding signed by the Executive and the Irish Government on 7 April is aimed at getting North/South cooperation and coordination right in the response to COVID-19 across the island, recognising the island as a single epidemiological unit. Data modelling across the North and South has, of course, been undertaken.

These are the most challenging times that any of us can remember. It will only be by working together in government and across society that we will minimise the suffering and the hardship caused by the pandemic, tackle the challenges ahead and set about achieving social and economic revival. There will be times when there are strongly held but contrasting views on the right decisions and next steps. We, as an Executive, have set out our criteria and how we will apply them to our decision-making, and we will continue to communicate them with the public and the community. We will also listen carefully to understand the views and experiences of everyone who has been impacted at this very difficult time.

The Executive will continue to put in place measures to help those in need during the lockdown. We have taken steps to help those who are shielding through advice lines and food deliveries. A COVID-19 community helpline has been contacted by over 12,000 people to date. Access to food parcels continues to be the main reason for calling the helpline, and over 57,000 food boxes containing essential items have been delivered directly to the doors of vulnerable people who cannot access food

through online shopping, family, friends or local support networks. We have put in place economic interventions for our business sector. Our schools are providing places for the children of key workers and vulnerable children.

The restrictions will be lifted in stages, when the timing is right, and that will not be in the too-distant future. If people continue to adhere to the public advice, which is working, we will be able to remove the restrictions more quickly and restore your freedoms without further delay. The Executive will continue to work as hard as we can with common purpose. COVID-19 does not discriminate, so we must remain united in common purpose against the biggest threat facing our community and the world. I thank all of our health and emergency responders and everyone who continues to work on our behalf. They work on the front line, and their selflessness and courage at this time know no bounds. We will continue to provide updates on our thinking, and we are grateful for the opportunity today to provide the Assembly with this update.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for coming to the House to make the statement.

It was remiss of me, particularly given that two of the Members involved are in the Chamber, to overlook condemning utterly the threats that have been issued against elected Members of the House, whether it is Ms Dillon from Mid Ulster, Mr Aiken from South Antrim or Mr Beattie from Upper Bann. We all stand with you and condemn utterly those who harass or harangue the democratically elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I echo those remarks of condemnation of the threats against colleagues. Nobody in a democratic society should have to face such threats.

I want to start by referencing quickly the problem in our care home sector. This is fast becoming a care home pandemic. The owners and staff of homes are doing all that they can with the resources that they have, but the virus continues to spread. That needs urgent and immediate attention, and I hope that we can get some clarity today on the special measures that will need to be taken by the Executive to address this as the emergency that it is.

I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for providing me with some advanced sight of their statement. I saw it about 10

minutes ahead, which I welcome, but I suggest, on behalf of Members, that a short recess to allow people time to read the statement would have been good. There is quite a lot of information in it to digest in 10 minutes, although we tried our best.

The urgency of the remarks is critical, because the public are hungry for information. This affects their lives, livelihoods and communities, which have been shut down and isolated. They all — we all — want to know when this will stop. The "when" is important. It would have been useful to have timescales in the document with the proviso that they could be changed or moved due to circumstances. People would be understanding if the times needed to change due to medical or scientific evidence, but, without timescales, the document could be seen as being almost an aspirational one, which may not satisfy the public's thirst for knowing when things might change.

People will want as many specifics as possible. The recycling centres, the parks, the shops, safety at work, schools reopening when the time is right and, of course, visiting families and loved ones are all high priorities, and it would have been important to get a better steer on those things.

12.00 noon

As everybody knows, knowing who has and does not have the virus is critical, and that will require comprehensive testing, tracking and tracing arrangements. Is that envisaged as a result of this plan being published today? Can you give us details on how that will happen beyond conversations and modelling between the medical officers, North and South? Can you give us the real, practical steps that will now take place on an all-island basis, given that the virus does not know any borders?

Mrs O'Neill: Sorry, I thought that you had the statement an hour beforehand, so apologies for that. Our door is open to discuss this further outside the Chamber today with you, as Chair of the Committee.

We all know that care homes are where all the attention needs to be right now. The Health Minister described care homes as where the battle currently is, which means that there can be no stone unturned. We need to throw everything but the kitchen sink at making sure that every resource that is necessary in care homes is put in place. We discussed that yesterday at the Executive and agreed to come back with a fuller paper on those types of

measures and what additionality we can bring to put the effort into the care homes. There has been a lot of emphasis on improvements in support for care homes, and the Member registered that point himself. Financial support and trying to transfer staff in are crucial, but we have to keep asking ourselves every day: are we doing enough? Is enough being done?

For me, one of the things that will be really crucial to us being able to advance and support care homes more is to get to the point of universal testing. I have made that point. When there is an outbreak in a care home, there should be a rolling programme of testing that allows you to monitor that situation very carefully. We do not want to be sitting, at any stage of this, regretting that we did not do enough, so the test, trace and isolate policy is crucial to all that, as you know. We have to get to the point where there is capacity to test in care homes in a universal way, and we are having that conversation. At the Executive on Thursday, we expect to have a further conversation about how we can build on the additional finances and the resource in terms of people. We need proper personal protective equipment (PPE) for all staff in care homes, and all these things need to be looked at in the round. As the document outlines, there will be an urgent expansion leading to an intensive programme of testing for residents and staff in care homes, and that will commence immediately. That is a good thing.

What about the light at the end of the tunnel? I get that. We all have families and we are all in the same boat, and everybody wants to have something to look forward to. We looked very carefully, as a whole Executive, at the issue of putting timelines and specific dates to certain areas, and we decided against that for the reason that people want light at the end of the tunnel. We do not want to build up expectation and then have to move, because all this is dependent on the R rate being at a lower level. Clearly, at the moment, with the R rate sitting at somewhere around 0.8 or 0.9, we are not in a space where we can comfortably move to do anything.

To give people an idea and indication of time, we said that we will review the regulations every three weeks. The next review has to happen by 28 May. However, we have built enough flexibility into this programme so that, if the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer were to sit down tomorrow with the Executive and say, "We are now at 0.5 in the reproductive rate", that will allow us the space to move in advance of the three weeks. The document talks about the different stages and

the five-stage approach, and you could very quickly be at step one. That gives people an indication that, provided that the disease keeps going on a downward trajectory and the R rate keeps coming down, we could be in that space in the very immediate future. Hopefully that gives people an indication of time. The flexibility that we built into this gives us the ability to move as we see fit. Hopefully that gives people an understanding of that. It is about trying not to build up expectation. It is about saying, "Here are the five steps. Here is the guide. Here are the types of things that are included in that". It is important that we highlight to people things that can perhaps happen in each step in the time frame.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: On a point of housekeeping: the ministerial statement landed in the Speaker's Office at seven minutes past the hour, and we reconvened at 37 minutes past the hour, so they were within the accepted time frame for the statement.

I gave the Chair of the Executive Office Committee some leeway, because he is the Chair of that Committee, but the questions will have to be much more focused. I have 20 Members wanting to ask questions, and we are seven minutes into an allocation of an hour. Does the Chair want to ask a supplementary?

Mr McGrath: I do, for clarification. The different phases can be seen in the document. Under the heading "Current Position", is that where we are today for all the headlines; we are not moving, today, to phase 1; and it will be three weeks before we review moving from the current phase to phase 1?

Mrs Foster: Thanks, Colin. There is no silver bullet and no flick of a switch. We have to do this in a stage-by-stage process. Taking that into account, what you see in the document, where it says "Current Position" in all the boxes, is where we are today. We will continuously look to see whether we can move to stage 1 in relation to the different boxes. As Michelle said, we have built in the flexibility to move whenever the advice comes to us. I think that that is a better way of doing this. I understand the desire for dates. Believe me, I understand that. However, we had to balance up putting down dates and then not having the flexibility to move in a different way, and that is why we put that in.

We will give notice. Thinking about businesses in particular, if we are saying that they can reopen, obviously, they will need time to get

ready. That is what this plan is about as well — to give them an indication of the movement.

The Member asked a specific question about track and trace, which I want to pick up. Contact tracing is, of course, very important to us, moving forward. The contact tracing service NI is very well advanced. On 27 April, a pilot phase of contact tracing was begun to permit testing and further development of the system and processes. The process is evolving, and we are learning from that pilot. A transition phase following on from the pilot commenced on 11 May. We are preparing and developing the delivery of phase 2 of the project, and we hope to implement that on 18 May.

Contact tracing is key to us moving ahead in our steps. I really want to make that point. It is part of what we are planning for. Whilst you may say that some will see this as an aspirational document, I have to say that I think that it is very clear on what we are relying on for decision-making. If you look at the document, you will see that it is very clear that we are looking at evidence and analysis, the capacity of our health service, and a risk assessment of the impact on health, on the economy and, indeed, on society. We realise that the restrictions are having a big impact on family life and on people meeting their friends and that that has an impact on mental health. We recognise that, and we want to challenge it and to make it part of our risk assessment.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement and the document that we received. We all just want life to be back to normal. I cannot wait until I hug my little grandson, my mum and dad and my family. I am looking forward to that, but I understand that we need to be measured in our approach.

First Minister, you mentioned that the Economy Minister will bring more detail on economic recovery. Will you expand on the point about our plans for economic recovery?

Mrs Foster: When we say that we are planning for the future, of course, we are making sure that health is to the fore and that we take into account the impact on the R number, which Michelle referred to, to make sure that we move forward on a step-by-step basis. However, we are also conscious of what the Member said in reference to hugging her grandchild, the society point and the economic issue. COVID-19 has had what the Economy Minister, if she was here, would say was a "devastating impact" on the Northern Ireland economy. We have to look at how we mitigate that impact and then how

we plan for recovery. In the near future, she will bring plans on the recovery element of that, and that will sit alongside our road map.

The very good work of the Northern Ireland engagement forum should be remembered. Something that we did here, which was unique to Northern Ireland, was to set up that forum between employers, trade unions, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Diane's Department. It produced a very good piece of work about how you could work safely, and that guidance should be read in accordance with going back to work. Just today or late last night, the Department for Business on the mainland brought forward guidance about safe working as well. All of that has to be read in conjunction with the road map that we are bringing forward today.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Over the last seven or eight weeks, many companies and communities have helped in the fight against COVID-19. I would like your assessment of that. I do not think that we, in Northern Ireland, are aware of just how many people have continued to work hard to deliver for communities and our health service through this crisis.

Mrs Foster: The deputy First Minister may want to recount visiting some of the firms that have been involved in repurposing to deliver PPE, for example; many firms are doing that. There are many firms whose furloughed employees are out helping in the community, delivering food and all of that. We should be very proud that so many of our firms — rather than just saying, "Right, we are on furlough. We are not going to do anything" — have repurposed to provide PPE and other assistance to the community. We are very proud of those firms, and I send a message of thanks to them from the Chamber.

Mrs O'Neill: I have visited Bloc Blinds and other companies that have repurposed. There is a lesson for everybody for the future. We could face a second wave of this pandemic or another pandemic of some kind, so there is a lesson to be learned in the need to be self-sufficient. The companies that have repurposed may have a future in continuing to produce PPE to make sure that we have sufficient levels if and when we ever require it again. All credit to those companies that were in a very bad place — they were having to furlough their workers and they were anxious — for very quickly turning it around and being able to help the health service and keep people in employment. There are only good news stories out of that,

and all credit to those companies. However, for me, there is something in this around how we make sure that, for a future crisis, we are self-sufficient in the things that we may need and that we have supply chains here that can deliver for us.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Ministers for their statement. I welcome the amount of work and thought that has gone into this. I also welcome the fact that it will be based solely on the evidence that is presented at any given time. I do not think that that is aspirational; I think that it is sensible. This virus is no more a respecter of calendars than it is of borders, so that is the right approach. However, it raises questions about having the capacity to test and trace to provide the evidence, which will need to be dealt with speedily. I, too, am concerned about the care home sector. My question on that was largely answered in response to Mr McGrath, but that sector needs urgent attention.

The document states that communities must be "educated, engaged and empowered" to deal with the issues as we move out of this. I would like to raise the issue of our harder-to-reach communities. I was very saddened to hear in recent days of the death of a foreign-national worker in Dungannon. They are some of our most valuable workers. However, we know from testing in the South of Ireland that there are particular clusters emerging within the food-processing sector, largely due to the fact that those are often worked by people who live in multiple-occupancy housing. They have language issues and need particular supports. I ask that you work with the Public Health Agency — I have raised this with them — to ensure that those harder-to-reach communities are reached out to and engaged with on an ongoing basis.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair of the Health Committee for raising this very important issue. Of course, we send our sympathy to the family of Ms da Silva. I was very shocked to hear that she lost her life in Dungannon in that way. He makes a very good point about how we reach out to those who do not have English as their first language. We could maybe look at our summary document and communications going out in different languages.

We know that there are many languages in Dungannon and Portadown and places like them. It is important that we are able to communicate with everybody who lives in Northern Ireland. It is one of the reasons why Michelle and I, very early on, wanted to have signers with us at all of our press conferences.

We have been able to reach out to the deaf community in a very real way by doing that.

12.15 pm

The Health Minister and the whole Executive are very focused on our care homes at present. We have asked the Health Minister to bring forward another comprehensive paper on what is happening in our care homes on testing and staffing levels. We understand that thousands of staff hours are going into the private sector nursing homes to try to assist them. New guidance is out in relation to COVID-19. We know that most of our care homes do not have COVID-19 and it is about making sure that it does not get into those homes. There is a whole strategy around our care homes now. We accept that those people are our most precious and vulnerable residents and we want to make sure that we do all that we can. As Michelle says, when we look back, we will not say that we should have done something else at that time. We are very much engaged on the issue of care homes, as is the whole Executive.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to add to that, I also want to send our condolences to Ms da Silva's family. Clearly, there will have to be a full investigation into what happened in her circumstances and I encourage her employers and the HSE to do that. I say very clearly to all workers that nobody should be working in unsafe practice. Very good work has been done by the Labour Relations Agency, working with trade unions and employers, to develop guidance and make sure that it is put in place, that it is solid and that it is understandable. It needs to be translated into work practices.

No one should be going to work where their health is compromised in any way because things have not been put in place. I am not saying that that was the case in that instance — I do not know — but there needs to be an investigation. Workers in general need to be protected. There is guidance there and it needs to be adhered to. I encourage anyone who has concerns about their workplace to bring them forward to the HSE, whose remit is to investigate those complaints.

The Member's points about nursing homes are well made. There is not one person in this Chamber who does not share the concern and the anxiety about making sure that everything is done to support our nursing homes. That is why it is important that, in addition to what has been announced around funding and the other issues that Arlene mentioned, the Executive have confirmed that the Department of Health will

implement an urgent expansion and an intensive programme of testing of residents and staff in care homes. That expansion is expected to commence immediately. That is in addition and, then, on Thursday, we intend to look again to make sure that we do everything that needs to be done.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Are you happy enough, Mr Gildernew?

Mr Gildernew: I have a short supplementary question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Go ahead.

Mr Gildernew: As part of the consideration of what else could be done, may I ask the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to consider the hospitals' current discharge policies to see whether there is more that can be done to delay the discharge of people who are, potentially, either tested positive for COVID-19 or waiting the result of a test, to provide a breathing space for the care homes?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to take that on board and incorporate that into the conversation. The current policy is that everyone will be tested but that discharges are not delayed because of waiting for a result. We will be happy to pick that up.

Dr Aiken: Before I make my remarks, I want to say that attacks on anybody, not just MLAs but journalists as well, fundamentally undermine the principles of democracy in Northern Ireland and everywhere else in the world and should be, rightly, condemned. I thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for your remarks.

I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their joint statement. The UUP join you in your words of thanks and support for our vital key workers, especially those in the blue-light services, the NHS and our social care staff. I appreciate that it cannot be easy to be part of a five-party Executive. *[Laughter.]* You can smile at that. Today, however, it is good to see a growing sense of cohesion, which is something that everybody in Northern Ireland wants to see. That is echoed by everybody in the Assembly, which wants to see that cohesion continuing to grow.

The Ulster Unionist Party has been calling for a recovery plan for many weeks. This is, indeed, a start. We welcome the paper, and the fact that the Economy Minister is working on a new paper on the economy. We cannot see that

soon enough. On what date are we likely to see that economy plan? Will it address the concerns of the many companies that are fighting for survival? In particular, will you give a commitment to talk to the Finance Minister to make sure that the money that is being held centrally is now used to support our businesses so that we have an economy to pull ourselves out of in the autumn?

Mrs O'Neill: To state the obvious, five parties working together around the Executive table was always going to throw up challenges. We are all adults: we will have disagreements and different takes on things, and we will have different emphasis at different times, but our job is to try to work through that as best we can. I think that we have been able to do that through the crisis that we face as a society, because none of us escaped it. It is impacting on us all.

The plan that is being put forward today is the five parties working together. It is us trying to present a way forward, and it is about us taking the approach that we think best suits our local population. It is also about trying to give people light at the end of the tunnel and an assurance that there is a way forward and that we will soon get back to some semblance of normality. As I said in my initial comments, life as we knew it is not going to be the same again. That having been said, we are adaptable people. I have no doubt that we will be able to adapt, but our job will be to try to limit the spread of the disease. That is why social distancing is going to be with us for some time to come.

As an Executive, we were solely focused, initially, on the public health crisis and saving lives. Subsequently, of course, we have had to turn our minds to the recovery. What does that look like? What does recovery and renewal look like? When you look at some of the assessments around the local economy and the damage that this is doing to the economy, you will, rightly, be concerned about how we are going to build our way out of it.

One of the initial assessments put forward talks about how the economy growth rate will be at 25% to 30% below normal. That shows the size of the challenge ahead of us. We have, therefore, been working our way through what economic recovery will look like. That is being done within the Executive, because we want to be focused only on the public health message.

We will continue to work as a collective Executive. We do not have an unlimited pot of funding, as Members know, and we have to make wise choices about how we use the funding that we have. It is important that we

come at those things together. To be upfront, we will not be able to do all of the things that we want to do, but we will do our best with people, and we will do our best to work together across the Executive on identifying the priorities. That will come from identifying a plan, establishing how we are going to recover and trying to fund that as best we can.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for your answer. One of the issues that we have talked about is dealing with the pandemic on an all-island basis. Some initiatives that are being taken in the Irish Republic, particularly in relation to VAT and VAT reduction, are likely to severely impact our transportation sector and hospitality sector. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister make a commitment to talk directly to the Westminster Government about making approaches, particularly around air passenger duty (APD) and VAT reduction, so that when we come out of this situation, our economy is at least able to compete on a level playing field?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that question. Due to our membership of the UK, we have been the beneficiaries of significant economic schemes. I think the Member will acknowledge that. We wait to hear what the Chancellor has to say today in relation to the tapering of the furloughing scheme. That is critical, because certain sectors, even by our step-by-step plan, will not be out of lockdown by the end of June, which, of course, is when the furlough scheme is due to come to an end. I hope that we will see, today, a tapering of that scheme so that our businesses will continue to benefit from it. That is very important.

Of course, we have also intervened in a number of ways. We have our £10,000 scheme, our £25,000 scheme, and the hardship scheme that is about to go online. Furthermore, we are looking at more schemes relating to rates. We will come to the House on that very soon.

You asked a specific question about Diane's paper. I hope that that will be out within the next week, so that we can dovetail it in with the road map. If there are developments in the Republic of Ireland, we will take those up with our Government. If we are at a competitive disadvantage, we will be asking how we address that, and how we help our businesses and sectors to overcome it.

The Member recognises that there are some sectors that will really struggle. The sad truth is that some businesses will not survive. It is right that we are honest about that, but we have to try to ensure that the maximum number of

businesses survive. That has always driven the Executive in their economic interventions, alongside those of the Westminster Government.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next person on the list to speak, we are 27 minutes in to our time. I gave some leeway because the first four people on my list are Chairs of Committees. If Members ask short, focused questions, and short, focused answers are given, everyone will get their speak in.

Ms Armstrong: I join with others to condemn absolutely those who have made threats.

I thank the First Ministers. This is not the worst document in the world. Compared to those of other nations, this is a document that the community can look at, but, as you can imagine, people will automatically ask, "When will we go to stage 1?". We are not going to give them dates. There is no point; you have said that. We will do it when it is safe to do so. However, if we are starting to go back to work, a number of people are concerned and will ask, "What about childcare?" and "What about education? We cannot go to work unless our kids are looked after." What support and hope can you give to those people?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for your comments. We will try our best to produce something. We wanted to produce a very user-friendly document that people can take away and look at for themselves.

I absolutely understand the desire of people to have a date. I want to have dates. I wish I could say, "On X date, this is going to happen", but, unfortunately, because it depends on the science and on the spread of the disease, we have to be very careful about that. However, we can give people indications. The first category talks about where we are today. We hope to keep this under review. At the very outset, 28 May is the next review date.

I have two things to say. If people continue to comply with the regulations and stay at home — that is our message — and, if the R-rate comes down, we will be in a position to move much more quickly. We will not hold on for a day longer. If it means that we review this every day, that is what we will do. We do not want to hold onto very stringent measures for a day longer than necessary. I give you that assurance.

In my opening comments, on the issues of education and schools, I talked about parents'

desire to have children in school. We understand all that. Realistically, it will be September before schools open again in the normal fashion. Even at that, it will not be in their normal fashion, because we will have to look at how that is done. The Education Minister will speak with the trade union movement, because we need to look at how we can manage that.

There needs to be very careful planning around what parents can expect to see in September, or when schools start. It is a very confusing picture for children themselves, especially for those who are transitioning from P7 into first year, or those who were supposed to be doing exams. All those things are now in the mix, and it is quite confusing for people. The Education Minister will give more detail in due course.

Childcare will be one of the most challenging pieces in how we move forward. A lot of workers have been furloughed, but when that scheme comes to an end, how will we manage? How are they going to survive? These are big challenges and I do not have all the answers and they are challenges that we are going to have to work our way through. If we are to allow people who are able to go to work, because they cannot work at home, how can we support them with the childcare sector?

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for her answer. Let us think about mental health, when we come out of this. I am so sorry for anyone who has lost some one during this terrible time. We have lots of grieving families who have not been able to grieve properly. A lot of our front-line health workers are seeing the cold face in the deaths that have been happening.

A lot of people have lived in isolation; for instance, widows who live at home and single parents. What will we be able to do to support society as it comes out of this? As we know, it will not go back to normal. It will not be a case of flicking a switch today and step 1 will start. There will be progression. How can we support the mental health of society and those who are struggling so much at present?

12.30 pm

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her very relevant question. When we think of mental health, it can sometimes conjure up an idea in our head, but the Member is right to mention the elderly in that context because, at present, many elderly people are really struggling with isolation, their families not calling in, and not being able to go to some of their meetings.

They are really struggling at present. There is a specific piece of work to be done on elderly people's mental health. I hope that we will be able to do more on that. Mental health, whether it be that of NHS workers — real concern has been expressed and the term "post-traumatic stress" mentioned in that context — or, of course, young people, for whom we were concerned before all this came upon us — we had actually set up a new and improved Executive subcommittee to look at well-being and resilience as opposed to dealing with the aftermath — is an issue on which we are very focused. The Health Minister is in the process of appointing a mental health champion. He brought a paper to the Executive to seek our agreement on that. Of course, we were in full agreement with it. It will sit across the Executive. We hope that the champion will be able to help to identify the pinch points on all those issues, but, my goodness, we are very alert to the fact that it will be a huge job of work.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the document. It has been released only one hour and already there are questions about the detail and the need for indicative timings to allow businesses to plan effectively. How do the Ministers respond to those people who have already raised concerns about the detail of the document?

Mrs Foster: We expected that to happen. What we have tried to do is give examples of what will happen in work, retail, education, travel, families, sport and culture, and, then, to give indicative pieces on moving to step 1 and step 2. We have set out the current position. Michelle has already articulated the fact that if we are given the advice to move sooner than 28 May, we will do that, because part of looking at the regulations is very much to look at their necessity and whether they are proportionate: in other words, do we need them or are they doing more harm than good? We will have to look at all those issues.

At the front of the document, we have set out the actual decision-making process. The good thing about the Executive's meeting on so frequent a basis — not that I am saying that it is not a good thing for the Executive to meet so often, of course — is that we can review that on an ongoing basis. I hope that it will be very much a living document and that we can come back and talk about it, and that we can communicate with people. Part of the document is about the partnership approach with the community out there. We are telling them what we will do and I hope that they will respond positively, because compliance is key. If people comply, we will be able to move faster. That is

the reality: it is very simple, but is actually the reality. We know that there has been fraying around the edges on compliance. We are saying, "Keep the faith, be patient, and we will be able to move to step 1".

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister for her response. Obviously, the fact is that each jurisdiction — each devolved Administration — has taken its own plan based on its own needs. How do you respond, First Minister, to those who say that the United Kingdom is very much disunited in how we are dealing with the issues?

Mrs Foster: I do not see it like that. I see it as a devolved reaction, and, I think, to be fair, the Prime Minister sees it as that as well, even though there has been a lot of noise around the issue. We are working, as I have already referenced, in a UK framework around some of our economic interventions. Therefore, they will have an impact on what is going on, but it is important that we have a localised response to what is going on here in Northern Ireland. That is key and critical for us. I do not see that as being a threat to the United Kingdom at all. In fact, I see it as devolution working in practice right across the UK.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis na hAíre as ucht a ráitis. I welcome the focus that the strategy places on tracing, testing and isolation. The World Health Organization has advised consistently that every single suspected case should be tested and all possible contacts traced. Can the Minister outline how that can be taken forward in an effective way, given the limitations that there have been on testing and tracing, which have meant that not every single suspected case has been tested?

Mrs O'Neill: There is recognition now, right across the Executive, that the cornerstone of our recovery is actually having a fully fledged test, trace and isolate policy that is up and running. Everybody can note that there have been improvements in the capability to test. It is not where it should be yet. However, there are improvements, nonetheless. There is now the capability to test just over 2,000 people per day, but, yesterday, we were told that that will be ramped up by an additional 1,000 tests a day when the AFBI testing comes online. Unfortunately, we thought that it would have been online before now. AFBI will provide an additional 1,000 tests per day.

Alongside that, additional testing is coming forward in the form of another 500 tests per day. Therefore, that is an increase of about

1,500 tests per day on the 2,000 that are currently there. That is, obviously, a far-improved picture, but there is way to go because the linchpin that will carry us through all this is those three things working in tandem. Although I welcome the fact that there have been improvements in the capability to test, I recognise that there is a way to go.

On tracing, I welcome the fact that the pilot programme is up and running and that we will see further advancements on 18 May, which is just next week. Then, it is about the isolation and to look after those people who need to be isolated as a result of all that work. That is what we will wax lyrical about, if you like, in the weeks ahead as we move our way through this plan, because it will be the key to allow us to relax the measures and move forward as quickly as we can. The more that we can test, trace and isolate, the greater our ability to get the R number down, get transmission down and reduce the restrictions.

Mr Sheehan: I acknowledge what the deputy First Minister and, indeed, the First Minister said earlier about the pilot scheme for tracing, and that it is going to be ramped up. Those countries that have been most successful in combating the virus have followed the testing, tracing and isolating model. However, we are starting from a very low base indeed. Is the Minister confident that testing and tracing can be ramped up to the extent that will allow us to ease the restrictions in the foreseeable future?

Mrs O'Neill: I am confident that we will make sure that it is. This is an essential part of the recovery, and if we do not get this right, we cannot lift the restrictions. Therefore, it is part and parcel of the plan and the way out of this. It is the exit. It has to be done. A number of things are being developed. A conversation is happening about what the app will look like and how it will assist in the way forward. I certainly have a view — I believe that it is the view of the Health Minister as well — that any app needs to be decentralised: people need to hold their own information as opposed to it being held centrally. Those things are all being developed. This is absolutely where the focus has to be to get the policy right and fully functioning. It is key to the recovery.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement to the House. I very much welcome the news that a more comprehensive paper will come from the Executive on our care homes, because we are all incredibly worried about what is going on

there and about protecting those who are the most vulnerable in society.

Can the First Minister or deputy First Minister tell us what role the joint biosecurity centre will play?

Mrs Foster: The joint biosecurity centre was raised with us at COBRA on Sunday. The idea behind that is that the centre will have the expertise to look at all the devolved regions. Therefore, if there is a localised outbreak, we can take localised action.

That is why I said that there was recognition in the UK that there might need to be localised interventions. I really welcome the joint biosecurity centre that has been announced by the Prime Minister. They will work in conjunction with the Chief Medical Officers in the devolved regions to make sure that we have the best information possible. Sometimes, people forget that this is "novel coronavirus": it is new. We are learning all the time about the impact, how we control it and how many people will be immune if they catch it and survive. All of those things have to be explored, including, most importantly, the vaccine. The joint biosecurity centre will be very involved in all of that.

Mrs Cameron: When the Prime Minister refers to taking action to deal with community spikes, does the First Minister envisage that he means there could be different restrictions in different parts of England?

Mrs Foster: Yes, possibly. The idea behind the centre is that they will have more of a granular look at the infection in various places around the UK. Obviously, England is a large country, and there may be differences, as, indeed, there are around the R number. Parts of England are different from other parts. The east of England has a higher R number than London, for example, which is lower because they are ahead with regard to infection and transmission of the virus. They are down to about 0.5 now, whereas the east of England is around the same as we are in Northern Ireland. There are differences; therefore, the need to be able to react to that and have a localised response is very important.

Ms Anderson: The information that you have released today and the statements that you have made are very clear. It seems that there are five stages and we are going to move through each of those stages when it is safe to do so. It is worth reminding everyone who is clamouring for more information of what you

said about the pandemic: it is still there, and it is as deadly today as it was during the lockdown. Can you outline the guiding principles that will ensure that we walk through the five stages when it is safe to do so?

Mrs O'Neill: It was remiss of us not to say that this is International Nurses' Day. It is important to put on record our thanks to all the nurses who are working on our behalf in the most difficult circumstances. "Thank you" to all of them on our behalf.

Thank you for your comment around it being clear. It is only natural that people desire all of the information and want concrete information. I absolutely understand that. It is important that people understand that we are guided by the science but this is what it looks like in each stage as we move forward. When it comes to family and community, for example, a number of people have asked questions. Paula asked about hugging her grandchild: people want to know when that can happen. We want to be able to give that assurance as quickly as possible. If I was pointing people to the stages, I would say that, when it comes to family and community, we are looking at that in the first phase. If everyone is compliant and we get the R rate down, we could be there very quickly. It is important to say that, when we get to that point, groups of four to six people who do not share a household can meet outside if they can socially distance. Alongside that, with the exception, obviously, of people who are shielding, because they have to be protected, families are able to visit immediate family indoors, provided that they can socially distance. It, at least, brings them closer together. People are trying to get their head around that process, and we will try to keep communicating it as best we can.

As Arlene said, we will not surprise people. We will tell them that we are looking at these things and hope to make a decision, and we will move as quickly as we can. The guiding thing to take us through this is the evidence, so it will be science-led. It is about the capacity of the health service to respond and about the transmission. The World Health Organization's guidelines say that the success of any exit strategy has to be that the transmission is under control; that there is capacity in the health service, including the ability to test, trace and isolate; that outbreaks are minimised in special settings, including our care homes; that preventative measures are in place in workplaces, schools and other places where it is essential for people to go; that importation risks can be managed; and that all of that is communicated to the public and people are

engaged about the new life as we know it and are able to socially distance and prevent the virus spreading. Those are the things that will guide us. That gives you your clear guidance. We will work our way through this as quickly as we can, but, all the while, public safety and saving lives will be the number-one priority. That is why we have to be guided by the science.

12.45 pm

Ms Anderson: You referred to the fact that today is International Nurses' Day, so it is appropriate that the statement is being made and the information is coming out on this day. With that in mind, I will ask you about nurses, who, at one time, were on strike and to whom we now show deep appreciation, and about domiciliary nursing. Given the pay scale that those care workers are on, it would be good to send them a signal of our appreciation not only by acknowledging what they do but by taking into account the salaries that they receive. Unfortunately, they are at the lower scale compared with what others receive.

Mrs O'Neill: That is a really valid point, and I think that we are all having conversations now about the kind of society that we want to see at the other side of this and about the fact that the people whom we have depended on most are predominantly a female workforce and predominantly from the lowest-paid workforce. It is important that we have conversations about the type of society that we will live in on the other side of this and about how we value the people whom we rely on so much right now. That is a conversation on where we go next to rebuild and use any resource that we have as best we can. Also, how do we value our health service? The health service is what we depend on to get us through this, and, after the impact that years of cuts and years of austerity have had on our health service, we have big, big building to do on the other side of this. Going into this, we had a health service that was at breaking point, and we will certainly have a more challenging picture on the other side of this.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for giving us the presentation today. First, I echo what the deputy First Minister and Martina Anderson said about International Nurses' Day. We have all been reminded of how amazing a job nurses do. My mum started training as a nurse 50 years ago in the Royal, and I have not been able to see her in about two months. For my

mum and everyone else who has been a nurse, it would be remiss if I did not mark that.

I take the point that it is important that we do not get stuck on dates. As a former civil servant, I understand the importance of building flexibility into documents so that you can change your mind later. I am, however, reminded of the phrase that there is light at the end of the tunnel but there is no tunnel. The document talks about the interaction of the R rate with other factors, including contact tracing. Can one of you give me a sense of how that interaction with contact tracing works? Is there a specific number of contact tracers that we need to have in Northern Ireland to relieve certain restrictions? If the R rate is going down from, for example, 0.8 to 0.7 but there are a certain number of contract tracers, does that mean that we can ease restrictions? It would be helpful to have a bit more clarity on that.

Mrs Foster: I hope that the Member will accept that this is the tunnel and this is the tunnel for moving out. He is right to ask about the number of contact tracers you need, depending on where we are with the R rate, and, I am sorry, I do not have that figure that with me. I am sure that, when the Health Minister comes to the Chamber on Thursday, he will have that number. The Member is right: that is what we need to look at. We will need to be able to trace the virus in the community. The only way to do that is to have contact tracers in place, and we will need to know where it is in the community. Yes, he is right, but I do not have the figure with me today.

Mr O'Toole: My brief supplementary is about the financial aspect of this. The First Minister talked about the furlough scheme. While we have been here debating, Rishi Sunak has announced that there will be some form of extension of the furlough scheme until October. That, I am sure, is welcome, but we need to see much more detail from the Treasury on what that means. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister make representations to the Treasury that that furlough scheme can be flexible for the devolved Administrations, reflecting the fact that we may have a different approach to how we proceed through the next stages of this? The Treasury should be cognisant of that and willing to give us flexibility on how we deploy that here.

Secondly, have the First Minister and deputy First Minister given thought to greater use of Northern Ireland's borrowing powers in how we go about developing the recovery? It was not mentioned in last week's Budget, but there is headroom in our reinvestment and reform

initiative borrowing capacity. Will the First Minister and the deputy First Minister give some thought to that?

Mrs Foster: We have already discussed looking at our borrowing with the Finance Minister. At present, he is looking at how much that would allow us to have in order to make the interventions that we will need. Whilst the Executive have made interventions, we know that that is probably not the end of where we need to intervene. I understand that, as the Member said, the Chancellor has indicated that the scheme will be in place until October, which is really good news. The Chancellor has also said that people can come back from furlough part-time, which is also good news, as it gives businesses the flexibility to plan ahead. The Member will know that engagement with the Treasury is through the Finance Minister, and there has been good and open conversation on all those matters. Indeed, all our Members of Parliament speak continually with the Chancellor and all other Departments about the flexibilities needed for the devolved Administrations.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Ministers for their statement, which is a very human one. We can all relate to what they have said. I welcome the way that the Executive are working together. My colleague and party leader, Steve Aiken, made it absolutely clear that cohesion is what we need. There are some people whose sole purpose will be to find fault with the document. Therefore, I hope that you do not find that my question is about finding fault; it is not.

It is welcome that you say that this is not calendar-led, but how do you square that with the Department of Education setting the transfer dates on 21 November, 28 November and 12 December, while the registration for those transfer dates starts on Thursday? How does that sit with your claim that it is not calendar-led?

Mrs Foster: The transfer tests for next year have, as I understand it, been put back by two weeks, so that will not happen until December. We very much hope that we will get to stage 5 before December. Of course, if we get a second peak, we will have to pull again, so I think that that announcement was made in the hope and desire that we will be at stage 5 by December and that the tests can take place.

The Education Minister is working with the teaching unions, with teachers and with schools to plan for a return to school. Of course, we have a different term time from England.

England might decide to send primary- and nursery-school children back to school at the beginning of June. If we were trying to manage that and then, all of a sudden, term time ended, that might be more disruptive than if we used the time to plan for the end of the summer to get children back in a socially distanced way. It will be difficult and challenging for teachers and pupils alike to come back to such a scenario. I worry about sports, for example: what will happen to contact sports? I know that many young people look forward to sport in school, as well, of course, as learning. They enjoy the social aspect of all of that, and where that will be we simply do not know at this time.

Mr Beattie: I will be very brief. The point that I am trying to make is that there is real pressure on parents now, because registration opens on 14 May. It is a financial commitment that they have to buy into, because it is £50 to register for the transfer test and £75 if you do not register on time. Therefore, given the flux that we are in — I understand that we are in a flux; it is not a criticism — is there any way that we can make representations to waive the cost of registering for the transfer test for this year? *[Interruption.]*

Mrs Foster: I hear Mr O'Dowd to my left making some comments from a sedentary position in relation to transfer that I will not pick up on.

On the transfer, I am sure that we can pass that on to the Education Minister to take up with the various bodies.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to put the record straight *[Laughter]*, I, clearly, do not support academic selection, nor do I support the transfer test. I do not think that that is where we should be. This is the most challenging of all years for our young people, and to present them with that in the middle of all this is just not on. That is my view.

Mrs Foster: Well done, Doug *[Laughter.]*

Mrs O'Neill: You did well. You set it up well *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The First Minister referred to Mr O'Dowd as being to her left: that is an understatement *[Laughter.]*

Ms Bunting: I am grateful for the statement. We are witnessing the United States publicly wrestling with the balance between health and the economy: the loss of life versus the loss of livelihood. Both are devastating to families, so

what reassurance can the First Minister and deputy First Minister give the business community that we have found the right balance?

Mrs O'Neill: The message is — I think that everybody would understand this, even those in the business community — that the initial response to this was that it was a public health issue and we were trying to save lives. We were also very mindful of the fact that we were speaking to a lot of business organisations about how we move forward. The work that was done around working with the Labour Relations Agency and the trade unions and the business organisations to create strong guidance for workplaces shows that we were working towards trying to get people back to work when that was possible. What we will have to do in the time ahead is work with business organisations and communicate as we move forward. None of us have been here before. This is not even like a time of recession; this is a very different and challenging space. We will have to work our way through it, but the best way that we can do that is to communicate that with the business community.

It is not "health versus the economy". That is an important message. A healthy population is a healthier economy, and the two things are interlinked and interchangeable. Our job will be to try to communicate a plan as soon as we can, and that is what we are working on.

Ms Bunting: We have recently seen in the national media that there have been mentions of "clusters" or "bubbles" of friends and family with whom we can meet up. I note — it is welcome — in step 1 that we will be able to meet up with four to six members of our immediate family. What consideration did the Executive give to wider clusters to include friends and how did we reach that number?

Mrs Foster: I think that, with regard to the groups of four to six people who do not share a household, that does not necessarily have to be family; that can be friends. We recognise — indeed, the matter was raised at the Executive — that some people do not have a large family but have a large circle of friends and want to have social contact with those people. That is why that is phrased in the way that it is: so that people can have that social contact for a variety of reasons.

Just in relation to furloughing, the announcement today by the Chancellor extending that to October is important. If firms had had to come off furlough at the end of

June, they would have had to make some people redundant. That really concerned me, and, as someone who was Economy Minister during the recession, getting redundancy notices nearly daily, I know that it was a really difficult thing to cope with. I really welcome the fact that the furloughing scheme has been extended, because that means that firms may be able to keep people on furlough instead of making them redundant. We should really welcome that. It gives them a chance then to maybe get their orders up again and to look for new business, particularly in the manufacturing sector. That is something that I really welcome, and I hope that it really helps our economy.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Ministers for what is a sensible and thought-out approach. I note that the strategy recognises the reality and importance of Ireland as a single epidemiological unit. How will that strategy maximise the opportunity and obvious advantage?

Mrs O'Neill: Clearly, we live on an island and have an advantage because of that. We have to use that to help get us through this. We have the memorandum of understanding so we are looking at sharing our modelling. Our two Chief Medical Officers work very closely across the island, but you are right: we are one epidemiological unit. It is good to be able to say that word *[Laughter.]* We are one epidemiological unit, and it is important that we understand, as our Chief Scientific Adviser has told us, that the trajectory of the disease's spread is the same right across the island. The disease knows no borders or barriers, so it is important that we move forward in as joined-up a manner as we can.

We have had North/South engagements with Ministers, including the Tánaiste and us and the two Health Ministers and CMOs. That engagement is crucial as we chart our way through the next period. We are all, across the island, in this together, and we need to work our way out of it as best we can together.

1.00 pm

Ms Sheerin: I am glad to hear you say that engagement is ongoing North and South. Obviously, there are a number of people who live on either side of the border who would, in ordinary circumstances, cross it on a daily basis. Can I assume that there is a plan to continue interaction between North and South?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. We are probably due to meet again towards the end of this week, and we will

be talking about this plan and how we will work our way through it. Sorry, I omitted to say earlier that the North/South meetings that we have had have also involved Brandon Lewis, Secretary of State. We have another one of those meetings later this week, and it is important that we are as joined up as we can be throughout this.

Ms Bradshaw: I am sure that the last few months have not been easy dealing with this issue, so I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their work. The document references the wider health impact and the phasing and reintroduction of the usual health and care services, yet there is no detail in the report. Are we to expect a separate report?

Mrs Foster: This is something that we have been focusing on because, as the deputy First Minister said, before this crisis, we had waiting lists of 305,000 people. We know that 9,000 elective surgeries have been cancelled, so there will be a huge challenge around non-COVID healthcare. The Health Minister is bringing forward a paper to the Executive about the reverse surge, if you like, and how we switch on all those services again.

I am sure that many Members have had correspondence from constituents about cancer care, stroke care, screening and all those issues. Indeed, I know that the Member has raised some of those issues. So, it is important that we have that information and that we can then come to the Assembly. As I said, because the Health Minister is coming to the Chamber on Thursday, he may well be able to say more about that then.

Ms Bradshaw: As the deputy First Minister mentioned, the budget and the health service were not in a great way before the pandemic. What support will the Executive give to make sure that the budget is sufficient going forward?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that out of all the money that the Executive have distributed for the COVID-19 response, the bulk of it has gone to Health to be able to combat it. We will continue to work with the Health Minister. Nobody is underestimating the challenges that we have. After three years of the Assembly being down, we were just back in the door. We were working our way through things, and, obviously, COVID-19 hit.

It will be a very challenging picture, but we need to look at how we deliver care. We need to look at all those things. As the previous Health Minister, I brought forward the plan for reform of

the health service. That is still relevant and maybe more so now. Our waiting lists were atrocious. We need to get past that and be able to get people the right care at the right time. That will take us all as an Executive to work collectively to be able to fix that.

On the first point that you made around getting things back to whatever normality looks like in the health service and being able to get those people who had their appointments cancelled back in the door is so important. I have been lobbied by parents of children with cystic fibrosis who normally have their own specialised clinic who are now being asked to go to A&E. That is not a good situation for anyone who is living with cystic fibrosis, for obvious reasons, given its respiratory nature.

People desperately want to know when they can get back to their normal clinics and their normal care. We want to be able to get there. We have to get there as quickly as we can. We have to maintain capability in the health service to deal with any resurgence of COVID-19. As the First Minister said, the Health Minister will bring forward a plan to the Executive around that, and he will communicate that to the Assembly.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement. I also echo your words about nurses, especially on International Nurses' Day. Not all superheroes wear capes is a saying that could not be any more applicable than to our nurses. Their selfless commitment is amazing, and I take my hat off to every one of them.

Given what you have said today about workplaces and the detail around that, when can we expect more guidance for employees and employers? Who is responsible for ensuring and enforcing workplace safety?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his specific question in relation to guidance. As I have already indicated, the guidance is there already in the form of 'A practical guide to making workplaces safer', which came out from the Northern Ireland Engagement Forum. That gives very clear guidance in relation to safety.

Safety in the workplace is the Health and Safety Executive's remit. The local councils look after some retail outlets and issues. I understand that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy today launched new guidance on getting us back safely to work, so that is there as well.

In relation to our nursing colleagues, today we of course celebrate International Nurses' Day and I really want to send my good wishes to everyone in relation to that in the public sector. But, in the private sector, I understand that those who work in nursing homes get only statutory sick pay if they have to self isolate — because they are in the private sector that is all that they are entitled to. I think that that is something that we as an Executive need to look at. I know that the Health Minister has put in quite a significant amount of money to support care homes — I think it is £6.5 million — but we do want to look at that particular issue because we do value all of our caring staff and it is important that I say that.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister for her answer. The document states that, under the current position, enhanced messaging around what work is permissible will come out. I look forward to that because clarity is key, especially for businesses. They do not want to break the rules; they want to know what they have to do in order to keep their employees safe. I raised that issue when I spoke to the Health and Safety Executive last week at the Economy Committee. The HSE said — as you have — that their remit extends only to manufacturing industry and construction and that the rest is for local government and their environmental health departments. However, having contacted a number of those departments this week on the back of that advice, many of them were not aware of that or of the guidance, and probably do not have the people power in place to enforce it. That is concerning. Is there anything that the First Minister and deputy First Minister can do to ensure that the capability is there whenever workplaces go back?

Mrs Foster: I think that we can engage. The local government chief executives' representatives are on our Civil Contingencies Group which, as you know, is part of the gold command dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. We can raise with them what extra they need in relation to health and safety inspections at local government level. There will, of course, be a huge increase in people who are concerned and who will want to make representations, and therefore they will need assistance to be able to do that.

Mr Wells: Many of us welcome the very positive tone from the contributions here today. I think that we are all with you in the very difficult task that you face, but there is always a "but". The "but" is care homes, and I speak as someone with a direct knowledge of what is going on. Why are we not in a position to have

up-to-date information as to the number of people in care homes who are affected by the COVID virus; the number of people who have had to go to hospital; and the number of people who have died? Why has that up-to-date information not been given to us daily?

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for his question. I understand why he has a very personal interest in making sure that care homes are something that we take a huge interest in — and not just take an interest in, but take huge actions on as well.

As I understand it, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority has been trying to make sure that it gets the information from the care homes. As I indicated to other Members, there is not the same resilience in the information coming from care homes in the private sector. We are trying to improve the data that we get — and we have made good progress — but I think that it is fair to say that there are still issues around the data that we are getting from our nursing homes, and whether it could be used publicly. You may say to me "Well, I know that X-number of people died in such-and-such a nursing home", but that has to be ratified.

As the Member will know, there are very strict and stringent rules about the data that we can put out publicly. The Office for National Statistics is very clear about that and has rules in place. Whilst we are continuing to work on that and understand the concern, it is important that the Member realises that there are still some issues surrounding the clarity and resilience of the data that we receive.

Mr Wells: Since going public on this issue in the 'Belfast Telegraph', I have received many calls from throughout Northern Ireland. I can tell the honourable Members that the news that will come through from nursing homes will be very difficult to accept and very painful for society. The battle lines in the fight against COVID-19 have moved from our hospitals, which have done tremendously well and deserve our praise, to the nursing homes. How can the Executive make the strategic decision that they need to make, which is to pour resources into our nursing homes, when we do not have the current figures, which are so essential in making such decisions?

Mrs O'Neill: We need to get those figures because people need a very clear picture of exactly what is happening, the level of deaths as a result of or associated with COVID-19. Also, we currently have a situation where we have the Department of Health figures and the

NISRA figures, which leads to a confused picture. That is not an acceptable position. That will be rectified. I noted that the Health Minister said that he will engage with NISRA to try to improve that picture, and that is also important. However, I do not need the figures to know that we need to put every bit of energy into the care homes. I do not need the figures to know that the battle lines, as you rightly said, have been redrawn, and that is where we need to focus all our efforts.

I do not know whether you were in the Chamber earlier when we chatted about this in response to another Member's question. What I said then, stands. We need to throw everything but the kitchen sink at this. On Thursday, there will be an Executive discussion dedicated to the issue, and we expect that the Health Minister will bring a paper on what additional work can be done to support care homes.

Throughout this crisis, we have listed areas where there has been financial support, areas where the RQIA is playing a certain role and areas where trusts are being asked to flag the status of their homes. A lot of work has been done, but, clearly, we need to do more. It is important that we have that conversation on Thursday and then make the strategic interventions that you rightly pointed to.

One of the things that I said earlier — perhaps you did not hear it — is that the Executive have agreed that, as part of our response, and as a matter of urgency, a testing programme will be rolled out immediately across all nursing homes. That will be on a rolling basis, but we need to get to the point of universal testing in every nursing home.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Ministers for their statement. I want to ask about the policing of restrictions as they are lifted. We all know about the public discourse and lack of clarity on the restrictions. This is an issue. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. The police cannot do this alone. How will it be done? What will be the message from the Executive Office? What channels of communication will be used to ensure that people do not relax? The vast majority have abided by the regulations, but people have greatly relaxed, certainly over the past few days.

Mrs Foster: One advantage of the ongoing review of regulations has been our ability to change them if we needed to. As the Member knows, we changed the regulations on travelling for exercise, because the police flagged that up as an issue to us.

At present, we are actively considering whether, as is already the case in England, police should not be the only enforcement agents. We are looking at whether others, such as council officers, could be involved in enforcing some of the regulations.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome that review. There seems to be an issue with the HSE giving clarity and doing regular workplace inspections. In order to allay some of the concerns that many staff have, are you considering providing the necessary upskilling to employees — for example, environmental health officers or inspectors in the Department of Agriculture — so that they could play a role in the broader inspection of workplaces?

Mrs Foster: What is important is that we have the appropriate person to not only enforce the regulations but educate people. In answer to Mr Stewart, I referenced the fact that council employees will have to enforce the regulations on safety and so on in the non-food retail sector. Is there a role for others? We will certainly consider whether there is a role for the Health and Safety Executive or agricultural inspectors. We will wait to see what the respective Ministers have to say about their role. However, we are actively considering widening the scope of enforcement.

Mr Muir: I thank the Ministers for their statement. The strain on public finances as a result of COVID-19 has been significant. We have seen the bids for additional funds that are coming through from each Department. What engagement has occurred with the UK Government on a stimulus package that would give us some certainty in how we plan? The Barnett consequentialia are coming through, we cannot plan and we need to be able to fund the bids that are coming through.

1.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I expect that there will be an economic stimulus package later on. We have to get people back to work first of all and then see what the impact is and where that stimulus package would be best targeted.

On the Budget process, we have instructed all Ministers to look at their departmental budgets to see what they will be unable to spend because of COVID. Whilst we are having to redirect money to deal with the COVID crisis, there are things that Departments would otherwise have been doing but cannot, and that money should come back to the centre so that it

can be used in the most proactive and productive way. Those conversations are continuing.

Mr Muir: One thing that has changed a lot over the past weeks is the way in which we deliver public services. That transformation has already occurred, although a lot more is going to have to take place in the months ahead. What collective commitment will the Executive make to ensure that we fund that transformation so that we deliver public services better than we did before?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that, out of every negative, you should try to find a positive. Perhaps there is an opportunity for us to look at how we do things, how we deliver care in the health service and how we respond in many public services. Part of the NDNA deal was reform of the Civil Service. That is still necessary work. There will be a lot of learning from our ability to respond to this crisis right now that will factor in to all the reforms that need to happen. We certainly need to change the way that we do things. We will have no choice but to change how we do things, but it is important that we do it for the right reasons, that we actually shape things and take the opportunity to learn from good examples. There are things that, if the Department had been asked to do them six months ago, it would have taken years to analyse, consult on, scrutinise and whatever, but it can now turn them round, just like that, because it needs to do so. Perhaps there are lessons to be learnt in all those things. There always need to be checks and balances, but there is a bit more latitude and agility to allow us to shape things very quickly when we can.

Miss Woods: I wish to join in the condemnation of threats made to Members and journalists.

Thank you, Ministers, for your statement. It raises many more questions, especially about returning to work. No one should return to work unless it is safe to do so, and people need clarity on that and reassurance that it is safe. The document acknowledges that people will be concerned about their safety when travelling to or attending work. On page 8, the Executive say:

"there is an onus on businesses ... and ... others to show how they can accommodate the current social distancing".

What is the Executive's responsibility for the implementation of guidance to ensure that businesses operate safely? Will there be, through the Health and Safety Executive and councils, an enhanced role in ensuring that

employers comply with the guidance, through inspections or closure of unsafe businesses?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. As I said, the engagement forum that was set up by the Department for the Economy has brought forward guidance. That was brought forward in conjunction with a wide range of industry bodies, including: the trade unions; Solace, the body representing local government chief executives; the Health and Safety Executive; the Public Health Agency; and the Labour Relations Agency. That document has been out, so we are actually ahead of other parts of the United Kingdom. Today, as I said, the British Government have brought out new guidance in relation to the United Kingdom and what should happen across there, so I imagine that will be looked at by the Department for the Economy to see what applies to us, here in Northern Ireland, as well.

The Economy Minister will bring forward a paper, I hope, in the next week, which will talk about economic recovery and renewal. As she does that, integral to that will, of course, be guidance on safety and safe working practices. It is important that that is a key part of our effort to get people back to work.

Miss Woods: Thank you for your answer, First Minister. Will the Executive commit to take responsibility for the implementation of the guidance that is issued to businesses?

Mrs Foster: Well, we have already adopted the guidance as Executive policy. Therefore, it is our responsibility, along with the Health and Safety Executive, local councils and all the enforcement bodies, to ensure that it is put in place appropriately.

I have been impressed by the number of employers who are actually ahead in planning for a new work environment. They have spent a lot of money, time and resource on looking at how they can change their working practices, whether that is staggering shifts or whether it is making sure that there are physical barriers between people or that people take their breaks at different times. All of that is very important as we give people confidence to go back to work and make sure that they have a livelihood at the end of this. We know that, whilst this is a public health crisis, if you are in poverty and do not have a job, that has health implications as well. Therefore, there is a need to make sure that we continue to try to recover the economy, and then to renew it as well.

Mr Allister: As I see it, the devolved regions were all very happy to be in lockstep with Westminster when it came to receiving and spending the Treasury's generous support. Now that we have moved, hopefully, to easing out of lockdown, there seems to be a preference for difference. I suggest to the First Minister that this should not be about the virility of devolution, nor about who has the best slogan. However, it could ultimately be about who has an economy left. I would like to hear from the First Minister a sense of urgency as to the resuscitation of our economy, because the stagnation of the status quo is going to do untold damage. It is very good to have a satnav that gives us the direction of travel, but if a satnav keeps saying, "Do not start the engine", it is not really advancing us, is it?

Mrs Foster: I welcome the fact that the Member recognises that this is a satnav. It has been described as a tunnel, and now it has been described as a satnav; I am quite happy to take both of those descriptions. I absolutely agree with the Member that we have benefited greatly from our membership of the United Kingdom in the economic packages that have been shared with us, and, of course, our National Health Service is part of our kingdom as well. However, what is important is that we have a localised response. Do you know what? The Prime Minister recognises that. He does so through the new joint biosecurity centre. The fact is that we might have to have localised responses to this virus, and he knows that that is the case.

I do agree with the Member that it is not so much about the slogan as the actions. The actions are set out in our paper. That is where we want to go to in relation to getting the economy back up and running again. I fundamentally believe that part of this is about public health and part of it is about getting our society back together again, but, of course, we need a good, strong economy to make sure that we have that in place for the well-being of our people in the future.

Mr Allister: Yes, but is the problem, particularly for Northern Ireland, not that, whereas you might have all these goals, you can only move to any of them at the pace of the slowest because of the veto-operating Executive that we have? Are we not in fact, in this part of the United Kingdom, more likely to be held back from doing things that we need to do for our economy and these other various steps because of the problems of operating mandatory coalition with a veto? The result is that you move at the pace of the slowest.

Mrs O'Neill: What we are doing is saving lives. That is the Executive's primary objective. We are working our way through this situation as best we can. The message remains to stay at home. That is what has actually helped us to keep our R rate down where it has been. At the outset of this, when the first person died here, the predictions were telling us that 14,000 people were going to lose their life. We worked our way through this to try to minimise the loss of life. On the one hand, we are very lucky, but, on the other hand, almost 500 people have lost their life. I have no other priority here, and I do not think anybody else here has any other priority, than to save lives. That remains our guiding compass. We are not standing still; we have a way forward. We have actually set out a pathway through five stages of how we will move into recovery. It is our job to make sure that, whilst we minimise the loss of life, we try to build our way out of this on the other side. I am very happy that that is what the Executive are doing.

Mr Carroll: I welcome the fact that, unlike in England, the restrictions here have not been lifted, but, then again, just doing better than Boris Johnson is nothing to brag about.

A worker in a food production plant died in recent days, just weeks after workers at the company were forced to walk out en masse over health and safety concerns. Their colleagues, union reps, migrants' groups, radio broadcasters and more have been highlighting the lack of testing on those sites, never mind breaches of social distancing and PPE use. It is my view that we cannot consider lifting lockdown without first protecting workers in danger today, and there is a strong feeling that the Executive have not done enough to protect workers in that regard. If workers are forced back to work under unsafe conditions, my advice to them is to follow the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 2000 and:

"stop work and immediately proceed to a place of safety".

In the light of that, do the Ministers think that more could have been done to protect essential workers? Was it a mistake to allow non-essential businesses such as Bombardier to reopen?

Mrs O'Neill: Let me say this very clearly: I hope that you have taken the opportunity to report to the HSE the concerns that workers to whom you have spoken expressed about their

workplace, as your job as an elected representative compels you to do.

No worker should be going to work in an unsafe situation. It is very clear that any workers who are concerned about their workplace need to raise their concerns with the HSE. They need to make sure that they flag them up. I absolutely support any worker walking out of the workplace if it is not safe. That is exactly how it should be. I acknowledge that good work has been done with the trade unions, with the Labour Relations Agency and with the businesses organisations to identify the sectors that could get back to work and could do so if it is safe. The criteria and the guidance were set out: every single employer must do the right thing by their staff; every single employer must adhere to the guidance; and every single worker must be protected if in work and not able to work from home. I send that message very clearly to all staff out there.

People are still afraid. I understand. From the very outset, people have been very anxious. You are anxious not just about yourself but about your family and about spreading the virus. You are anxious about bringing things home to your family. Those are all very reasonable feelings to have, but we must send a very clear message that we must protect the workforce. Employers have a duty to protect their workforce, and any employers that are not adhering to the proper guidance, social distancing and protecting their staff need to be called out.

Mr Carroll: I thank the deputy First Minister for her comments, especially where she said that she supports workers walking out if they feel that they are unsafe or are working in unsafe conditions. Guidelines have been referred to already, but there are guidelines and then there is enforcement. They are two different things. I am concerned that step 1 will force more and more workers back into work without there being robust mechanisms in place to protect them.

I asked the Health Minister this question a few weeks ago but got neither a sufficient nor a direct answer. I will therefore ask the Ministers here today. More people are likely to go back into work very soon, so is now the time to increase the number of people employed to inspect workplaces, in order to ensure that the health and safety measures are not being breached?

Mrs Foster: As we have indicated in other answers, the health and safety piece is spread across a number of agencies. If those agencies

are saying to their sponsoring Minister that they believe that they need more resource to go out and inspect, and not just to inspect but to educate, advise and inform employers as to how they can facilitate workers coming back safely, of course we will look at those bids, and the Department of Finance will look at them in a sympathetic way.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Executive for the road map for Northern Ireland, which will take time to assess. I thank the people of Northern Ireland for complying with Northern Ireland guidance and ask them, as the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have done, to continue to comply with the guidance to keep saving lives.

I ask the First Minister and the deputy First Minister sincerely, on behalf of the many parents who have contacted me, how it is right to require 10-year-old children to sit the transfer tests in November and December of this year, further to several months of remote learning and up to three further stages of blended school and remote learning, when the Executive can take action to change the use of the tests for post-primary transfer admissions?

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that parents still want to see academic selection. He may not agree with academic selection, but most parents in Northern Ireland still believe that it is the best way in which to decide where to send their child to school. That is the case, and we listen to those parents, so we believe that the transfer tests should be facilitated. If the Member has concerns, he should raise them not just with the Education Minister but, as I have said today, with the two bodies that are arranging the tests. I am sure that he will have an opportunity to do that at the Education Committee.

1.30 pm

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I will do that on Wednesday of this week. The document also states that measures are in place to provide outreach services to children with special educational needs. Families across Northern Ireland are telling me that they are not. It would not be fair of me to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the services to which the document refers, but I ask them sincerely to encourage the Education Minister to give an urgent oral statement to the Assembly to tell us what outreach services are in place for children with special educational needs.

Mrs O'Neill: On your first point around unregulated tests, it is not the Department of Education that sets those tests, it is the unregulated bodies. My position is very clear: I agree with the Member that it is very unfair and that children should not be put in that position.

On the issue of special educational needs and the outreach services, we are happy to take that on board. The Education Minister will make a statement to the Assembly on Tuesday of next week, so perhaps that is something that we will flag up in advance. It is such a trying time for everybody, but for anyone who has a child with a disability, it is even more challenging. So, we want to make sure that every support is there. If there are examples of that not being the case, obviously we will want to raise them and make sure that they are rectified.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for coming to the House. By my count, they got through 60 questions between the two of them over the course of that session.

Mr Allister: How many answers?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has been here too long to be chuntering from a sedentary position.

Before we move to the Adjournment, I announce to the House that the Commission has agreed that the Building will be lit up blue tonight for International Nurses' Day, as a tribute to all our nurses.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Adjourned at 1.31 pm.

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