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Contents

Assembly Business

Committee Membership 1

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension 1

Ministerial Statement

Health and Social Care Trust Rebuild Plans 2

Executive Committee Business

The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 17

The draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 19

The Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: First Stage 19

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs 20

Communities..... 28

Economy..... 38

Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Blair, John (South Antrim)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Brogan, Ms Nicola (West Tyrone)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Flynn, Ms Órlaithí (West Belfast)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McHugh, Maolíosá (West Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (Speaker)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (Strangford)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 13 April 2021. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, as a mark of respect, the Business Committee agreed to defer all non-essential business scheduled for this week. Yesterday's Assembly and Executive business, including Question Time, will be taken today.

To enable business to flow more smoothly today, a business motion to suspend Standing Order 20(1) has been tabled that will, if agreed, allow Question Time to commence as soon as all other Executive business has been disposed of. There will be no lunchtime suspension, and the Business Committee will meet immediately after the Assembly adjourns. I encourage Members and Ministers to keep a close eye on proceedings to ensure that they are in the Chamber when their business is reached.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Mervyn Storey replace Mr Gordon Dunne as a member of the Committee for the Economy. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: The motion to suspend Standing Order 20(1) will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Ministerial Statement

Health and Social Care Trust Rebuild Plans

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement on trust rebuild plans. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of the need for parties to observe social distancing, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members participating remotely must ensure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members present in the Chamber must also do that. They may do so by rising in their place as well as by notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. In accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during the statement or in the period for questions thereafter.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak.

Before I move to the substantive content of my statement, I pay my respects to the late Duke of Edinburgh. Prince Philip was a truly extraordinary individual. A distinguished veteran of the Second World War, he was someone who dedicated his entire adult life to selfless public service. He was at the helm of the royal family for longer than most of us have been alive. He was an anchor of steadfastness, and it is clear that he had a total and unswerving dedication and devotion to his country — his charitable interests included being patron of a number of health organisations — and, most importantly, to his wife, Her Majesty The Queen. His immense contribution can never be overstated.

My motivation in making today's statement is twofold. First, I would like to update the House on our immediate plans for rebuilding health and social care services. Today, I am publishing the trust rebuild plans for the months of April, May and June.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I would like to provide an update on some of my longer-term rebuilding initiatives. I will focus on cancer services, the long and growing waiting lists, and on the significant constraints that I face in tackling those.

Our health service prides itself on being available to all and free at the point of access. I contend that we are still in grave danger of undermining this essential feature of our health service. With ever-growing waiting lists, I question whether all of our citizens have adequate access to the health service that they need.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than having to wait months or, in many cases, years for access to elective healthcare. Many suffer pain and discomfort while they wait. We simply cannot let the situation continue to deteriorate. I am absolutely determined to put this right. However, as I will argue today, I cannot do this alone. If we are to address our absolutely dire waiting lists, I need the support of the House and my Executive colleagues.

Before I delve further into that issue and cover the trust rebuild plans, I will set the scene by briefly outlining how recent history has led to where we find ourselves today. The pandemic has highlighted serious, long-established fragility in our health and social care system, especially in staffing capacity. Our health and care system was under immense and growing pressure long before the pandemic. Ten years of financial stringency and short-termism had undoubtedly taken its toll. During the last decade, our health system has been repeatedly documented as being out of date and failing.

Sir Liam Donaldson's 2015 report, 'The Right Time, The Right place', referred to Northern Ireland having an "ossified model of care", with specialist staffing resources "too thinly spread". Similarly, the 2016 Bengoa report, which was endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive and the other parties in the House, referred to the model of care as "outdated" and:

"not the one that Northern Ireland needs."

It also stated:

"the current configuration of acute services is simply not sustainable in the short to medium term."

The following year, an expert panel assessed our adult social care system, and its report, 'Power to People', concluded that it was "collapsing in slow-motion."

The decade of chronic underfunding has had consequences, not least of which is the failure to build greater capacity and resilience. We have some of the best staff and most innovative treatments in the world. Northern Ireland should simply not have the waiting times that it has.

They have been intolerable for some time and have grown worse. The time for words of concern has passed. I firmly believe that we require a period of firm action now. The hundreds of thousands of people who are on a waiting list deserve no less.

Undoubtedly, the pre-existing fragility in our system also hampers our response to the pandemic and underlines the particular need for caution in Northern Ireland as we emerge from lockdown.

It is in that context that I am today publishing trust rebuild plans for April to June 2021. The publication of those plans comes as we emerge from the severe third COVID wave, which has further depleted the resilience of our health and social care system. Over the winter, our health and social care services have been under pressure like never before. I am pleased that we are now coming out of the latest COVID-19 wave, and, while there is no time for complacency, the highly successful roll-out of the vaccine is giving real hope.

I am aware that our hard-pressed health and social care staff, especially those who have worked in the most challenging roles over the past 13 months, are in need of rest, and that is reflected in the trust rebuild plans. However, I also know that they wish for nothing more than a return to their normal duties, delivering the care that they are expertly trained to do. I am hopeful that the publication of the plans signals a gradual return to normal duties for our staff.

The trust rebuild plans are based on five principles, which are, first, that we de-escalate ICU as a region; secondly, that staff are afforded an opportunity to take entitled annual leave; thirdly, that elective care is prioritised regionally to ensure that those who are most in clinical need, regardless of place of residence, get access first; fourthly, that all trusts seek to develop green pathways with the aim of maximising theatre throughput; and, fifthly, that the Belfast City Hospital Nightingale facility is prioritised for ICU de-escalation in order to increase regional complex surgery capacity as quickly as possible.

For that fifth principle, I can confirm that the Belfast City Hospital Nightingale facility is now closed, with the last remaining ICU patients vacating the site on Friday 9 April. I am also pleased that the trust rebuild plans reflect our many regional initiatives, not least my action to ensure that all elective surgery is prioritised in line with greatest clinical need and is not dependent on a patient's postcode.

Alongside the trust rebuild plans that have been published today, a data annex has been included that sets out the trust activity projections for the three-month period of April to June 2021. The activity projections for May and June are indicative at this stage and will be reviewed in early May. That reflects the ongoing high degree of uncertainty that we continue to face, but it is also because I want to make sure that, if it becomes clear over the coming weeks that trusts can do more, I expect them to do that, even in the context of many competing challenges and uncertainties. I still want to see as much activity delivered as quickly as we can.

Having published the immediate trust rebuild plans, I want to spend some time on our growing waiting lists and waiting times. There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on our hospital services and particularly on elective care. The downturn in elective surgery, while deeply regrettable, reflects the unprecedented pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not right that any patient should wait longer than is clinically appropriate for surgery. I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort.

Staff were redeployed to help to manage the high number of patients who were being admitted to our hospitals and to allow the system to increase critical care capacity. For the past year, rightly and unavoidably, our priority has been urgent and emergency care and providing ICU care to those who needed it. It was not lockdown that added to waiting lists and led to much-needed operations being postponed; it was the virus. Our system, like systems all over the world, simply could not maintain a normal service, given the surge in patients who required life-saving and immediate interventions.

Staff had to be redeployed, and agonising choices had to be made. That was not about prioritising one condition over another but about providing care to the sickest patients quickly. It was about maintaining ICU care for everyone who required it, COVID and non-COVID patients alike. Despite those challenges, a number of actions have been taken to maintain elective services as much as possible. We have also pushed ahead with important reforms of our urgent and emergency care services. Those initiatives demonstrate that, despite the pandemic, we have continued to deliver much-needed reform of services. I will now turn to some of those initiatives in more detail.

10.45 am

On actions to maintain elective services and to reform services, we have created Northern Ireland's first regional day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley Hospital in the South Eastern Trust. The day-procedure centre has been providing support for the region, particularly for urgent cancer diagnostic work. Similarly, surgeons from across Northern Ireland have been travelling to the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH) in Enniskillen to provide surgery that could not be provided at other sites owing to the rising number of COVID-positive inpatients.

I have also announced a new regional approach to orthopaedic surgery. It involves developing a networked regional system of dedicated hubs.

As I have mentioned, I have also established a new regional approach to the prioritisation of surgery. That will ensure that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated to the patients most in need, both during a surge and in the future. It includes fully maximising all available in-house Health and Social Care (HSC) and independent sector capacity. While that may mean that patients will need to travel further for their surgery, I would rather see the highest-priority treatments delivered across Northern Ireland than lower-priority treatment delivered locally. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) also continues to work closely with independent sector providers to increase the capacity available to provide elective care in the coming months. Access to the independent sector will also be managed on a regional basis.

I have also pushed ahead with the much-needed reform of our urgent and emergency care services, and fantastic progress has been made. That not only puts us in a stronger position for the future but has allowed us to manage the impact of COVID-19 more effectively; indeed, I intend to publish for consultation in the near future further proposed steps to reform that important service.

Despite all those initiatives and the incredible dedication of all our Health and Social Care staff, we face a burning platform. The pandemic has had a significant impact on our already appalling waiting lists. Arguably, the greatest strategic challenge facing my Department and, indeed, the Executive as a whole is the urgent need to address those waiting lists.

Prior to COVID-19, the trend in demand for hospital-based elective care services had been increasing, largely because of the fact that we have a growing, ageing population with a

greater prevalence of chronic health problems. That increase in demand was not matched by the corresponding increase in health service budgets necessary to increase our capacity. Patient demand for elective care services continues to exceed capacity across a range of specialities. As a result, even before the pandemic, the number of people waiting longer than the target waiting times was increasing. Our inadequate capacity includes well-documented and significant staffing pressures in many parts of our system. Underinvestment in staffing in the past decade is the exact opposite of what was required. On top of that, our outdated configuration of services means that staffing resources and expertise are too often stretched too thinly across the system.

The latest available figures on our waiting lists suggest that, at the end of December 2020, more than 320,000 patients were waiting for their first consultant-led outpatient appointment; more than 105,000 patients were waiting for inpatient or day-case treatment; and around 145,000 patients were waiting for a diagnostic test. To address that issue, I can today announce that I intend shortly to publish an elective care framework. The purpose of the framework is to set out both the immediate and long-term actions and funding requirements needed to tackle our waiting lists. Bringing our waiting lists down to an acceptable level is a long-term effort, requiring a recurrent funding commitment.

I appreciate that many Members have specific concerns about our cancer services. My Department has much activity under way to stabilise and improve diagnosis, treatment and life chances of cancer patients here. Staff in health and social care trusts have worked hard to ensure that systemic anti-cancer therapies and radiotherapy have been protected throughout the surge, and those treatments have been offered as an alternative to surgery whenever possible.

In June 2020, I established a cancer services rebuilding cell to oversee the resumption of cancer screening, diagnosis and treatment in clinically safe environments as quickly as possible and to protect those services as much as possible throughout the pandemic. Taking into account existing capacity constraints and the ongoing threat of COVID-19, on 7 October 2020, I published a policy statement setting out my Department's approach to the rebuilding and stabilisation of cancer services. That included a stabilisation plan for oncology and haematology and cancer services rebuild plans. Details are available on my Department's website.

As we continue to stabilise and rebuild services in these challenging circumstances, it is important to note that all patients are treated according to clinical priority as determined by specialist clinicians. One of my primary aims is to ensure the continued delivery of high-quality cancer services, provided, of course, that it is safe to do so. At present, trusts are keeping the position under daily review and are reinstating red-flag surgery and rescheduling patients as quickly as possible. Fortunately, the vast majority of patients who experienced a delay from January to March 2021 have since had their treatment completed or have a confirmed plan in place.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, undoubtedly, had a devastating impact on cancer services. I understand the worry and concern that long waiting times can cause for patients and their families. I am committed to dealing with that problem. Therefore, I am finalising a cancer recovery plan: "Building Back: Rebuilding Better". The plan seeks to make recommendations to redress the disruption to cancer services caused by the pandemic. The cancer recovery plan is also fully aligned with the short-term recommendations in the cancer strategy and will focus on the three-year period until March 2024. The recommendations cover 11 key areas from screening through to palliative care and have been co-produced with the Health and Social Care Board and colleagues from across the health and social care trusts.

Substantial costs are associated with the delivery of the recovery plan and the strategy. In addition, cancer charities struggle to continue to deliver current services and develop new services to people suffering from cancer, while managing the impact of falling income streams. To support cancer services, I have used both transformation and COVID-19 funding to set up two grant schemes. The first used transformation funding of £600,000, which covered the period from December 2020 to 31 March 2021 and enabled charities to deliver a range of key services to support people living with cancer during the pandemic. I hope to announce further details of the second scheme, which will be aligned with the three-year time frame of the cancer recovery plan, later this week. I am pleased to confirm that it will be accompanied by an important mental health support scheme, one that will be appropriately resourced to produce greater levels of mental health supports and interventions. The final details of both funds are being concluded. I hope that, once they have been announced in the coming days, they will demonstrate the importance that I place on recovering and

strengthening those crucial services and supporting the organisations that will be central to that.

It is widely recognised that addressing the waiting-list backlog and reforming services to ensure future sustainability is a complex and long-term issue and one that requires recurrent funding commitments. Let me make it clear: one-off COVID funds have been essential for health and social care over the past 12 months. However, as I have repeatedly stressed, one-off non-recurrent funds cannot provide the long-term fix that our health service requires. Nevertheless, they have been vital during the emergency that we have faced during the pandemic. I will continue to utilise such funding to the best of my ability for as long as it is available.

In recent weeks, I have been able to allocate one-off funds to specific priority areas. The debt that the health service and wider society owe to unpaid carers, for instance, cannot be overstated. Without the care provided by family members and friends, many vulnerable people would have been plunged into full-scale crisis over the past 12 months. I have allocated £4 million to a new carers' support fund that will provide support for charities working for and with carers. The support fund will provide practical support and acknowledgement to what is such an important sector.

All those allocations, such as the additional grant support to the air ambulance and a range of our community and voluntary sector organisations, as well as the major funds that I hope to be able to announce this week, have been made possible as a result of the one-off COVID funds made available to Northern Ireland during 2020-21. I would, of course, love to allocate further recurrent funding to all those areas, but, as ever, the available recurrent funding is not keeping up with the levels of demand and need.

As Members will be aware, the Executive's Budget has now been announced by the Finance Minister. I recognise that the 2021-22 Budget allocation was disappointing for all Departments and that the scale of pressures significantly exceeds the funding available. From my perspective, the Budget is extremely disappointing. Tragically, as it stands, I cannot make any substantial inroads into improving the waiting list position that I have just outlined. That said, I welcome the £52 million for Agenda for Change pay, which will enable pay parity with England to continue in 2021-22. Likewise, the announcement that £20 million for safe

staffing will now be funded from Barnett consequentials is a positive move.

It has to be recognised that, while the additional resource allocations in the Budget are to be welcomed, the non-recurrent nature of much of the funding means that I will still face some difficult decisions. The present funding model that we operate within is not fit for purpose. What is really needed is a multi-year Budget, and, unfortunately, the Executive have not received that from Westminster. One-off COVID funding cannot be effectively deployed in rebuilding services as that requires us to make multi-year commitments to training places and to appoint people to permanent posts in order to attract and retain staff. We require major sustained investments to rebuild our services. In particular, increasing the capacity of our elective care system, whether in-house or in the independent sector, requires a significant recurrent funding commitment. Only with such a commitment can we begin to invest in the staff and infrastructure required to make progress. At a minimum, a recurrent source of earmarked funding agreed in advance is needed to close the capacity gap and to address the patient backlog. An incremental year-on-year increasing allocation will be required, and it could take five to 10 years to return waiting times to an acceptable level. Longer-term surety of funding at a significant scale will enable innovations in-house and with independent sector providers.

Mr Speaker, I again thank you for the opportunity to speak today. At the heart of my address is a genuine concern for the people of Northern Ireland, the hundreds of thousands of people on our elective care waiting lists and the many more who will need access to those services in the future. Failure to tackle the elective care waiting lists will impact not just on those who are currently waiting but on all those who will need access in the future. The issue affects us all. Such a failure would also be morally reprehensible, as we must not lose sight of the fact that, for the last five to six years, despite all the advances in medication and technologies, growing numbers of people have come to harm because they have not received the treatment that they deserve. Who does not have a loved one, a friend or a relative who, at some point now or in the future, will need to access an elective procedure? As a House, we owe it to all our citizens to now tackle the elective waiting lists.

To address that burning issue, in the near future I will publish for consultation a cancer recovery plan, an elective care framework and the urgent and emergency care review. Our

great staff want us to be ambitious about the future of Health and Social Care. They want us to build back better and to learn the lessons of the pandemic regarding capacity, resilience and investment. I share that ambition 100%, and I believe that the people of Northern Ireland do too. However, I fear that, without a significant and recurrent funding commitment from the Executive, we will be severely restricted in our ability to deliver and will be fighting the scourge of waiting lists with at least one hand tied behind our back.

I ask Members and my Executive colleagues to reflect on what I have said today. I look forward to having further constructive discussions about how we collectively address this most serious issue. I conclude by appealing for unity on waiting times across the House. We must start to put it right. It is a long-term task that needs long-term recurrent funding. It cannot be done on the basis of money that is here today, gone next year.

To put waiting lists right, we will need more staff in our health service, but how can you recruit additional people to the workforce if there is no certainty that you will have the money to keep paying them next year? How do you sign up more young people for the required years of training on the basis of single-year funding?

11.00 am

I recognise that there are many pressing rival demands on the public purse in Northern Ireland and that huge issues face every Department, and I fully accept that the Executive have limited room for manoeuvre in budget terms — decisions are taken in London, and we have to play the cards that we are dealt — but I cannot think of a more pressing issue facing us than waiting times. It cries out for action. It is a daily rebuke to the standing of the House and to the reputation of politics. It leaves thousands and thousands of our people — our fellow citizens and neighbours — in avoidable pain. We owe it to them to do much, much better. Mr Speaker, I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Can we, please, bring Colm Gildernew on screen? *[Pause.]* I will give him a few seconds. *[Pause.]* We will try to return to Colm Gildernew. I call Pam Cameron.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Health Minister for his statement. I welcome any ramping up of services and reform of our health service. There are many people waiting for cancer operations or diagnostic tests to detect cancer and other

potentially fatal diseases, but there are also many people waiting for routine elective surgery. Those people are living in agony, and some have been waiting for a year for the vital healthcare that they so require. In the plan for an elective care framework, how does the Minister envisage elective care being given significant enough recurrent funding to effectively reduce waiting lists and meet targets to bring the numbers to more acceptable levels?

Mr Swann: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee for her question. I apologise for not being able to brief her and the Chair prior to making the statement, as has been my normal practice, due to an Executive meeting this morning.

One of the things that we have done during the pandemic is establish the elective care centre in the Lagan Valley Hospital. That is proving to be a great asset to our health service across Northern Ireland. It is about establishing that centre as part of the long-term solution to reduce the number of people waiting for elective care, but, as I said in my statement, it must be done through a regional approach. We must look at treating patients faster rather than closer to their homes. Treating patients closer to their homes would be the ideal position, but, due to the size of Northern Ireland, the footprint of our health service and our staffing specialities and pressures, the regional approach, which we are seeing in Lagan Valley and in the other areas in which those changes have been made, is paying dividends. It is about investing in staff and the processes that allow that regional approach to work.

One benefit that we have seen over the past year is the breaking down of silos across our trusts. Those silos were not intentional or created by anyone in particular, but they grew up over time. We now see our health service colleagues working across sectors, trusts, primary care, community pharmacy and secondary care. It is about building on that for the future so that the people who need to be seen can be seen as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. I note and share the Minister's concern around elective care waiting lists. As he rightly points out, those are concerns for us all, particularly the, approximately, 145,000 patients who are waiting for a diagnostic test. Such a wait puts further pressure on those individuals and, potentially, the health service,

due to the increased treatment that will be needed.

We have seen good examples of considerable partnership working on rebuilding and reconfiguring services, including cancer services, particularly breast cancer, and strokes. I note that several plans are to be published on emergency departments, elective care and cancer recovery. I am somewhat concerned to see in the reference to the cancer strategy that it has:

"been co-produced with the Health and Social Care Board and ... the health and social care trusts."

That is a fairly minimal approach, and, basically, it does not include some other very important sectors. What commitment can the Minister give that these plans were developed with staff and patients in the genuine spirit of co-production and partnership working, as promised in the Bengoa report and 'Delivering Together'?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his statement. As he is aware, many of the plans announced today have been a long time in the cooking and development from the Bengoa report, 'Transforming Your Care' and 'Power to People'. They have all been done with that co-production and co-development phase throughout their entirety, especially with regard to our long-term cancer strategy, which has been co-produced and co-chaired and will keep those people who need these services most right at the heart of what we do. That co-production has also been done in the review of our elective care model, which has been a long time in the development. It is about keeping patients at the centre of what we do, but it is also about making sure that we get the ultimate utilisation of our footprint and our staff across the entirety of our service.

This is not about redesigning or closing hospitals or paying staff off. This is about actually indicating that we need every spare square foot of capacity that we have; we need more, and we need more staff to actually do that. As the Chair well knows, I regularly meet our trade union side and the chairs of all my arm's-length bodies to make sure that they are fully embedded in and have sight of everything that we are doing as well, and also to provide the accountability that the Committee requires in our producing these plans and programmes and in coming forward with them for scrutiny and assessment.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. I know that he shares my commitment to improved mental health services, and I welcome that, in the statement, he mentioned the cancer recovery plan being accompanied by mental health support for patients on waiting lists. My question today refers to mental health waiting lists specifically. More broadly, as we emerge from the pandemic, mental health support will be necessary, now more than ever. Can the Minister give an update on crisis intervention services to support those on mental health waiting lists, should they need it, and does he see improved support for these critical services as part of a longer-term rebuilding of services as a whole?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member, and I think that the Member is fully aware of my commitment to improving our mental health services across the entirety of Northern Ireland. That is why, even during the height of the first wave of the pandemic, I went ahead and published the mental health strategy and the consultation plan in relation to that. In the coming days, I hope to make further announcements about additional moneys that will be allocated to mental health support for people who need it across our society, especially as we come out of the pandemic. It will be accessible to a number of organisations and individuals that it had not been previously available to. The detail of that is being worked through, and I look forward to publishing that and giving the Member and the Committee a fuller briefing later this month.

Mr Chambers: I certainly welcome the comprehensive statement from the Minister this morning. During the pandemic, a phrase that kept coming up was "we are in this together". If ever there were challenges facing the House, where we need to be in it together, they are the challenges that the Minister highlighted this morning. Going forward, party political considerations need to be set aside.

Tackling our waiting list position should be a key objective for the entire Executive. To put our system on a long-term sustainable footing, it desperately needs financial certainty of more than a 12-month budget. Nevertheless, in the meantime, can the Minister confirm that his Department and the Health and Social Care Board are utilising the interim COVID funds to increase capacity as much as possible, including in the independent sector, both inside and outside Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I think that all in the House have, at

some time, spoken about the need for long-term financing for Health and Social Care and the need for a Budget that is not simply year-on-year. No matter which Minister or Department has been to the House, they have indicated the challenges that not having that brings, no more so than in Health, because it does not allow us to give that firm, long-term commitment that we need to invest in not only our staff but our facilities.

On the utilisation of the independent sector, we have engaged with it, and that is a necessary part of our recovery plan to try to drive down some of the waiting lists that we have. Our independent sector and healthcare providers have, during 2021-22, completed more than 7,000 procedures, and endoscopic diagnostic tests have been carried out by them, all paid for by the health and social care system. In addition, as a result of Health and Social Care having access to theatre capacity in the three local independent sector hospitals, approximately 4,750 cancer or time-critical patients were treated by HSC consultants, again, paid for by the health and social care system.

It is about utilising, as I said, every square foot of our health service and the independent sector across Northern Ireland as we tackle what will be a long-term commitment, which, as the Member indicated, has to be party-political-free. Bengoa set the tone for that. New Decade, New Approach, in its commitments to reducing our waiting lists, set the tone for that. Now, we as a House and as a society need to follow through on that commitment: health needs to be a priority for all, irrespective of faith, favour or party political alignment.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement this morning. I share the Chair of the Health Committee's concerns about the fact that you talk about pushing forward with reform and then coming back and consulting with the wider public on that, but I will not labour the point.

The Minister talked about there being 145,000 patients waiting for a diagnostic test. Obviously, cancer is key area for that. I chair the all-party group on cancer. I was not aware that the Department of Health was at an advanced stage in taking forward the recommendations from the various work streams. Can the Minister provide us with an update on the investment needed for better diagnostic testing and whether consideration is being given to putting some of those resources into primary care and possibly even the community and voluntary sector?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her statement about how we tackle this and for her support through the work that she does as chair of the all-party group on cancer. Cancer is one of those diseases that has touched every family across Northern Ireland and those in the House. As I said, we will make further announcements about additional funding that will be supplied for the three-year cancer recovery fund. That is being produced and worked on with a number of community and voluntary sector organisations that specialise in that area. We want to make sure that that funding is utilised in the available time commitment and that it supports everyone across the voluntary and community sector and the health service. It is not simply there to plug a gap; it is there to do additional work over that three-year period.

The Member will be aware, as the chair of the all-party group on cancer, of the co-production and co-design of our cancer strategy over many years. That was paused this time last year because of the pandemic. That ingrained work, through co-production and co-chairing with service users, was, I think, crucial in getting us to where we are at this stage. We can take the opportunity and investment to try to redress some of the inequalities, especially in cancer diagnostics and cancer services, that we have seen on a postcode basis across Northern Ireland.

We need to be honest with the people of Northern Ireland: this will not be about having everything on your doorstep. That is the easy cry; it is the easy political campaign. It is about rebuilding our health service so that people can be seen as quickly, efficiently and safely as possible and get the service, the diagnosis and the diagnostic tests that they need so that they can, if necessary, get on to a treatment path as quickly as possible, not as close as possible.

11.15 am

Mr Buckley: This is a bleak statement from the Minister, and it is clear that the current situation cannot continue. It is unsustainable. For many of our constituents, the COVID pandemic has, sadly, become a healthcare pandemic that has rocked the very principles of the NHS that he outlined: available to all and free at the point of access. I share the Minister's concern wholeheartedly, and I want to see the same vigour from the Executive in engaging on this issue as we have seen in the fight against COVID-19.

Will the Minister indicate the shortfall in the recurrent funding that would be required year-

on-year to implement the strategy that he outlined in the statement? We know that waiting lists will not be dealt with immediately and that that requires a long-term strategic plan. However, capacity — both staffing and space — is an issue, so engagement with the independent sector will be crucial in the immediate term. Will the Minister outline the engagement that will happen immediately with the independent sector?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments. Again, he highlights the challenges.

The National Health Service is precious to me. It is precious to me not just as Health Minister but because of the support that my family has received from it, like many families in the House and across Northern Ireland. The core strength of our National Health Service is that it is free at the point of need, free at the point of care and free at the point of delivery, no matter the ailment or stress.

It is a question of how we build capacity not just in staffing but in our recurrent footprint. The Member highlights — I thank him for his support — the challenges that not having a recurrent budget in health presents. It does not allow us to face the long-term challenge and make the long-term change that we need to see in the health service across the entirety of our system.

On the utilisation of the independent sector, we have engaged with it extensively over a number of months, even from the first wave of the pandemic. The biggest challenge that we have in working in partnership with our independent sector is the inability to give it a long-term funding commitment. When we buy services from the independent sector, it is for a 12-month period. We cannot buy a number of thousands of operations or diagnostic tests on the basis of a long-term commitment, so the independent sector faces the same challenges as we do as a health service. If they know that we are able to give them £35 million this year, they can spend it, but they are then under the same staffing pressures as we are: how do they staff up, knowing that, in 12 months' time, the Department of Health may not have the money to keep the services and staff that they have invested in? It is about how we get over that hurdle of the recurrent budget.

That is not a criticism of my Executive colleagues. Every one of my ministerial colleagues is under the same pressure. However, the system that we now have pushes additional challenges on to, in particular, the Departments who spend the majority of our funding on our staff, such as my Department

and the Department of Education. That ongoing need is always there and always will be there until we can get over that hurdle. It is about investment for the future.

There used to be a great phrase in politics in Northern Ireland: "Invest to save". Nowhere is that key principle of invest to save more important than in our National Health Service. Invest now. Invest now in the health of our young people. Invest in diagnostic tests so that we do not get to the pressures that come in future years but can intervene before we get into a worse scenario with increased waiting lists and more serious conditions to deal with and support.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I thank the Minister for his statement.

Minister, you will be aware that, at the end of January this year, more than 20,000 people were waiting for a neurology appointment, with 13,000 of them waiting for over 52 weeks. What are you doing to support those people?

Will the additional funding for mental health services include investment in people who have mental health crises and addictions — people who are commonly referred to as having a dual diagnosis? Ask any trust, and it will tell you that it has seen a massive increase. We have seen it in north and west Belfast.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The challenges in neurology are well documented. It goes back to long-term investment in specialists, especially in critical procedures and critical areas, which we have not seen for years. In an awful lot of specialities, there was no succession planning. We need to see that now and make more investment. However, in a number of those specialities, it takes years to train consultants and to bring them on board. Attracting consultants from abroad requires an attractive package. There needs to be long-term sustainability. Those consultants need to know that their post will be there and that their staff will be there to support them. That is one of the challenges that we have seen in neurology and in a lot of other specialities in Northern Ireland.

With regard to post-pandemic mental health support, we have seen work being undertaken in primary care through our multidisciplinary teams. It is about how we strengthen those so that, in mental health, we see people closer to home. That is one area in which that can be done and you do not need to go into a theatre or a diagnostic room. I will make

announcements on funding for talking therapies and to support the voluntary and community sector. Volunteers have carried such a heavy load over the past 12 months, and we must make sure that there is funding for them. Again, all that I have in my purse is short-term funding. Short-term non-recurrent funding is all that I can give. However, it is about making investment in those people so that they can pay back into communities.

The Member knows well that, if we can engage with people who are starting to struggle with mental health issues, that can prevent the problem becoming a more serious long-term issue. It can prevent the challenge coming onto their friends and family. It is about making sure that we invest in community organisations and the voluntary and community sector and support them in what we will need them to do over the next number of years as we combat the challenge of the mental health stresses coming out of COVID.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the Minister's statement, in which he rightly identified that staff were essential to the delivery of our health services. It is welcome that one of the five principles in his rebuild plan is ensuring that staff have the opportunity to take their entitlement of annual leave. However, that would need to be the very minimum in supporting and retaining our staff. Following on from that point, what progress has been made with the COVID-19 recognition payment for staff? How many staff have received that award so far?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I will tell him that no staff have received that payment so far. One of the two asks that I was given was to make sure that the payment was tax-free and did not affect benefits, especially for lower-paid staff in our healthcare sector workforce. Since we made the initial announcement, additional work has had to be done, and that continues. Thanks to the Member's colleague in Finance, we were able to increase the package so that that £500 should not incur the majority of its tax implication. We have also been working with the Member's colleague in Communities, who has engaged with her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to see how we can make the payment so that it will not have an effect on any supplementary benefit payments either. That has been a bigger challenge. We are now working to ensure that, if that £500 is paid over a staggered period to individuals who are also on income support payments, it will not adversely affect any other benefits that they are gaining.

It is complex work that covers many thousands of staff not only within but outside the health service. It has taken more time than I would have liked, but I want to make sure that we get as much of that money as possible into the pockets of the people who have worked for it and deserve it. We are working with our trade union side to make sure that it is on board. One of the asks that it made of us was to try to make the payment to as many people at the same time as possible, rather than paying it piecemeal and causing anxiety to people who may think that they are not getting it or are not entitled to it. It is challenging work. It is a massive workforce to cover with a number of financial commitments, but that acknowledgement payment is one of the pieces of work for which I have had full support from my Executive colleagues. It is more complicated than it sounded initially, but I want to make sure that people get as much of that money in their pockets as possible by working with my Executive colleagues.

Mr McNulty: I am delighted to say that, this morning, I got my first COVID vaccination. It was at the South Lake Leisure Centre in Craigavon, and I was mesmerised by the teamwork, the positivity, the professionalism, the friendliness, the warmth of the welcome, the camaraderie, the organisation and the efficiency. It was heart-warming. Well done to all the health carers and management involved and to you, as Minister, for overseeing the deployment of the vaccinations. I give a special mention to Linda Willis, who put the needle in my arm, and to Sharon Kerr. The most important thing is that the energy, enthusiasm and teamwork on show there was incredible. It can move mountains.

Minister, in your statement you referred to 570,000 patients who were waiting for their first consultant-led outpatient appointment, for inpatient day-care treatment or for a diagnostic test: that is more than half a million people. That is a third of our population. You talked about it being five to 10 years before waiting lists got back to acceptable levels. That will not provide much comfort to patients and their families. Can you say anything today that will provide some comfort for those patients and their families?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his acknowledgement of the vaccine service. I have visited a number of sites. I got my vaccine through community pharmacy and our GPs, who are delivering it as well. One of the most emotive visits is to visit one of those vaccine centres. I was in the Ballymena centre in the Seven Towers Leisure Centre yesterday. The

majority of the staff on duty were volunteering and working on their days off to deliver vaccines, because they see it as such a psychological lift for them and for the people of Northern Ireland. They are providing part of the relief and part of the way out of what has been a terrible 14 months. Those staff — some of whom have come back from retirement, and some of whom are trainees — have energy, commitment and drive. I spoke yesterday to physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and dieticians, all of whom had come forward to be part of the vaccine programme because they see it as such a positive thing that our health service is doing. It is such an emotive one as well. Talking to the centre manager, I learned that one of the things that they did not prepare for when they established the centre was putting boxes of hankies in each vaccination booth. The manager said that the number of people who burst out in tears because of the relief of getting the vaccine was immeasurable. I have used this story in the House before as well: I think it was in the South Eastern Trust that a lady receiving her first vaccine thanked the vaccinator for holding her hand, because that was the first human touch that she had felt in nearly a year. Those releases that the vaccinators and those who are vaccinated are getting are immeasurable.

I am glad that the Member has got his vaccine, and I am glad that he will get his second one as well. I encourage everyone in the House who is in an eligible age group to go forward —

Mr Buckley: Give it a wee bit of time.

Mr Swann: I will try to get to you as quickly as possible, Jonny.

It is part of the solution. I put on record my thanks to all the people who are working across the system and delivering it. The Member thanks me, but there is nobody who deserves more thanks and praise than Patricia Donnelly, who has brought the entire process together.

With regard to the people who are on the waiting lists, that is what today's statement is about. That is why I am not sugar-coating it. I am not saying that everything is perfect or that, in another couple of months, we will be back to acceptable levels, because it would be disingenuous and dishonest of me to do that.

This is a challenge. I say this to the people of Northern Ireland: you have a highly dedicated and highly professional health service, with people working in it who want to get back to their day job and see you as quickly and

efficiently as possible. That will mean changes and will mean challenges for many of us as politicians.

11.30 am

In the past year, I have seen a willingness from our health service staff to go somewhere else to deliver a service. Belfast surgeons have been operating in the SWAH. Two years ago, people would have said that that would never happen. People have travelled from one side of Northern Ireland to another to get a procedure, because they know that that is where they will get it. Our health service has moved outside the challenge of being local. Many of our patients have moved outside the challenge of being treated locally. The next challenge for us as politicians is to allow our health service to take a regional approach and allow patients to get the service that they need delivered where it is going to be. I am now looking at that regional approach, and I have used the phrase many times. That is why we have set up the hub-and-spoke model for orthopaedics in Lagan Valley Hospital. It is about how we provide a holistic health service to all the people of Northern Ireland using a regional footprint. That will bring challenges, and the biggest challenge that it brings to us as politicians is to accept that things will have to be done differently.

Mr Speaker: Following on from what the Minister said, I am pleased to advise the House that I had my second vaccination this morning at the Ulster Hospital. You can now call me "Two Jabs Alex" [*Laughter.*] I call Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: Mr Speaker, it is a while since you have been called "Two Jabs Alex", perhaps back in your boxing days.

Mr Durkan: When he was a councillor and an MLA [*Laughter.*]

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. It is a statement of hope, but you are right, Minister, to tinge it with reality when it comes to funding. I also welcome the indication of further support to be announced in the coming days, particularly for mental health services. You are the Minister who has put mental health to the fore in everything that he does. Do you envisage that this will increase the provision of crucial counselling and talking therapy services?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I again acknowledge that one of the first initiatives that the Executive took was to establish the Executive working group on mental well-being,

resilience and suicide prevention. That set the tone and tenor for what we were going to do about mental health and for how the Department was able to move forward. I have said before that, no matter how bad the first pandemic was, we still moved ahead and launched the mental health strategy. It was something that we had committed to doing, that we were going to do and that needed to be done. That is why we went ahead and appointed our first interim mental health champion: to make sure that we recognised mental health and the challenges that it presents to the people of Northern Ireland and got it the recognition that it needs in our health service, this place and the Executive, so that mental health services could get the support — practical, financial and political — that they need to address many of the challenges that they have long faced across Northern Ireland.

To answer the Member's specific question about potential funding, as I said to Ms Ní Chuilín, the allocation will be made to the voluntary community groups, charity organisations and specialist organisations that have experience and knowledge of how to address the issue at a community level, to challenge what needs to be challenged and to address what needs to be addressed. The challenge that I have is that the funding is non-recurrent. It is not long-term funding, and that puts additional stress and strain on the people who are already doing that work and will continue to do it.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I agree that the time for words of concern has now passed. I say that as someone who comes from the Western Trust area. On top of all the legacy issues, we have struggled to attract and retain staff.

Minister, I very much welcome the additional funding for carers' charities and organisations. What reassurances can you give those who have been left to cope in their own home that statutory respite services will resume safely and equitably?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The phrase that she used was "attract and retain staff". That puts the challenge back on us, as politicians. There is nothing so great as a good health campaign coming up to an election. I remember that, when I had not long been in the House, a chief executive of a local trust pointed out to me that one thing that puts pressure on the recruitment and retention of staff is for a hospital or service to be continually in the press, with people saying that it will close. Nobody wants to move to a service that is

publicly said to be under threat even if, in reality, it is not under threat. It is the same as the old adage that it is never the Education Authority (EA) that has to close a school: there is a rumour that the school will close, and the parents start to move the pupils out. The same narrative can easily start around the attractiveness of a facility and its ability to retain staff.

This is about long-term commitment to the staff and to the footprint of what needs to be a regional service. I applaud some of the examples that have come from the Western Trust. The example that I used was the excellent facilities in the South West Acute Hospital, which were underutilised for a long time. Now, the majority of surgeons across Northern Ireland would gladly go there because it allows them to see their patients. They know that it is an appropriate use of facilities and that it is a place that can provide the care and attention that they need. This is about how we make sure that that continues over the next 12 months.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. As with any statement outlining waiting lists, I fear that it is just the tip of the iceberg. I know of people who have been hesitant to go to their GP, whether because of fear of putting the health service under strain or fear of contracting the virus.

As the Minister outlined, one of the key ways of dealing with waiting lists is through financial investment. What financial allocation does the Minister feel he needs in this financial year to be able to start dealing with the waiting lists? Have any allocations or bids in monitoring rounds been refused thus far?

Mr Swann: We have just started a new financial year, and I have £35 million for tackling waiting lists. That is what, we have assessed, we can use in this calendar year. It is a calendar-year budget, a 12-month budget. New Decade, New Approach allocated £50 million to the Executive collectively for tackling waiting lists. That was last year's money. That money came, and it has gone. We also used it for some of the utilisation of the independent sector. That is where we are with regards to that. That £35 million is for utilisation of the independent sector.

It is about long-term, continued investment to improve the services that we have. It is about upgrading the theatres and ICUs in our hospital capacities to make sure that we can progress and process as many operations as possible. We saw that there was a need for a massive

number of ICU beds because of the long-term COVID patients who were in them. We have funded 75 ICU beds across Northern Ireland. Today, there are, I think, 68 or 69 people in ICU beds with non-COVID conditions, so we are already getting near to the capacity of our funded allocation of ICU beds.

COVID has shown us that we have to escalate and move into our surge model in relation to ICU beds. That is where we have had to bring in staff — ICU nurses, anaesthetists and all the rest — from across our system. That is why yesterday's announcement by the Belfast Trust about the de-escalation of the Nightingale, which I reaffirmed today, is such a positive step. We can use that facility and ensure that it is a green-list site for a regional approach for more complex operations.

This is about how we approach the challenge of getting all those pieces to fit. I said that we had seen the breaking down of silos, and it is now about making sure that they produce. We are in the early days of the Budget in regard to bids, funding, what we will need to spend and what we can spend. It is about having a recurrent budget, so that I can give surety to staff, hospital trusts and the independent sector that the commitment that we make today will still be there in five to 10 years' time and that they will still get that financial support.

Mr Boylan: Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. Minister, I believe that you are serious about tackling waiting lists, but I will ask my question in this context: in the statement, you talked about taking a regional approach to the prioritisation of surgery and the use of the independent sector to restart services and reduce waiting lists. If we are serious about waiting lists, does that regional approach include the utilisation of cross-border services? What discussions have you had with your counterpart in the South about a regional and cross-border approach to addressing the issues?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Part of the independent sector that we are engaging with, have utilised and will use is the independent sector in the Republic of Ireland. The issue is where we can get a service at all. The Republic of Ireland has its own waiting lists, as, I am sure, the Member is fully aware, so it is an illusion to think that it will accept patients from Northern Ireland simply to reduce our waiting lists. Its focus will be elsewhere. It is about using the independent sector in the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere to get people seen as quickly as possible.

There are cross-border initiatives that are still being utilised. In children's cardiac services, the majority of our children who need heart surgery are being seen in Our Lady of Lourdes in Dublin. That is a great initiative. Cancer services are being provided for the entirety of the north-west, meaning Donegal as well as Londonderry, in Altnagelvin. There is a memorandum of understanding on kidney transplants between the Belfast Trust and the Beaumont Hospital in the Republic of Ireland. It is about all those services that we can deliver cross-border and utilising the specialities on either side of the border. The ability to simply utilise the health service in the Republic of Ireland to address our waiting lists is not a reality, but the utilisation of the independent sector there is something that we are and will continue to be engaged in.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I very much welcome it. Will the Minister give his view on what I and many consider to be an entrenchment of a two-tier healthcare system? Those who can afford to go private will do so, and those who cannot will languish on lists while their physical and mental health deteriorates, with many of them getting into debt to pay for treatment. Can any steps be taken to eradicate the perverse situation in which a consultant at a hospital can tell someone that they will have to wait four years for an operation but he can see them next month if they are willing to pay and go private?

Mr Swann: The Member highlights the duality of our health service in Northern Ireland, which, as I mentioned, challenges me. One core principle that I hold dear as a unionist is our National Health Service, which is free at the point of use, free at the point of delivery and free at the point of care, irrespective of your ability to pay or your need. Due to underinvestment in the service and staff over the long term, the independent sector is meeting the needs of those who can afford to pay. It is as simple as that.

What we need to do and what my statement is about is invest in our National Health Service: invest in the people who work in it, in its footprint, in its equipment, including its diagnostic equipment, and in its theatres so that the demand on and the opportunity for the independent sector is not as great. Due to the underinvestment in our National Health Service over the last 10 years, the independent sector is there and is meeting the need. If surgeons are capable of working in both systems, I am not in a position to prevent them. We have used the same surgeons to bring down our waiting lists when we have utilised procedures that we

need in the independent sector. It is about meeting the demands of our patients as quickly as possible.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I welcome the successful roll-out of the regional day procedure centres at Lagan Valley Hospital and the ongoing utilisation of the lists at the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. Minister, do you believe that, compared with only a short time ago, there is a new outlook not only among patients but among clinicians and that people are now prepared to travel slightly further if it means receiving or delivering treatment much sooner?

11.45 am

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The Member mentioned the South West Acute Hospital, and I thank her for the invite. It seems like a long time since I visited the SWAH and one of the COVID centres in her constituency.

It is about that challenge, and, as I said in answer to an earlier question, we have seen that professionals and healthcare staff are willing to travel. It is not just surgeons; the entirety of the team — anaesthetists, ICU nurses and everybody who makes up the surgical delivery team — are willing to travel to access theatre capacity, recovery beds and ICU beds for their patients. The professionals in our health service very much see people as their patients.

People are now willing to travel. Realistically, Northern Ireland is not a big place, especially if you need a surgical procedure. We have seen that people are now willing to travel, as I said in an earlier answer. The challenge is no longer for health professionals or patients; the challenge is for us politicians to let the clinical demand be met by the clinicians, who can deliver a service, no matter where it is, on a safe site, using the green lists and regional priorities so that those who are in most clinical need are seen more quickly than by using the postcode in which they live or want to be treated.

One of the outworkings of the pandemic has been the breaking down of silos across the entire health service. From primary care hospitals to community pharmacy, everyone working in the healthcare family has pulled together and pooled the resources. That will serve Northern Ireland well because the staff want to get back to the day-to-day work of seeing and treating patients.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his statement. I go back to his remarks about staff not applying for jobs because of rumours about hospital closures. Likewise, the removal of services from hospitals and quiet buildings can fuel that. Will the Minister make a commitment that the full estate of the health service will be used to address the trust rebuilding plans and deal with the problems we have? Will facilities such as the Downe Hospital in Downpatrick be used to their fullest capacity to retain jobs and to attract jobs in the future as thriving centres for health?

Mr Swann: As I have said before, we will need to utilise every square foot that we have. Each hospital may not provide every service that it has in the past. The challenge of the regional approach is to put an orthopaedic surgeon in one centre where he can see more patients than can be seen in three orthopaedic services doing a lesser degree of work in a number of other capacities.

I thank the Member for his commitment. I believe that some of his councillors have started a campaign for a long-term commitment to the Downe and Daisy Hill Hospitals. Again, it is that sort of language that unnerves staff. There is nothing more unnerving for people working in our health service than social media campaigns about saving their hospital when it is not under threat. Therefore, I ask the Member and some of his party colleagues to step away from the party political campaigns and support the staff who are working in the hospitals to deliver the entirety of the services in those facilities. As I have said, we do not have enough staff. We need more staff, so no one will be done away with. We do not have a big enough footprint, and we need every square foot that we have. It may not be that everyone gets every service that they want delivered on their doorstep, and that has to be the reality, if we are to address the waiting lists that we are talking about today. It also has to be about a political commitment from all in the House to Bengoa and all the other reforms that have been talked about. Now is the time to implement those changes and stop talking about them. We had three years when we were unable to meet the challenges and make the transformations that were needed. Now is the time, as we come out of the pandemic, to serve the people of Northern Ireland by addressing all their health needs equally and equitably.

Mr Allister: I hear what the Minister says about tackling waiting lists, but I have been in the House for 10 years and have heard every successive Health Minister make similar affirmations. Yet, we are where we are. During

those same 10 years — indeed, during the entirety of devolution — almost 2,000 beds and all the necessary staff who go with them have been removed from our health service. What reason is there to believe that today's affirmations will be any different? Is the Minister confident that the Executive are prepared to reverse the disastrous policy that denoted the previous Executives that were made up of the same parties?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I have been in the House for as long as he has; I think that we came in on the same election. The difference is that I am standing here now. We took this position when many other parties in the House passed on it because we knew that there was a job of work to be done.

The Member referred to the decreasing number of beds. That is commensurate with the decrease in investment in staff that we have seen. There is no point in buying a bed if you do not have the staff to support it. It is the same process as the Member talked about. I am sure that he listened to my statement in detail. I highlighted our need to invest in our staff. There is no point in having the facility if you do not have the staff to look after the people who need the care. It is about investment. We have started that investment with our 300 trained nurses this year, next year and the following year. That is not enough. It will not recoup the losses of years of the wrong policy of disinvestment in our National Health Service. The health service was one of the things that were seen as easy to cut money from because it made up nearly 50% or more of the Budget. It is not easy to do that; once you do that, the easy place becomes the challenging place.

The major expenditure in the Department of Health is on staff. That is the first place that is looked to for cuts, whether it be bursary placements, staff training places or nursing training places. That is why the safe staffing investment that I mentioned in my statement is so critical. Until a few weeks ago, that was being hived off into a monitoring round bid. It is now there; it is now secured. That is what I argued for and got to make sure that we put that investment into our safe staff. We increase our bed numbers when we increase our staff numbers. That allows us to challenge the waiting lists that we have.

The Member knows me well enough. I will not come here with empty promises or platitudes. I could have flowery-ed up today's statement and told everybody that it was going to be great tomorrow: I did not. I told everybody about the challenges that we have in the health service

and politically in the House. It is not just about the Executive parties getting behind me, as Minister of Health, or the health service but about everyone in the House getting behind the health service and those who work in it. I know that the Member has that at his heart. I know how much he writes to me and the number of cases that he raises with me in regard to his constituents. I ask him to support me politically in the House and outside of it when it comes to the work that I need to do and the challenges that I face.

Mr Carroll: Thanks to the Minister for his statement. I am concerned that there appears to be a continuation of relying on the independent and private sector to tackle waiting lists. What efforts are being made to increase the number of staff? We are understaffed, as he stated. Before the pandemic, we were 2,000 or 3,000 nurses short. What efforts are being made to increase the number of staff in our health service? Specifically, what work is he doing with his Executive colleagues to remove the barriers that currently prevent refugees or asylum seekers who have healthcare training, including those who are trained nurses and other healthcare workers, from working due to the racist and reactionary immigration policies that we have?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I do not think that racist and reactionary policies sit within my Department, nor does it take such an approach. In the community pharmacy where I received my vaccine a couple of weeks ago, there was a pharmacist from Romania who had recently come to Northern Ireland and got accreditation on the certification and professional list. She was working in that pharmacy delivering vaccines because she was a trained vaccinator. So, there is no reactionary approach.

The Member will know well about the international recruitment of nurses, which continues to be progressed by my Department to make up much of the skill set that has been lost. It takes time to train a nurse. We need to fill those slots now, so we have been proactive in the international market, and we intend to keep working to fill many of those slots. However, it is simply not possible to fill nursing positions overnight. I cannot knit nurses. They have to be trained, they have to be invested in, and they have to be recruited. I am thankful for the support of the Executive for the additional places that we secured when this place was restored over a year ago. That commitment was vital. It was unfortunate that we got to a place in Northern Ireland where our nurses and our Health and Social Care staff had to take to the picket line to indicate the reality of how

underfunded the health service had been over the past 10 years. We need to address that now, and, with the support of all Members in the House, I am intent on putting it right.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I, for one, will support you. I know how difficult it is, and I know about the policy of "Not in my back yard". When I applied for my vaccine, I went to Ballymena because that was the first place that was offered. Everything about it was efficient.

Mr Speaker, like you, I have my little card to show that I have had two vaccinations. I know that my features are a little more rugged than yours. If you want to be known in the boxing arena as "Two Jabs Alec", I will be known as "Two Pokes Pat".

On a serious note, Minister, I look at the work that is ongoing at Lagan Valley Hospital, where that old Victorian facade opens out. I was treated in the day-procedure centre there. I congratulate the Department and the trust on the work that is being carried out at the day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley. Minister, will an overall assessment be made of the increased number of visitors to the hospital and how that will impact on the traffic and parking issues along the Hillsborough Road? It is great to welcome what is coming in, but we have to look at how successful it is. Will you call for some sort of investigation of parking around the hospital?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I congratulate him on getting his second jab and on travelling to Ballymena to get it. That is a double bonus for the Member.

I will look at the parking issues around Lagan Valley. That has not come across my desk, but, now that the Member has raised it, I will raise it with the trust and see what can be done.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister.

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

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

12.00 noon

Executive Committee Business

The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The next items of business are motions to approve two statutory rules that relate to the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and I will then call the Minister to move it. The Minister will commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I beg to move

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

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

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek the Assembly's approval of two statutory rules (SRs) that are being made under powers in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020. The overarching objective of the Act was to provide businesses with the flexibility that they needed to continue trading during this difficult time. The measures were designed to help companies and similar entities by easing their regulatory burden and helping them to

avoid insolvency during that period of economic uncertainty.

The Act introduced greater flexibility to the insolvency regime, allowing companies an opportunity to explore options for rescue so that they have the optimum chance of survival. It also temporarily suspends parts of insolvency law to help directors to continue trading through the emergency without the threat of personal liability and to protect companies from aggressive creditor action.

The pandemic has had a longer and deeper impact on the economy than had been envisaged when the legislation was passed last summer. The regulations that I am asking the Assembly to approve today are the latest in a series of statutory rules that I have presented to extend some of those temporary provisions. The first statutory rule is a set of regulations to extend the period during which schedule 8 to the Act applies, from 30 March 2021 until 30 September 2021. The regulations were made on 9 March 2021 and must be approved by the Assembly within 40 days of that date.

A new moratorium procedure established by the Act gives companies in financial difficulty the opportunity of a breathing space, free from creditor pressure, to explore options for rescue. Schedule 8 to the Act facilitates easier entry to the moratorium during the coronavirus crisis by temporarily relaxing some of the eligibility conditions. It also contains a set of temporary administrative rules that are needed to work with the primary legislation until permanent rules can be made.

The second statutory rule also takes the form of regulation. The purpose of that rule is to keep in place until 29 April 2022 a general power that allows my Department to make temporary amendments to corporate insolvency or governance legislation for reasons relating to the effects of coronavirus on business or the economy. Providing for temporary legislative change in that way will mean that the insolvency and business rescue regime may quickly react and adapt to deal with significant and unexpected future challenges presented by the impact of the pandemic on businesses.

Temporary amendments to legislation may be framed to give protection to companies that would be viable but for the effect of the pandemic and to provide the regulatory support needed for their survival rather than their being forced to enter insolvency proceedings. That power, which had been due to expire on 30 April this year, has already been used to replicate legislation made in the rest of the

United Kingdom. I consider it prudent to keep that general power for a further limited period. It will provide my Department with the flexibility to respond quickly to any urgent or emerging issues that will help local business owners avoid insolvency and continue to trade through the current crisis.

The content of the two sets of regulations and the dates to which the provisions are being extended correspond to what is being done in the rest of the United Kingdom. Both sets of regulations have been agreed by the Economy Committee, and the Executive were advised prior to the debate.

To conclude, it is essential that measures to assist companies that are struggling financially as a result of the pandemic be kept in place for as long as is necessary. It is vital that local business owners be afforded the same easements, and for the same periods, as the rest of the United Kingdom. The extensions to be made by the two sets of regulations will ensure that that happens.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I support the motions on behalf of the Committee.

As the Minister indicated, the regulations to amend the relevant period in schedule 8 to the Act extend the period during which the Department can exercise its power to make regulations under section 28 of the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 that amend or modify the impact of corporate insolvency or governance legislation.

The Committee considered and approved the SL1 for the regulations at its meeting on 3 March, with members agreeing the SR itself at the Committee's meeting on 23 March 2021, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules' report. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion to approve the regulations.

As the Minister indicated, under section 32(1) of the Act, the power that the Department or the British Secretary of State has to make regulations under section 28 is set to expire on 30 April. Section 32 includes provision to make regulations that substitute a later expiry date for the one currently specified. It specifies that the new date has to be within the period of one year from the current date, and must be within the two-year period following the date on which the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act was passed, which was 25 June 2020.

The Committee considered and agreed the SL1 for the draft regulations at its meeting on 23

March 2021. The Committee has not, however, considered the draft regulations in the Order Paper today. They are scheduled to be considered by the Committee at its meeting tomorrow. As the Committee has not considered the statutory rule, I am therefore not able to support the motion on its behalf. The Committee has no view, and, on that basis, I will not be opposing the motion.

I will now make a couple of comments as the Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. As the Minister said, the SRs are two of a number of regulations being made in respect of the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act that we have supported. Obviously, businesses need the flexibility to respond, and we are cognisant of the impact that the restrictions are having on businesses. The crisis has continued a lot longer than many of us, and this legislation, had anticipated. We therefore continue to support the extensions, in order to give businesses and the Department the ability to respond appropriately.

Mr Stalford: On behalf of my party, and her party, too, I welcome the action that the Minister has taken in bringing the motions before the House.

The measures are clearly designed to enable companies to operate under the strictures that have been placed on them through the various COVID-related restrictions that the House has passed. It is important that we do that in order to protect businesses and companies and to allow them to trade once this period passes so that they are in the best possible shape to do so. It is my sincere hope that this will be the final time that the Minister has to come to the House to seek approval for such measures. It is my hope and my conviction that the Executive should be doing all in their power to open up as much of our economy as possible in order to allow our people to get back to work, to stimulate economic growth and to create prosperity.

The Minister will agree with me when I say that, hopefully, this will be the final time that she will have to come to the House to seek support for such measures and that we can get back to work in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I invite the Minister to conclude the debate on both motions.

Mrs Dodds: I thank those Members who have indicated their consent to the making of the statutory rules. I say to my colleague that the

economy has gone through a very dark period because of COVID-19 and the restrictions placed on it. I look forward to that time, in the very near future, when we are rebuilding and recovering our economy and when the restrictions and regulations are no longer needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

The draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Resolved:

That the draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the Minister and to the House for the rude interruption of my phone. If only I could be silenced as quickly as the mute button on my phone works, some would think that that would be of great benefit to many people. I apologise to all concerned in the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I thank the Member for acknowledging and recognising the error. I ask that all Members take care and ensure that their phones are on mute.

12.15 pm

The Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to introduce the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill

[NIA 20/17-22], which is a Bill to amend the Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990 to allow for payments to be made from the Horse Racing Fund to horse racecourse operators; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments to allow others to join us for Question Time.

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Fishing Vessels: Customs Declaration

1. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether fishing vessels leaving local ports are required to complete a customs declaration on return. (AQO 1834/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As you may be aware, customs formalities are not a devolved issue, although my Department has been liaising with HMRC to seek clarity on those issues. The HMRC advice states that for fish caught in UK territorial waters, the EU's view is that there is the need for customs and regulatory requirements, including the submission of safety and security declarations by the fishers on each landing. That potentially means that there is the need for additional control for the landing of goods — that is, fish, at Northern Ireland fishing ports — which would be extremely burdensome and totally unworkable for most of the smaller vessels, as some of the requirements mean that they have to land in a port that is under customs control, which may be a considerable distance from their home port.

The UK Government (UKG) have provided us with a different legal interpretation of those customs formalities and have advised that Northern Ireland vessels will be required to meet only pre-existing obligations, such as those in the fisheries control regulation, when landing into ports in Northern Ireland until further notice. That is in line with the approach that has been taken to the implementation of the protocol more broadly where there is the need for pragmatism as traders and fishers adapt to new requirements.

The UKG have assured me that they would robustly defend that approach should any challenge to it be raised by the European Union, although it is important to note that that has been the subject of engagement between the UK and EU during Joint Committee proceedings. It is accepted that that approach will require further discussions with the EU. However, the UK's position is clear that Northern Ireland vessels should not be subject

to any new customs requirements until further notice.

My Department has been working through a number of Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol issues in the recent UK/EU negotiations that relate to fish being landed in Northern Ireland ports by NI registered vessels, and two of those issues have been successfully resolved through those negotiations. The outstanding unresolved issues relate to illegal, unreported and unregulated regulations and the application of EU customs formalities on the fish landed by our vessels into our ports. I have been pressing the UKG on those matters since early last year

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister's time is up.

Mr Poots: — when I made it clear that my desire was to have those obligations carved out in a way that is similar to what was provided for in the sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and tariff issues through the negotiations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Minister that he has two minutes and that, if he requires additional time, he can request an extra minute.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for that fulsome answer. I absolutely appreciate that the matter is outside his control. I know that he is working hard on it. However, he will agree with me that it is absolutely ridiculous that the waters around Northern Ireland can be classed as a third country when fishermen go into them. It is one of the ludicrous aspects of the protocol.

My question spins off slightly from that. What influence does the Minister have to ensure that Northern Ireland's fishermen get their full quota from the new quota system and extra fishing quotas post-Brexit?

Mr Poots: Obviously, I was not happy with the deal that was initially arranged by the Prime Minister and the European Union. We should have obtained much greater quota volumes under Brexit, but the UK Government settled for less. However, we will revisit that in 2025. With regard to the quota as it was awarded, we had extensive discussions and correspondence with the UKG on the matter. They arrived at the circumstance at which they arrived, which did not give us the uplift that we would have wanted, albeit we have, on average, a 10% uplift across the fleet. Therefore, in that respect, fishermen are considerably better off after Brexit, but it could have been much better

again, had the UK Government negotiated a tougher deal with the European Union.

Ms Anderson: Given the devastating impact of Brexit on fishermen and fisherwomen, what exactly is the current position for fishing vessels that go from the North to the South, and vice versa?

Mr Poots: First of all, I do not accept that there has been a devastating impact on fishermen as a result of Brexit. As I indicated, they will be able to catch more fish, and, were it not for the COVID situation, the value of those fish would be considerably higher than is the current situation.

As the Member is probably aware, there was a voisinage agreement between ourselves and the Irish Republic. Under the Fisheries Act 2020, all EU vessels that fish in UK waters must be licensed by the UK. Similarly, all UK vessels that fish in EU waters must be licensed by the EU. Reciprocal access to the Ireland/Northern Ireland zone of nought to six nautical miles under the existing voisinage neighbourhood agreement means that we must license each other's vessels. That is being progressed urgently. Vessel lists have been exchanged. We are waiting on confirmation that licences will be issued to Northern Ireland vessels before we can respond. We are very keen to ensure that Northern Ireland fishermen can continue to fish in Irish waters and that Irish fishermen can continue to fish in UK waters under the previous agreement. It worked extremely well. If there is any holding back on that, it is not coming from the Northern Ireland side.

Mr McNulty: What is the Minister's assessment of the additional quota that has been allocated to the local fishing industry as an outcome of Brexit?

Mr Poots: It is better than it was before Brexit but not as good as it could have been had the UK adhered to tougher negotiation with regard to regaining the waters that we have been deprived of for many years. The opportunities that exist are not what they could have been. However, I hope that we will take the opportunities that exist now and that, in future negotiations, we will gain considerably more opportunities for our fishermen.

Agricultural Policy

2. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the development of a future agricultural policy. (AQO 1835/17-22)

Mr Poots: In 2018, DAERA undertook an engagement exercise, gathering a broad range of stakeholders' views on future agricultural policy. Those views and further stakeholder engagement have been central to developing my vision for future agriculture in Northern Ireland.

My Department is now at an advanced stage in the development of a draft policy framework portfolio, which I hope to publish in the coming months. The framework has been defined around the four key outcomes of increased productivity, improved resilience, environmental sustainability and improved supply chain functionality. As that work continues in the years ahead, we will continue to engage with our farmers, land managers and environmental stakeholders to co-design new agricultural policies.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, will you outline your intention on entitlements? Will you continue those in the development of a future agricultural policy?

Mr Poots: Before I arrive at any fixed positions, I want to engage with the industry and, indeed, the Assembly and the Committee. We should have a fit-for-purpose agricultural payment policy. We will also need to reflect that in our climate change policy and ensure that farmers who may lose some of their grazing lands because we need to wet peatlands etc are adequately compensated. We need to look at the support that is provided for hill farmers, in particular, to keep suckler cows and sheep and to ensure that those hills are well utilised. We also need to consider whether we want to support suckler cows on lowlands or whether, because of sexed semen, for example, the beef would come from the dairy herd and there would be no requirement to incentivise farmers to keep suckler cows on the lowlands.

Those are all issues for discussion and debate. I do not have fixed positions on them. It would be wrong to have those before identifying the views of the public and, indeed, the Assembly.

Mrs Barton: Minister, have you determined a change in the departmental policy on the final decision-making power of the DAERA appeals process yet?

Mr Poots: Legally, it would appear that it ends with the Minister, but I have made it very clear that this Minister has no intention of overturning the views that have been expressed by an independent panel. Unfortunately, that was not the case for many years, and quite a number of

appeal cases that went to the independent panel were overturned. I disagree with that. There is no point in having an independent panel and the Minister then being lobbied by officials and overturning the views of the independent panel. It is a much fairer process if someone goes to an independent panel and makes their case and argument and it is accepted that the Minister will accept the decision of that panel.

Mr Blair: Minister, will future agricultural policy involve significant further investment in sustainable farming systems? Those will be key not just to a COVID recovery but to a green recovery.

Mr Poots: Yes, absolutely. I have asked my officials to work up a bid to be made to the Department of Finance. If we are serious about tackling climate change, we need to recognise that it will involve making a significant investment. We will seek the Department of Finance's support in making that significant investment and supporting the farming community, in particular, to engage, where they can, in activities that will significantly reduce the carbon footprint and increase carbon capture. It is critical that we work across the Executive on that course of work.

Mr McGlone: We have worked through a number of threads in the responses. Will the Minister confirm whether there will be a specific Bill that is tailored to Northern Ireland? He mentioned that a number of policy areas will be looked at, but will there be a specific Bill for that purpose?

Mr Poots: That would be a decision for the next Minister, after the election, whoever that happens to be. Timewise, I do not think that we would be able to introduce an agricultural Bill during the lifetime of this Assembly, which runs to May 2022.

12.30 pm

Roe Valley Country Park

3. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the completion of his Department's project at the Roe Valley Country Park. (AQO 1836/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials have confirmed that there is no further update at this time, following the information provided pursuant to AQW 10099/17-22 and the Member's freedom of

information request, DAERA/20-334, which was received on 12 December. My officials have again confirmed that the project, which relates to the reinstatement of the hydroelectric scheme at Roe Valley Country Park, cannot be completed until permission is granted by an adjacent landowner for access to their lands in order to allow works to proceed. As previously advised, departmental officials have confirmed that a comprehensive proposal has already been made to that adjacent landowner through their legal representatives. Whilst officials have been notified that the landowner in question considered that proposal unacceptable, departmental officials still await details of what elements of the existing proposal they object to. The landowner concerned is aware of that. To date, no further contact has been received by officials from the landowner, or an appointed legal representative, regarding those details.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. I fully appreciate that there is a long-running difficulty with the project. It has caused the adjacent landowner great physical and mental distress since 2013, and, according to information received through the landowner's request under freedom of information, it has cost the taxpayer a lot of money. In the interests of everyone, will the Minister undertake to see whether a speedy resolution can be found to bring this worthy project to a conclusion? Would it be acceptable to have a site meeting or an online meeting with departmental officials, the landowner, the Minister and me?

Mr Poots: I cannot give the Member an answer to his last question, because the issue is being dealt with through the Departmental Solicitor's Office, and the landowner has their legal advisers. I am not unwilling to do it, but we will await advice on it. I recognise that it is a worthy project, and it is one that we want to take forward, but we need the cooperation of the landowner. If the landowner has issues, we need to identify what those issues are and see whether we can reach agreement with the individual.

Mr Durkan: The intrinsic value of our country parks, open spaces and forests has been amplified over the past year. Will the Minister commit his Department to continuing work with Derry City and Strabane District Council to facilitate the repair or reinstatement of the footbridge in Muff Glen forest, outside Eglinton, which was destroyed by floods in 2017, thus making that tremendous asset more accessible and increasing the number of people who can enjoy it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I believe that that is beyond the Roe valley, but the Minister may wish to respond.

Mr Poots: I am unaware of the particulars of the case, as I was not forewarned. However, we have been working closely with councils across Northern Ireland to improve our forest parks. We have seen some fantastic projects being carried forward, where DAERA has supported the local authorities, and access for families and the disabled has been improved. We are happy to look at the issue that the Member has raised around Muff Glen.

Islandmagee Gas Storage Project

4. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the marine licensing process for the Islandmagee gas storage project. (AQO 1837/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have received a portfolio of documents on the Islandmagee gas storage proposals. My Department is the competent authority on the marine licence, and I am also considering review documentation for the other two DAERA licences that were issued back in 2014 — a water discharge consent and a water abstraction licence. The documentation is comprehensive and will therefore take some time to be considered fully.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister will be aware that the gas caverns project has been, and remains, contentious, particularly in Islandmagee. I am interested in getting more detail on the advice that he has received on the full marine licensing review and on the abstract licence and consent to discharge. Is the Minister minded, on the back of legal advice, to refer the issue to the Executive? Will he support calls to instigate a local public inquiry?

Mr Poots: I received the documents on this just recently and will give them full consideration before making a decision. I recognise that the proposed development is unpopular with some local residents. That in itself does not mean that it is controversial under the legislation on Executive referral. While it may be controversial locally, that does not necessarily mean, in terms of the measures for a Minister to have to take it to the Executive, that it is controversial. I can assure you that I am considering the option of Executive referral. I am mindful of my duties under the ministerial code and the option of holding a public inquiry. As you can appreciate,

I am unable to comment further at this stage until I have given it full consideration.

Mr Dickson: Does the Minister agree that a public inquiry is inevitable, given the outcry about the project and, indeed, that it is a cross-cutting matter for the Executive and not one solely for his Department?

Mr Poots: Our scientists have been working on this and identifying the issues. Public inquiries are called on the basis of facts, not noise. While I sincerely appreciate the concerns of residents, given that it is a very pleasant and beautiful area, right out to Browns Bay, which I go to on occasion, and that local residents will therefore want to keep it as it is, all these things have to be given full and appropriate consideration. I am in a situation in which there is huge potential for whatever decision I make to be judicially reviewed by either the applicant or the residents. Therefore, I have to be very careful about what I say, and, before arriving at a decision, I have to give this my absolute careful consideration. We have the papers, and progress is being made on arriving at a decision. We are working on that at this stage.

Dr Archibald: Does the Minister agree that, in light of his recently published proposals for a climate change Bill and the green growth framework, it is inappropriate to proceed with further investment in fossil fuels rather than focusing on meeting our renewable targets?

Mr Poots: It certainly is a consideration. Responsibility for energy lies with the Department for the Economy. We have been looking to receive advice from that Department on its future expectations. Gas is a clean energy, but it is still a fossil fuel. It certainly has a much lower impact than coal or oil. Consequently, if it is identified that gas will be used for a considerable part of the foreseeable future, that would lead you to a point at which the gas caverns are beneficial from an energy point of view but not necessarily an environmental point of view. However, if Economy points to providing the energy resource from other means as opposed to gas and a significant upgrade in renewable energy, that would take you away from the gas caverns. I should say that the Department for the Economy has set a target of 70% for renewable energy by 2030. Beyond that, we would need to develop widespread large-scale offshore electricity generation, and that takes about 10 years to plan. That issue in itself will have its controversies. Whatever you do in all those areas, there will be controversy, and we need to respond to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I should have advised Members earlier that question 7 has been withdrawn.

Veterinary Education Facility

5. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the options analysis for a veterinary education facility. (AQO 1838/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is an increasing acceptance that the Northern Ireland agri-food industry requires a more assured supply of veterinarians than is available from the existing sources. However, there are a number of possible options for meeting that need. In my absence in early March, Minister Gordon Lyons met the vice chancellors of Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast. He proposed an analysis of the options for the supply of veterinarians and a more-detailed consideration of the various delivery models, structures and locations in order to inform a business case for a facility for veterinary education in Northern Ireland. It was agreed with the two university vice chancellors that the Strategic Investment Board would be asked to carry out that analysis as soon as possible. It has now been commissioned to undertake it, and it will go forward over the next six to nine months, with input from staff from the two universities and the support of DAERA officials.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, as you rightly said, recent developments have highlighted the shortage of vets across Northern Ireland. Will the Minister's Department provide a brief to the AERA Committee as soon as possible outlining progress? I have raised that issue at the Committee and in the House, and I am keen to see progress be made.

Mr Poots: The Department will be happy to update the Committee, and, indeed, the Member, as we go along. We have commissioned work from the Strategic Investment Board, and I would like to see that work completed as quickly as possible and a way forward identified.

Clearly, we have a shortage of veterinarians. As a consequence, veterinarians come from other countries to help sustain our agri-food sector. Our agri-food sector is worth some £5 billion to our economy, so it is critically important that we achieve the number required. It would be much better, however, to have the appropriate number of veterinarians educated here in Northern Ireland. We would then have less

leaking of young people who take up a veterinary course on the United Kingdom mainland, in Europe or, indeed, in the Irish Republic.

Mr McGuigan: The Minister stated the fact that we have a shortage of vets here in the North. Over and above that, perhaps the Minister can outline the benefits of having a veterinary school here for animal health and welfare and for the agri-food sector.

Mr Poots: We have an excellent research facility in Northern Ireland in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, and, indeed, other sources. We have some large pharmaceutical companies in the agri-food sector as well, so we are a country that is moving forward on all those things. A tie-up between a university that specialises in veterinary courses and the agri-food sector and the pharmaceutical sector for agri-food would therefore be hugely beneficial for research and for encouraging young people to take up a locally available veterinary course.

It is an expensive course to undertake, so universities have to take all those things into account when bringing one forward. Nonetheless, it would be hugely beneficial for Northern Ireland as well as for whichever university or collaboration of universities took up the opportunity.

Dr Aiken: Has the Northern Ireland protocol, particularly the Trade and Cooperation Agreement when it comes to the recognition of qualifications, increased the pressure on the availability of veterinary services and vets in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: The protocol has certainly created pressure, because, if things do not change, between DAERA and local council staff, we will require around 600 officials at ports. We would be looking at needing close to 200 vets, and they just do not exist. You do not train vets in six months. You train vets over five years, so the vets do not exist for that job.

The problem is this: if we draw vets from other services, are we damaging animal welfare? Are we taking away from practices vets who are out on farms or vets who are engaged in small practices? We are left in this ridiculous position in which vets would be checking food that has come here for years without being subject to checks and is going to be consumed in Northern Ireland, leaving them unavailable to do things that are required for animal welfare. It therefore certainly does have a very significant impact.

12.45 pm

Rural Policy Framework: Update

6. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the rural policy framework. (AQO 1839/17-22)

Mr Poots: There has been significant stakeholder engagement and consultation in developing the draft rural policy framework. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that it has had across rural areas, we have been reviewing the draft of the rural policy framework document to ensure that it reflects the ever-changing context, before going to public consultation. It has always been the intention that the rural policy framework will be a living document that is intended to be flexible and adaptable to change. Subject to securing the necessary approvals, I hope to launch a public consultation later this spring. It is anticipated that the rural policy framework proposals will be available for an eight-week online consultation period. Officials continue to deliver a range of schemes to support rural communities and businesses, with just over £20 million having been invested in rural development programmes in the financial year just finished.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that the community renewal fund was launched by the British Government as a main plank of the Shared Prosperity Fund. Can the Minister provide any information on that fund and whether there will be a consultation on trying to protect rural communities and giving them opportunities to access that scheme?

Mr Poots: I certainly hope that there will be the opportunity for consultation on the Shared Prosperity Fund. Obviously, that is a scheme that is being delivered directly by the Westminster Government. Unlike others, I do not complain about it, because, ultimately, it is additional money for Northern Ireland. It is additional money for the people whom we represent. I will not decry it just because it is not us distributing it, just I did not decry the EU money when it was coming. This money will replace some of the structural funds etc that came from the European Union. I welcome that and will seek to influence it as best I can for the benefit of my constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Climate Change Bill: Consultation

T1. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to confirm whether, when developing his proposals for a climate change Bill, he consulted environmental experts other than the Climate Change Committee. (AQT 1161/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Climate Change Committee is the expert independent panel set up by the UK Government. They have appointed independent experts to give that advice. Our Department works closely with all the bodies and NGOs involved in environmental issues. We provide them with significant financial support, and we listen to what they have to say and engage with them on the issues. I suggest that the evidence that the Department has taken is much greater than the evidence of those behind the private Member's Bill. I wish that the Members who support that Bill would indicate to me and the general public in Northern Ireland what independent evidence they want to bring to the table. Saying that Scotland is doing it by 2045 is not evidence; it is an indication of what another country can achieve. By the way, the Climate Change Committee supports that and recommends it, while recommending something different for Northern Ireland. I would be interested in the evidence, and I await the Members' evidence coming forward.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister's proposals do not commit us to net zero by 2050. There is a wealth of expert advice that the North is capable of reaching true net zero by 2050 without unfairly affecting sectors such as agriculture. Given the severity of the climate crisis, does the Minister think that it is appropriate that we do the legally required minimum when more ambitious alternatives exist?

Mr Poots: I do not believe that it is appropriate that we do the minimum; I believe that it is appropriate that we do the maximum. I note that the Member says that there is "a wealth" of evidence. I look forward to hearing the evidence as opposed to people pontificating about its existence without actually producing it.

Pet Vaccinations

T2. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that Great Britain is opening up to receive visitors and tourists and the fact that the holiday period is coming, whether the current mitigation for the vaccination of pets will be extended

beyond June and into July and August to allow people from Northern Ireland who wish to travel with their pets to enter into and return from GB. (AQT 1162/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for her question. I welcome the fact that the mitigation was introduced in January and gave us those six months. I was not looking for six months to allow us time to prepare, although some people were; I was looking for six months to negotiate away the nonsense of pets having to be treated for conditions that do not exist in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. The British Isles is free from those diseases; therefore, we are imposing on pets and animals something that is not required. It is a medicinal practice that they do not need, and we have to resist it as firmly and as strongly as possible. That is what I am doing.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister. Now that we are talking about the issues with the protocol etc, will you give an update on the regulations that are in place for importing pedigree cattle into Northern Ireland? Is there any movement there?

Mr Poots: Again, we have a significant problem with the importation of cattle and sheep. As a consequence, a large number of blackface sheep — blackface sheep in particular but not exclusively — are in Scotland. They were bought in September, and the farmers cannot get them home. The EU has been rigid about that thus far in spite of our requests. We need to get some flexibility. There are farmers in the Antrim hills, the Sperrins, the Mourne and so forth who have invested heavily and are not getting their animals brought home.

As well as that, the pedigree industry has been badly affected. Previously, farmers were taking bulls and heifers to Scotland and, indeed, to the north of England for some of the large sales. Because of the six-month standstill, they are not prepared to take that risk because, if they do not sell the animals, how can they ensure their welfare in how they are treated on a farm in Scotland or England? They are high-value animals. It will be devastating for the pedigree industry in Northern Ireland if the issue is not resolved. It is a ludicrous issue in terms of securing the single market. It has no impact whatever on the single market, and the European Union needs to back down on it, wise up and treat Northern Ireland with a degree of respect.

Climate Change Bill: Consultation

T3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the independent scientific advice that his Department received when drafting its proposed climate change Bill, given that he will be aware that climate change is an issue that concerns us all. (AQT 1163/17-22)

Mr Poots: As I indicated to Ms Dolan, we have been taking advice from the Climate Change Committee, which is a panel of independent experts. I recently received a letter from the chair of that committee. It indicated that the committee's

"analysis has not produced a scenario for the UK net zero in 2050 that sees Northern Ireland reach net zero in the same year. We are not therefore able precisely to calculate the costs of Northern Ireland reaching net zero, but they will almost certainly be higher than those of the 82% reduction target by up to £900 million a year by 2050. If engineered removals technologies are used, the context of a net zero 2050 target for the whole of the UK is also important".

That is what we need to focus on as one country moving forward to a net zero target. That is wholly achievable, and Northern Ireland can make a significant contribution to that.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister has set it out that his Bill will set targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 82% by 2050. Others have suggested reaching net zero by 2045. What impact would that have on Northern Ireland, and is it a realistic target?

Mr Poots: I believe that Mr Aiken, who is to my right, thinks that we can do it by 2035. I am not sure where his expertise comes from, but the climate change experts say that a larger reduction in output from the Northern Ireland livestock sector would be required, compared with the rest of the UK. Even our most stretching tailwind scenario, which entails a 50% fall in meat and dairy production in Northern Ireland by 2050 and significantly greater levels of tree planting on the land that is released, is not enough to get Northern Ireland to net zero emissions by 2050. Without a corresponding reduction in the consumption of such produce, this would simply shift emissions overseas.

I want to listen to climate change experts, but I suspect that there are a lot of climate change experts in the Chamber to whom I would be slightly less inclined to listen. I prefer to listen to

the Climate Change Committee, which has some expertise and background in these matters. We would do well not to destroy the Northern Ireland economy and put 50,000 families — there are 100,000 people involved in agri-food — into unemployment because we want to grab a headline.

Carbon Sequestration

T4. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what scientific work his Department is doing to recognise the importance of carbon sequestration in our soil, hedgerows and trees etc. (AQT 1164/17-22)

Mr Poots: I want to engage closely with the Assembly on that work. We have significant opportunities for carbon storage in our peatlands, but that will involve wetting those peatlands. As a consequence, the farms that are closest will most likely lose the ability to graze their lands, certainly for as long as they are currently able to. Therefore, those farms need to be adequately compensated. The opportunity to tap into a new single farm payment scheme that is not restricted by the European Union gives us the opportunity to do that.

I also want to look at the opportunity of having more structured management of our hedgerows. Hedgerows are superb capturers of carbon. If we bring a requirement into the single farm payment scheme that farms have a structured plan for their hedgerows, it will enable and encourage them to grow those hedgerows for longer periods. One of our biggest assets is our hedgerows, and, if we grow them a metre higher or a metre wider, they will capture massive amounts of carbon.

We can work through a lot of this together without inflicting the massive pain that I referred to in my response to the previous Member. That is what must be done. We must identify the means to ensure that our carbon footprint is reduced, but we must not destroy our farms in the process by doing illogical things.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for that response. I am sure that the Minister agrees that we need to be ambitious about what we do to reduce our carbon footprint and that the role of carbon sequestration and an understanding of that role are really important to the public discourse on this when it comes to recognising farmers' support of the environment. I am sure that the Minister also agrees that we need to

ensure that there is adequate knowledge transfer —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Could the Member come to her question?

Dr Archibald: — and that we encourage farmers to do these types of schemes on their land and, as you have referred to, that we reward them appropriately.

Mr Poots: Farmers recognise that they have a contribution to make and are engaging positively in making that contribution. It is for the Assembly to engage positively with them, and, therefore, I think that the Assembly would be much wiser to follow the path that I recommend in relation to climate change legislation, because it will work with the farming community. "At least 82%" means "at least", and it could be significantly more than that, if that is achievable. As the science develops and we identify, for example, what level of carbon capture exists in our grasslands and how it can be greater in hilly areas because more of that grass, which has captured carbon from the atmosphere, gets tramped back into the soil, then, perhaps, we can move forward with something more significant. We need to give ourselves a degree of latitude as opposed to enforcing something fixed that will not give us that latitude and will inevitably cause massive harm to our farm families, taking away their livelihoods and the jobs in the industries that are associated with farming. That would be a hugely unacceptable position for me as the AERA Minister and as the Assembly's spokesperson for that sector.

1.00 pm

Food Strategy Framework

T5. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the future food strategy framework. (AQT 1165/17-22)

Mr Poots: We have done considerable work on that, and we are at the point of making an appointment to take that forward along with the Economy Minister. That is being progressed and will be announced next week. Given the sad death of the Duke of Edinburgh, we do not propose to make the announcement this week.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Perhaps he can give us some indication of the role that Departments can play in supporting Northern Ireland food producers.

Mr Poots: Our Department is clear that we want to see Northern Ireland at its best. Many of our farmers are at their best, are achieving really great things and are world leaders. Others are somewhat behind, so the benchmarking of good quality, identifying what is achievable and encouraging people to be progressive in their agricultural practice are all very important.

How we use the climate change agenda to develop new interests on our farms is also important. Can we take our excess of farm nutrients and develop them into something that is sellable to other parts of the world that lack those nutrients? We have a surplus and they have a deficit, so can we invest in capturing those materials in a way that enables us to sell them as a product and have a win-win situation for the environment and the agri-food sector?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends the time for questions to the Minister. I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes until our next period of questions, which are to the Minister for Communities.

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

Communities

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 12 has been withdrawn.

Gambling Regulations

1. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Communities, following her Department's public consultation on the regulation of gambling that closed on 21 February 2020, for an update on the intended way forward on gambling regulations. (AQO 1849/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): An outcome report on the consultation was published on the departmental website in November 2020. There was overwhelming support for reform of the gambling legislation, and I am on record as saying that that reform is long overdue. Given the scale of reform that is needed, I am keen to bring forward proposals for some regulatory change in this mandate and have advised the Committee for Communities of my intention to do so in the schedule of legislation. As soon as I am in a position to do so, I will make an announcement on the way forward as quickly as possible.

Mr Frew: Minister, thank you for your answer. Your commitment to legislate in this mandate is really appreciated.

Article 168 of the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 prohibits promotional non-skill prize draws linked to a product. Will the legislation take into consideration the fact that UK-wide companies undertake promotional prize competitions linked to the purchase of a product and that Northern Ireland consumers will be disadvantaged as they will not be involved?

Ms Hargey: Yes, those issues were picked up on in the ongoing consultation and engagement, and part of that will come forward in changes in the time ahead.

Mr Butler: I welcome the Minister's points. I want to give the Minister the opportunity to join me in wishing our football team the very best of luck tonight as they face Ukraine and try to defend a 2-1 lead and, hopefully, do even better.

Will the Minister's proposals ban the gambling practices that are most likely to cause harm? Is she considering practices such as free bets, free spins, VIP schemes and reverse withdrawal functions?

Ms Hargey: Yes, all those options are being looked at and their impact considered. I am looking at the health implications and the services around gambling addiction. When the consultation went out, there was a recognition that reform was definitely needed in those areas.

Of course, I wish the team well tonight. Hopefully, they will come home with a victory.

Ms Mullan: Minister, will you support the establishment of an independent gambling regulator?

Ms Hargey: Yes, I would support that.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister outline what steps or actions, if any, government here or even elsewhere can take to ensure the tighter regulation of online betting sites?

Ms Hargey: That issue is being looked at. Obviously, because of the nature of social media and the opportunities for online gambling that are presented to people, it is a growing issue. Of course, we are proactively looking at ways to engage. We are discussing the health impact that it has at the other end. We want any

legislation to look at prevention before it gets to the critical point where people need assistance with their addiction. We are in regular engagement on those options and will lay them out in the time ahead, taking into consideration the increasing issue of online gambling.

Centenary of Northern Ireland

2. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the plans in place in recognition of the centenary of Northern Ireland. (AQO 1850/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thank you for your question. As outlined in previous statements by my Department, we have no plans in place to mark the centenary. However, a £3 million fund to mark the centenary has been set up by the British Government and includes £1 million of funding to be distributed through the National Lottery Heritage Fund, with the NIO in the lead.

That aside, PRONI, in line with its statutory remit, will facilitate access to archival records in its care that are relevant to the centenary by individuals, organisations and the media. PRONI will also launch an A-level educational resource titled 'Ireland 1900-1925: Crisis, War and Revolution' in May 2021. It will comprise a range of archival material covering the period, including sources relating to the establishment of the Northern Ireland state and the opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament.

Plans have been in place for some time across a number of our arm's-length bodies (ALBs) and other funded organisations to make the centenary. I have asked my officials to write to the Member separately to provide him with an update on their plans.

Mr Buckley: Sadly, the Minister's answer today confirms verbally what she confirmed to Mr Allister in written format, which is that the Department for Communities will not fund the centenary celebrations in Northern Ireland. Many people in Northern Ireland will rightly view her callous snub of the centenary as a recurrent and running theme in Sinn Féin: first, there was the centenary stone, and, now, a Department that has so much responsibility is not putting forward any funding. When will the Department for Communities — "Communities" plural — step up and respect the cultural aspirations of a significant community in Northern Ireland?

Ms Hargey: There is nothing callous in my approach, and I say that to the Member right now. It is unfortunate that he is trying to use those remarks in terms of the question.

I was extensively involved in the decade of centenaries in Belfast City Council during my time as a councillor. We managed to agree a programme that looked at all the events in the context of one having an impact on another, whether it was the formation of the Northern state or the different perspectives on partition. They are sensitive issues. For some, it is a celebration, but, for others, it is an event that has negative connotations. We need to be responsible and sensitive in how we address all the issues. I would prefer us to do that by sitting down collectively as an Executive. It is not just my responsibility as Communities Minister; we need to approach the issues sensibly. We need to look at all the events in their widest context, how one has an impact on another and how we then communicate that to the public.

We live in a contested society. We see issues emerging at our interfaces as things rupture. Anything that we do when looking at all the issues has to be planned and considered. As I said, my experience in Belfast City Council was that that worked well. All the political parties, most of which are represented in this Chamber, sat down in a coordinated and structured way to plan events. That has not happened. The NIO, of course, is running forward with events. Some of my arm's-length bodies, such as PRONI, are doing events. However, if we are serious about looking back at the past and learning from that in terms of building forward for the young people whom we saw on the streets of Belfast and beyond over the past week, we need to be mature about it rather than saying that we are acting callously. We need to look at all the issues in the round in terms of how they reflect across the community. Of course, the centenary is held dearly by some people —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister.

Ms Hargey: — in our society, but there is also the issue of partition —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister.

Ms Hargey: — and its ramifications. We need to look at all of that in the round.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Several other Members are listed. I ask Members to be direct in their questions and the Minister to be direct in her answers; otherwise, this may well take up the entirety of Question Time.

Mr Sheehan: Following on from the Minister's answer, does she agree that many people in the North find nothing to celebrate about partition and what followed it and that it is

important that any centenary events reflect the different narratives of the past here?

Ms Hargey: We have a layered and complex history, and we have a responsibility to lead. Obviously, we come from a contested and divided society. We are trying to build reconciliation and give our young people hope for the future. Those historic events could cause issues to rupture again. We need to do it sensitively and collectively. We need to look at how the issues knit into one another and have an impact on communities as a whole. I am willing to engage in such a process, and I ask others to do the same.

Mr Allister: The title that the Minister holds in the House is "Minister for Communities". She knows that, for the unionist community, the centenary of Northern Ireland is very important. However, consciously and deliberately, she did not seek one penny for her Department's budget. It does not have money for unionist community groups —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Allister: — or organisations that want to celebrate the centenary.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: When is the Minister —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I appreciate the depth of feeling around these issues. Mr Buckley tabled his question, and I gave him some leeway. The entirety of Question Time will be taken up by this issue if we have long preambles to questions. I appreciate that this is a sensitive and important issue, but it is important that questions and answers are short, sharp and focused.

1.15 pm

Mr Allister: On this issue, when is the Minister going to start being the Minister for all communities and not just the Minister for the Sinn Féin community, despite her pious words?

Ms Hargey: First, we are in a decade of centenaries, and I have not brought forward proposals on any of the issues. The NIO, under the auspices of the British Government, has given a commitment to mark the centenary of the formation of this state. As I said, I would have preferred a programme that looked at all the centenaries holistically. My focus as Minister for Communities is on delivering vital

services right across the community, be they in Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, the Market, where I live, Springfield Road or the Shankill. My focus is on issues such as housing, inequality and the income that people have. That is certainly where my focus has been over the past year, and it has particularly been on addressing issues relating to the pandemic. That has been done right across the community, because I see it as one community that may have different traditions. My focus, however, has been on delivering for all those communities, and I think that many in the Chamber and outside it will accept that I have done that in a respectful manner.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister very much for her comments so far, and, indeed, I welcome the remarks made by the deputy First Minister about HRH Prince Philip, which were much respected by our community and, indeed, across Northern Ireland. In view of that, in the spirit of reconciliation, can she and her party not see a way forward to agreeing to having even just a centenary stone here in the grounds of Stormont? Agreeing to that would say just as much.

Ms Hargey: As I have said before, and as you as a party leader will know, we all have a responsibility to look at the community as a whole. We are coming from a divided society, and we know that anything around symbols can cause tension. I think that the best way and the mature way is for the parties to sit down collectively. I know that my party is willing to do that, and I am willing to do that as a Minister. We need to sit down and address the issues so that everyone feels that their issues and what is important to them are addressed in a collective manner.

I have given a good example of how that was done on Belfast City Council, where we looked at the issues of home rule, the covenant and the 1916 rising and then started to look at the more recent centenaries that were approaching. That was done in a collective way, with the principles of looking at all the issues, and I think that that is the best way forward. It has been practised on Belfast City Council, and the sky did not fall in. Every party around that table that is represented in this Chamber welcomed the approach that was taken.

If people are serious about looking at the whole community and about looking at the aspirations of individual identities and needs, sit down collectively around the table. Sit down and work. I am willing to do that to look at all the events, because the centenary is important for a good section of the community here, but so

too is looking at the issue of partition and the ramifications that that had. Again, I accept that people will have different perspectives on that, but let us sit down and see how we can mark all those events collectively rather than trying to rip each other down. What example is that sending out to the young people who were out on the streets of Belfast and beyond over the past few weeks? We need to be seen to be providing leadership on those issues, and I would welcome that. That leadership has to come from across the Chamber and from all the Executive parties, and I will play my part in that.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate that the Minister and others do not wish to recognise the centenary, but is this not a lost opportunity to look forward for all in Northern Ireland by perhaps investing in youth and doing so in the name of NI100? For me, the centenary is about looking forward, and there is a real opportunity to do that. For all the issues that the Minister has raised, I think that we have to look at how we unite Northern Ireland moving forward. There is an opportunity to do that through NI100.

Ms Hargey: First, I do recognise the centenary. I recognise that it is a historic event that happened that still has an impact on our society here today, on what way you look at that society and on what your hopes are going forward. My view is that partition happened and that it was a reality that also had an impact. We need to look at all those issues in the round. We need to address and organise programmes that can be bought into right across our communities and across society and to do that in a coordinated and structured way. If we do not, it becomes a free-for-all, a fight and an argument. I do not think that that is good for young people or for society as a whole.

I have seen, in good practice, how it has worked. We need to look at examples such as those that I have cited and build on them in the time ahead. However, that involves all parties in the Assembly. Are they willing to buy into that? Are they willing to sign up to principles that look at all those events from the varying perspectives? I attended covenant events, and I attended dinners to mark the battle of the Somme and other events. Some people chose not to do that at that time. That is the type of responsible conversation and leadership that we need. I am willing to engage. The question is whether everybody else is.

Housing Waiting List: North Lurgan

3. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Communities what action the Housing

Executive is taking to address the growing waiting list for housing in north Lurgan. (AQO 1851/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have set out an ambitious, long-term plan to increase the supply of social and affordable housing and to reduce housing stress. However, those plans will take time to come to fruition. Whilst I share the Member's concerns that the number of applicants for social housing and those in housing stress continues to grow, the projected outcome of my plan is to ensure that the supply of social homes can meet the increasing demand. Crucial to that is protecting the social homes that we have and ensuring that they can be maintained, ultimately by the ability of the Housing Executive, in a revitalised form, to access borrowing to sustain itself and to build again.

In the shorter term, the new-build programme is the key action that we can take. One of my priorities is to enhance investment and increase new social home starts. Once the budget for the 2021-22 housing development programme has been finalised, I will announce further detail on the new social homes that will be started very soon.

I am aware from the Housing Executive that the current projected housing need for north Lurgan is for a further 168 new social homes between now and 2025. The Housing Executive is committed to working with the housing association sector to bring forward new social housing proposals to address that need. I understand from the Housing Executive that housing associations have been forwarding a high volume of proposals for the north Lurgan area over the past 12 months. I am pleased to advise that new social housing schemes providing 39 units are due to be completed in the area later this year.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer and welcome her plans for social and affordable housing. I also thank her for agreeing to meet me on housing issues in north Lurgan and in rural areas in my constituency. The waiting list continues to grow. Will the Minister undertake to keep up the pressure on the Housing Executive and social housing providers to ensure that housing is provided in areas of most need?

Ms Hargey: Yes, definitely. As part of the housing statement last year, there are strands of work on housing supply, the social housing development programme and ring-fencing in the areas of greatest need. I will bring forward

proposals in a number of areas in the short term. I have also made a commitment to the overall revitalisation of our housing sector and to ensuring that we meet those critical demands. I will present those plans to the Executive. They will be costed and timetabled before the end of the Assembly mandate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Deputy Chairperson of the Communities Committee.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I support the Minister's commitment to social housing. Will she assure the House that she is committed to shared housing? We have recently seen disgraceful actions in Carrickfergus. Will she dedicate herself to providing shared housing where people from all cultures and backgrounds can live together and to ensuring that we stop enabling housing zones that exclude people based on religion, culture or race?

Ms Hargey: The reports of recent days are really unfortunate. Those actions need to be condemned, as I know that, in the community, they have been. Housing is a fundamental right. It is the basic thing that somebody needs and that is needed for society to function. People, particularly those in critical need, must have a home. As part of the housing transformation, I am committed to that.

It is about building suitable, affordable and sustainable housing for those who need it, where they need it. It will include shared housing. We are working on a number of programmes, and we will look at that as part of the housing mix. I am more than happy to discuss that with the Member as a follow-up.

Mr Catney: Minister, will you give me an update on the abolition of the right-to-buy scheme? The house sales scheme in the housing associations has been abolished. Since the passage of legislation last year, what action has the Minister taken to extend that policy to NIHE properties?

Ms Hargey: Work is ongoing on bringing forward a consultation on the future of the Housing Executive house sales scheme. That will be brought forward in the coming weeks.

Mr Newton: Will the Minister respond to a report in yesterday's 'Belfast Telegraph' that indicated that, as it stands, in 20 years' time, we will still not have met the housing need?

Ms Hargey: The report is reflective of statements that were made in the Chamber by my predecessor, Carál, while I was off, and subsequently by me when I came back. That is part of the reason why a vital statement was brought forward in November on the revitalisation of the Housing Executive. One of the biggest issues is about dealing with the historical debt. I am glad to say that we have already dealt with corporation tax exemption. That is really good, but we need to get the Housing Executive to build again. There are supply issues, and we are bringing forward a housing supply strategy to look at those. We are also looking at homelessness and revising our response to it. Some good learning has come out of COVID-19 on how we can work proactively and better with Health on homelessness prevention and on sustaining tenancies for people so that they do not repeatedly become homeless.

All those issues are part of the revitalisation agenda. We are bringing forward some work on the house sales scheme, because I recognise that, on average, we build 1,800 homes a year and that nearly 500 of them are being sold off through the house sales scheme. We need to fundamentally deal with that in order to prevent depletion of the social housing stock. That is one of the areas that I will look at. Whilst we can be more ambitious with the housing development programme, 1,800 homes a year is not enough, and we need to have better ways of developing. Land is an issue, and we are looking at the land and supply strategy as well. We are —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, I am afraid that you are out of time.

Ms Hargey: — trying to work with councils on that. I am happy to share more information on that programme.

Miss Woods: The Minister touched on corporation tax in her answer to Mr Newton. On 3 March, she stated:

"the Housing Executive has paid almost £58 million in Corporation Tax. This is money that could have been invested in their homes for the benefit of their tenants."

Will the Minister tell us how change is made to corporation tax structures and how financial savings stemming from it will be measured? Will savings be reallocated to address housing waiting lists, housing quality and added benefits for people?

Ms Hargey: Part of our plan is for those funds go into maintaining the existing stock. There have been huge challenges. It is a part of the revitalisation agenda. If we do not make changes urgently now — we have been talking about this for over a decade, and change needs to happen now — we are going to lose half the stock that the Housing Executive has. That is the hard reality and is part of the cost analysis that we are carrying out.

It is really good and significant that the corporation tax issue has been resolved. We want those funds to go directly back into maintaining existing properties. We can then look at new models of enabling the Housing Executive to borrow so that we can have a more ambitious housebuilding programme.

COVID-19 Charities Fund: Allocations

4. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the allocations she has made through the COVID-19 charities fund. (AQO 1852/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am pleased to say that 887 grant awards have been made for a total of £16 million. I know how important the charities sector has been in helping us through this crisis. My wish was for charities to claim all the £20.5 million that was available, but I am satisfied that the money claimed has met the urgent financial need and kept charities afloat. I am grateful to our delivery partners, the National Lottery Community Fund and Community Finance Ireland, for the swift and agile way that they administered the fund and to NICVA for the support that it provided to the sector throughout the process.

1.30 pm

Obviously, it is not possible to name all the charities that were supported through the fund, but I will just give an idea of their diverse nature. We supported charities that deal with chronic illness, such as Action Cancer; animal welfare and environmental charities such as the Kids Pony Foundation; religious groups such as Dundrod Presbyterian Church; homeless charities such as Extern; community groups such as Limavady Community Development Initiative; and many other charities that have relied on this essential funding to keep them going.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her response and for her leadership on this issue.

Indeed, that investment will come as a relief to a lot of charities whose traditional means of fundraising have been curtailed as a result of the pandemic. Will the Minister agree with me that charities play a huge role in our community and our society and that they will need our ongoing support and assistance to rebuild as we move towards the recovery phase?

Ms Hargey: Yes. Charities play a huge role, and we saw that, particularly at the height of the pandemic. No charity looks the same as another. Charities range from the large scale down to the very local, and a wide range of activities take place. Part of our engagement around COVID and around this fund has allowed us to look in more detail at the nature of the charity sector, and, going forward, as we look at the social recovery phase and the economic recovery phase, we want to keep that engagement going to ensure that we have a charities sector that is fit and able to deliver the services that it needs to deliver and that we can mitigate any future shocks, whether economic or health shocks, and learn the lessons from the most recent pandemic.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, will you give us an update on the total allocation from the two tranches of funding for the charities fund? Welcome as it was, you said that £16 million was disbursed, and I think that £11.7 million was the second tranche, announced in December by Minister Ní Chuilín. It would be helpful if you could give us an update on exactly how much was allocated and how much was actually spent.

Ms Hargey: During phase 1, which opened last year, there were 501 successful applications totalling £8.8 million. Phase 2 opened in January this year, and there were 386 successful applications and a total fund of £7.18 million. Community Finance Ireland's administration fees were attached to the overall cost as well. The total funding expended was £16.3 million, and that includes the administration costs.

Mr Allen: At the outset, I declare an interest as I am charity trustee. The Minister and Members across the House will no doubt be aware of the vital work carried out by charities right across Northern Ireland and further afield. Minister, can you advise what work the Department is undertaking to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on charities moving forward, and what tailored programmes will be coming in the future to continue to support and sustain those charities?

Ms Hargey: First, there is the impact of COVID. We are starting to ease out of restrictions, and, hopefully, there will be more announcements on Thursday. We will keep a watching brief on the immediate issues that charities are facing. This funding was until the end of the financial year, so we will continue to keep abreast of that and look at that, just as we look at other funds that have been administered.

As I say, there has been good learning. The pandemic has allowed the Department to re-engage with charities in a way that, maybe, has not been done in a while, by looking at the needs and impact of the charities. There has been learning from the pandemic as well because it has exposed the vulnerabilities of certain sections and groups in society, and there are also issues with the capacity and vulnerability of the organisations themselves, in the sense of how a shock to society impacts on their organisation.

Officials in the Department are writing up that learning at the moment, and we want to move forward to see how we can support the charities, looking at the relationship that we have established with the lotteries, with Community Finance Ireland and with NICVA, who have done some excellent work in supporting those charities, particularly around building the resilience of volunteers who are involved. We will also look at mental health programmes that have been run through the Warm, Well and Connected programme. We want to build on all that in the time ahead and have a co-design approach to any future provision that we make.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the time for tabled questions. Before we move on to topical questions, I say that it is a shame that we managed to get only to question 4. It is a disservice to other Members who have tabled questions and to the public who are looking in that we were able to discuss only four issues in tabled questions today. The Lord above knows that there is nobody more windy than me at times, but I appeal to Members, please, in future, to try to focus their questions so that we can get through more issues and allow the people who are watching to get more answers to those issues. Fortunately for Mr Lyttle, who was to ask question 5, he is the first person on the topical list, so he will get to ask his question if he wishes to.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Funding Update

T1. Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities, after wishing the Northern Ireland women's football team every success in tonight's Euro 2022 second leg play-off against Ukraine, which will bring a historic victory and a major tournament qualification for the green and white army, for an update on funding for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQT 1171/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I reiterate that the subregional stadia programme is part of New Decade, New Approach. My officials undertook a robust, up-to-date, evidence-based exercise and a working group was established, involving councils, the Irish Football Association (IFA), Sport NI and others, including the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL). We are coming to the conclusion of that exercise and officials are collating all that information. By the end of this month and going into the start of the next, I hope to bring forward recommendations on the way forward to Executive colleagues.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her update on the long-overdue funding for football. What budget will be allocated to that much-needed funding for facilities for football?

Ms Hargey: The amount of funding that was set aside is the same: £36.2 million. If there is a need or an overarching demand for more, that would have to go to the Executive for approval. The amount that was set out in the Budget is £36.2 million.

Sports Clubs: COVID Relief Funding

T2. Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her plan to support the over 70 sports clubs with bars and restaurants that were either not eligible for the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) or the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) or, indeed, missed out on the sports sustainability fund because they were waiting on clarification about their LRSS application, before they are no longer sustainable. (AQT 1172/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The sports sustainability fund had already opened when those issues arose, so I was not able, at that point, to pause the fund, make changes or allow any new applications to be received when the fund closed. Some concerns have been expressed, and I have had some engagement on them. The sports sustainability fund allowed clubs to make applications where they operated a bar and could show that those lost earnings had had an impact on their sport.

I had a meeting with the Minister of Finance to look at the issue, and I know that officials were discussing it. The difficulty is that the fund has closed. We have administered the funding that was available, and, if clubs did not apply for it, I cannot change that. However, we will be looking at that to see whether there are any new funding opportunities, whether we could look at another round of sports funding or whether the LRSS could be amended. I do not know whether it could be amended, because one of the concerns was that, if the grant was made on the basis of rateable value, a smaller sports organisation could receive more than a huge hotel and there would be a disparity around some of those issues.

Nevertheless, we are keeping a watching brief. I have not been inundated with requests from sports organisations raising concerns directly. I know from some of the dialogue that there have been issues and we have raised them. The difficulty was that clubs did not apply to the scheme and, had they done so, they would have received the funding. We are keeping a watching brief for any additional COVID moneys that may be available to see whether we need to make a further bid to the Executive via the Finance Minister, coming into the new financial year, alongside charities and other bodies that have been funded.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, will you provide me and the House with a commitment that you will open a new scheme to support those clubs? Coagh United Football Club, in my area, is one of them, and, no doubt, everyone else will know of numerous clubs in their areas that need support. Will you commit to opening another scheme to support them? Those clubs will not be here otherwise.

Ms Hargey: I can give a commitment that I will engage and look at it, but I cannot give a commitment right now that I will open a scheme without looking at an assessment. There is no funding in my budget at the moment. Any funding would have to come through the COVID funding, and my priorities would be considered against those of the Department of Health, the Department of Education and other priorities. However, all those issues are being actively looked at, particularly as we look at the recovery period and at making sure that things can open. So, we are keeping a constant view of all that, and I am more than happy to engage with the Member on that issue.

Housing: Out-of-district Placements

T3. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities to explain the policy and practice behind housing placements, given that although he fully appreciates the efforts made and challenges faced by the Housing Executive to ensure that everyone here has a roof over their head, particularly over the past year, there is a growing concern in his constituency, which her party colleagues will bear out, not about the number of people from other districts being placed in temporary and emergency housing in Derry but, sadly, the nature of some of those people, with a number of offences having been committed, including a sexual attack on a girl last week by people from elsewhere who have been placed in housing in Derry. (AQT 1173/17-22)

Ms Hargey: We try to map out accommodation where it is needed. Primarily, the accommodation strategy is a matter for the Housing Executive. I know that it is being looked at. Obviously, COVID has presented a really big challenge for people who have been made homeless through no fault of their own over the last year. Trying to keep to the public health advice while trying to house people as quickly as possible, where accommodation is available, has been challenging.

Unfortunately, sometimes, that accommodation may not be available in the area that people are looking at or in the area that they need, so they have to be placed in other areas. There have been issues pertaining to the Derry area, and there has been communication with my Department. We have engaged proactively with the Housing Executive to overcome those issues.

We are looking at a homelessness strategy because we recognise that more needs to be done and that the need is not being met. We are also looking at a supply strategy for the accommodation that is on offer, and I hope to bring forward proposals in the time ahead. I am more than happy to sit down with the Member or to have a meeting with representatives in his area to look at the issue and to engage the Housing Executive.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that answer. In case anyone is in any doubt, I place on record that Derry is an extremely welcoming city. We have opened our arms, our hearts and our doors to people from all over the world who are seeking refuge and a better way of life.

Will the Minister confirm that she will commit to working with the Housing Executive, the PSNI, other agencies and, extremely importantly, communities to ensure improved management

to minimise risk when it comes to rehousing known offenders?

Ms Hargey: I concur that Derry is a lovely city. It is very welcoming. Any time that I have been there, I have been welcomed by the community across the board. I am more than happy to meet and to sit down with the Housing Executive, with the communities and others to discuss any of those issues. If a request to meet comes in, I will be more than happy to accept it.

Arts Funding: Regional Inequalities

T4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities how she intends to tackle regional inequalities in the allocation of arts funding across the North. (AQT 1174/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for the question. That issue was raised recently by you and by the previous Member to speak. I had a meeting with artists from Derry and elsewhere in the north-west, and the issue of regional disparity came up. I agree with most of what was in the paper that they put forward, and I know that it is reflective of organisations in other parts of the North.

We will look at a renewed culture and arts strategy. For me, equality of access and participation and the issue of how public funding is spent will be important considerations as part of that strategy. I gave a commitment to taking a co-design approach with organisations, the sector and the community on the ground in devising that strategy.

1.45 pm

Ms Anderson: As the Minister will know, for me, it is always about standing up for Derry. There is a lot of goodwill for all that she has said about our constituency. As Members for that constituency, we thank her for a very positive meeting with the arts sector. There are fantastic community arts organisations. I know that the Minister has met Studio 2 and the Nerve Centre, for instance, and many others, not to leave anyone out. Compared with Belfast, Derry receives less than £21 per head of population in the allocation of arts funding. Will the Minister ensure that there is a robust and dedicated strategy to tackle that stark inequality?

Ms Hargey: As I said, I recognise the brilliant work that arts organisations do, both at grassroots level and strategically, to build

communities and the contribution that that makes to the economy and in giving people an outlet and offering to engage in arts activities and programmes. It is my commitment that, as part of the review and strategy, the equality issue around access and participation with regard to public funding will be one of the strategy's key considerations.

Riverine Project: Update

T5. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the new Riverine community project in Strabane and Lifford. (AQT 1175/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In the past number of weeks, it was announced that funding of €8.9 million has been granted. My Department played a role in that funding. The project is a cross-border community park that links the Strabane and Lifford areas, with cultural trails that look at the history of peace and reconciliation. It physically connects the communities who live there and allows them the opportunity for open green space. It is an excellent project. I have engaged on that amazing work through the press and a video. The project has been over a decade in the making. I gave a commitment that, once the regulations allow me to do so, I will go down and visit the project to see it for myself. I look forward to that.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, Minister. I thank the Minister for her commitment to the project and her Department's significant investment. I went to school in the border village of Caledon. During that entire time, we were effectively cut off from Glaslough, just a mile or two on the other side of the border, with the result that I know very few people from that community even though we are side by side. Does the Minister agree that projects like that are crucial because the border has artificially stunted the potential of the communities that straddle it?

Ms Hargey: Yes, 100%. We know how many people cross the border every day. For them, it is seamless; they live on one side and work on the other, and vice versa, or they go across for medical treatment or education. The more that we can build connections between communities, physically and through programmes, to promote cohesive communities, reconciliation and peacebuilding, and also, vitally, to deliver essential services, be they education, health or other services, is a good thing. Whether it is in border constituencies or where inner city communities feel disconnected from town and city centres,

restitching and reconnecting those communities back together is critical. I want to look at that area more closely with regard to regeneration and the Peace programme.

Independent Advice Sector: Appeals

T6. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities, given that she will be aware of the impact that budget cuts in the independent advice sector will have on people who are vulnerable, in poverty or who have mental health issues, to outline whether her Department has conducted an impact assessment on the number of appeals that are awaiting a hearing. (AQT 1176/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There are no cuts to the advice sector. I have already made it clear that that budget will be protected in the incoming financial year. My Department carried out a full equality impact assessment pertaining to that budget. Obviously, one reason for the timescale for appeals is the pandemic. Business essentially had to stop overnight, and that has had an adverse impact on appeals. The Department is working with the appeals service to look at what we can do about the impact that the situation is having on people. Assessments have been done on the timescales and impacts, and we are trying to develop a programme that will look at those again. We will be working with the appeals service, which just after Christmas, following the announcement on the regulations, suspended all appeals until the start of April, as was its right. I do not have a say over that.

We are therefore engaging proactively with the appeals service, which wants to reduce the number of appeals as soon as possible. We will bring that forward in the time ahead. We have already started listening and are giving opportunities for telephone and online appeals, but we know that the majority of people like face-to-face contact. The restrictions that are in place limit what we can do. We are looking at a programme to try to bring down the waiting list as quickly as possible, when it is safe to do so.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will allow a 10-second supplementary question and a 10-second answer.

Miss Woods: That is fine, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for her answer. How much funding has been allocated and ring-fenced in this year's budget for tribunal representation?

Ms Hargey: I do not have the exact figure in front of me, but the budget will be the same as

what it was in the previous financial year. We are still agreeing the final budget, and I am signing it off, but there will be no change from what there was previously.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Communities. Members may take their ease for few moments. We will then move on to questions to the Economy Minister.

Economy

'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition'

1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the finding in the 'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition' research report, conducted by the University of Exeter's energy policy group and funded by the Executive, that her Department's statutory duty to promote the gas industry creates a risk of asset stranding. (AQO 1863/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for her question. The finding in the University of Exeter report is solely the opinion of the authors and is based on a small number of interviews. It is correct that there is an obligation on the Department and the Utility Regulator to promote the natural gas industry. Natural gas is an important element of the energy mix in Northern Ireland, facilitating significant carbon reduction as businesses and households switch to gas from more polluting fossil fuels. To date, over 285,000 consumers have connected to gas, but, with two thirds of households here still using oil as their main source of heating, further gas connections can contribute greatly towards reducing carbon emissions in Northern Ireland on a continuing basis.

Looking forward, my Department's consultation on policy options for a new energy strategy states that our gas networks, which are more modern than those in Great Britain and are expected to be able to accommodate zero-carbon gas without requiring extensive upgrades, can have an ongoing role to play in contributing to net zero carbon energy. Consideration is being given to how biogas and hydrogen injections to the gas grid could be facilitated to ensure that our gas network remains a valuable asset on the energy decarbonisation pathway to 2050.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms — I beg your pardon, did I call Miss Woods for a supplementary? No? I am terribly sorry. I call Miss Woods.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her answer. When I asked the deputy First Minister about this report, she said that the outworking of such a report had to have more Executive discussion. Will the Minister confirm whether she has brought, or intends to bring, the key findings and recommendations to the Executive, and what decisions and plans she has had to make regarding the implementation of the recommendations, after having had roughly six months to review them?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, I am entirely happy and at ease with forwarding the report to Executive colleagues for their information. However, the most important parts of the Department's energy development strategy are the consultation that has just been issued, the responses to the consultation that will be evaluated and the new energy strategy, which, of course, will have the imprimatur of the Executive when it is published later this year. That is the most important document that we will deliver in our energy strategy for Northern Ireland; a document that will lead us on a pathway to decarbonisation, to net zero by 2050 and also to a green economic recovery that will dovetail with my economic recovery action plan.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, would it not be prudent for your Department to suspend the promotion of fossil fuels at this particular time? Such fuels have been devalued in our long-term development plans. We need to lead Northern Ireland to that green new energy and to meet the commitments of the 2015 Paris agreement on climate. Are we not really wasting time now promoting those fossil fuels? Should we not be moving much more quickly to green new energy?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I fear sounding repetitious from the previous round of questions, but we might get more answers if we had short, sharp, focused questions.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. She has written many questions on this particular issue to the Department. I understand her concern in this matter, but we are where we are. Gas is an important transition fuel as Northern Ireland transitions to decarbonisation by 2050. In Northern Ireland, two thirds of households still use oil and heavily

polluting fossil fuels, so we need to use what we have in the meantime.

However, there is excellent news in Northern Ireland's story so far in relation to renewables. Almost 50% of electricity generated in Northern Ireland comes from renewable sources, and we are continuing to make progress with that. We have said that, as a starting point for the new energy strategy, we want not less than 70% of electricity to be generated through renewable sources. Those are important targets on our way to 2050, and I look forward to working with the Deputy Chair of the Committee and, indeed, the whole Committee on this very important issue, where I think Northern Ireland can be a world leader.

Dr Archibald: Minister, you will be aware that, amongst other things, one of the statutory objectives of the Utility Regulator is to protect the long-term and short-term interests of consumers.

In the context of the new energy strategy, have you considered an additional duty to promote decarbonisation? Investment will obviously be required in renewable energy, and that is absolutely imperative to decarbonisation.

2.00 pm

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. We have had some preliminary discussion with the Utility Regulator about a whole range of areas where his remit might be strengthened, including not just decarbonisation but, indeed, gas and a wider range of areas. We plan to take that forward in consultation with the regulator, as we think that it is important. A core value of our strategy is that we want energy that is affordable and has the consumer at its heart.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you have launched a review of the energy strategy in Northern Ireland, but do you agree that it has perhaps had a rather inauspicious start, given the alleged reports that certain critical lines in the report from the University of Exeter were removed at the request of your Department?

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely do not accept that. I presume that what you are talking about is the policy options consultation on the new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. Indeed, that has an enormous range of support across the board and across many business organisations in Northern Ireland that can see the potential for the green economic recovery that we need to have here, and that we will build back better after the COVID pandemic.

On the Exeter report, which, of course, is entirely different, I have to say that the author of the same report said that, obviously, all reports are fact-checked, that that is normal practice and that it did not, in any shape or form, impact on the outcome.

Mr Nesbitt: Minister, can the grid handle 70% of energy coming from renewables? If not, what quantum of investment is required to facilitate that?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for that very important question, which the System Operator for Northern Ireland talked about in its recently published paper. Of course, we will need to upgrade the grid to ensure that it is fit for purpose. We also need to ensure that the generation, sale and distribution of electricity in Northern Ireland is done for the benefit of Northern Ireland consumers.

Economic Recovery Action Plan: Executive Agreement

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her economic recovery action plan was agreed by the Executive before being published. (AQO 1864/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on our economy, and it is my duty as Economy Minister to ensure that there is a plan in place to support recovery. I moved quickly to develop and publish my economic recovery action plan, which has been strongly endorsed by stakeholders and the wider business community.

The Member will be aware that the Finance Minister recently announced the allocation of £286 million to fully fund my economic recovery action plan. That includes £145 million for the high street stimulus scheme that will encourage spend in local towns and city centres. That is a clear demonstration of the priority placed on economic recovery by the Executive.

I am, of course, aware that economic recovery will not be delivered by my Department alone, and I support the Communities Minister in welcoming the £27 million allocation from the Executive that will primarily be used by her Department to deliver a local version of the Kickstart scheme. Recovery is at the heart of the work being taken forward by the Executive task force. As part of that work, Departments have been asked to consider the actions needed to drive forward the recovery process. My economic recovery action plan provides a

comprehensive, fully developed contribution to that process.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer, although I am not sure whether she actually answered the question. Nevertheless, one glaring omission in the action plan is the failure to identify and build on cross-border trade. Is that failure more about the objections of the Minister's party to growing cross-border cooperation and trade than about the needs and interests of businesses, which that she should support?

Mrs Dodds: Perhaps I should enlighten the Member and indicate that my party has always supported trade and companies trading across the border when it is applicable and useful for them to do so. He will also understand that, in my Department, I sponsor and work very closely with InterTradeIreland, which has been busy supporting businesses not just in the COVID pandemic but when trying to unravel the myriad rules and regulations that the protocol that his party supports has foisted upon businesses. Every week now, I am writing to Lord Frost in London to report the specific issues that businesses are reporting to me.

Mr O'Toole: The protocol, while certainly imperfect, offers us the opportunity, as Invest NI, your own agency, says, to be at the "gateway" of two markets. It offers us a unique competitive advantage, and while imperfect — we did not want it in the first place; we did not want Brexit — it offers us some opportunity. Do you agree that images of our cities being subjected to petrol-bombing and rioting is deterring inward investors who are looking again at this society because of our unique position vis-à-vis the protocol? We have heard from specific investors who have been deterred from investing. Does she agree that political stability is necessary —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr O'Toole: — in order to attract investment and that the protocol is part of that? Will she call for political stability in order to generate investment?

Mrs Dodds: As a Minister, it is important for me to say, yet again, that violence is wrong whenever and wherever it occurs. It was wrong in the past, and it is wrong now, and I call on people to desist.

As someone who knows the areas involved very well, I find it disturbing to see what has

happened over the past number of weeks. As the Minister for the Economy, particularly because I am keen to promote skills and jobs and training in all parts of Northern Ireland, I have visited Impact Training on Lanark Way, which does a tremendous amount of work. I am really happy to report that the new Shankill/Falls women's centre, which is being built on Lanark Way, will soon be finished and open for business. I hope that people desist from violence. It serves no purpose but to bring misery to communities.

I spoke in recent days to Invest NI about inward investment, and there is no evidence at this minute in time that any investors have been put off Northern Ireland. Indeed, we have been busy with potential investors, and I look forward to working with them to see the fruits of that coming to Northern Ireland.

I commend the Member for his persistence on the protocol. The protocol, while giving us access to the EU market, also brings with it a huge number of problems for our access to our greatest and most important market, that market being Great Britain. I will say this again because it is worth repeating: we buy more from and sell more to Great Britain than to any other market —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time —.

Mrs Dodds: — throughout the world.

I will finish with one last thought. It is absolutely important that we deal with the issues of the protocol. Week in and week out now, I am writing to the Government about issues raised not just by small firms but by some of the biggest, best and most eminent firms in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister is within her rights at any point to ask for an extra minute, so that is OK.

Mr Middleton: It is to the Minister's credit that the economic recovery plan has received such positive comments right across stakeholders and business representative bodies. I welcome the fact that it has now been fully funded by the Executive. Does the Minister agree with me that it is important that, alongside the economic recovery plan, we now see a reopening of our economy and provide clear dates for our businesses to open in a safe manner?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question, which is not just topical but of

absolutely paramount importance this week. The economic recovery plan on its own is not of great use unless we have an open and functioning economy. I am thankful, and I know that Members are thankful, for the reduction in transmission and for the roll-out of the vaccination programme. However, what we need now are clear dates so that we can reopen our economy, give businesses certainty and allow them to plan that reopening. That will then allow us to go forward with the actions in the economic recovery plan that are designed to help us to rebuild and recover after the damage of COVID.

Mr Muir: Recovery is essential, but it must be a green recovery. What work is the Minister doing, especially in liaison with her Executive colleagues, to ensure that, as part of the recovery plans, we focus on a green recovery?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will know that green recovery is one of the four fundamental pillars of my economic recovery plan. That will not only lead us to a more sustainable environment and tackle climate change but help us to grow jobs and prosperity in Northern Ireland. We are already doing some of those things. There are many new and exciting developments and research and innovation projects such as Artemis, which will bring to fruition the really ambitious green recovery programme that Northern Ireland needs and seeks.

COVID-19 Support Schemes

3. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department's COVID-19 support schemes will continue whilst there are ongoing restrictions to trade for affected sectors. (AQO 1865/17-22)

4. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is planning any additional bids to the Minister of Finance for financial support schemes to assist businesses in their financial recovery from the impact of COVID-19. (AQO 1866/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 3 and 4. Also with your permission, I will avail myself of an extra minute to answer.

I can confirm that payments to eligible businesses under the COVID restrictions business support scheme and the large tourism and hospitality business support scheme will continue while restrictions remain in place. Whilst grant support has been a lifeline for

many businesses, it cannot last indefinitely. The best way to support businesses is to get them operating again. I am of the view that the safe reopening of businesses should happen as soon as possible.

On 25 February, I published my 'Economic Recovery Action Plan', which sets out a range of decisive actions to kick-start economic recovery as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to reprioritising funds within my existing budget, I have secured an additional £286 million from the Executive, which will allow me to deliver my economic recovery action plan in full. It is, however, important to recognise that recovery will not be completed in one year alone. Many of the actions set out in this plan will require funding beyond 2021-22. The action plan includes the high street stimulus scheme, which officials are developing in order to provide a much welcome boost to the local economy. I look forward to announcing more details about the scheme in due course.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments. Obviously, the tourism and hospitality sector is vital in Northern Ireland. As the successful vaccination programme rolls out, there is a great opportunity for staycations in Northern Ireland and an ability for this place to be used as a destination for people across these islands. We can really push our economy to do that. Will the Minister outline any plans that she has for the promotion of Northern Ireland, in our centenary year, as a great place to visit if we are going to be sticking to staycations?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Like him, I think that Northern Ireland is a great place to live, work and visit. I have spoken much about my economic recovery action plan in the Chamber today.

In that plan, we have some funding for Tourism Northern Ireland for a staycation voucher scheme for Northern Ireland, which I hope to roll out in the reasonably near future. Also, we will promote Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland and with Tourism Ireland in the Great Britain market, as a wonderful place to stay and visit.

All our research suggests that people will be more comfortable travelling within the British Isles over the next number of months, and we want our businesses to be able to take advantage of that and to have a good summer season, which is absolutely essential. Of course, to do that, they need to open. They

need to open successfully, safely and, above all, soon, and they need a timeline to do that.

2.15 pm

Mr Chambers: Is the Minister planning any additional bids to the Minister of Finance for financial support schemes to assist businesses in the wedding sector in their financial recovery from the impact of COVID-19?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Undoubtedly he, like myself and many others in the Chamber, has been lobbied and spoken to by a number of sectors within the economy that have been terribly impacted by the pandemic. The best thing that we can do for business is to allow it to reopen, restart and get on with doing what it does best. Representatives from the wedding sector, specifically, met with officials from my Department this week and talked about the problems that they have encountered in that reopening. First, they need the ability to plan, and that is hugely important in planning the way forward. We will, of course, continue to support and sustain businesses, but reopening is key to making the economy work.

I heard this morning on the radio that there is a backlog of over 3,000 weddings that will take place in Northern Ireland this summer. I think that it was representatives from the hotel sector who were being interviewed. It is a huge industry and, of course, personally very important to many.

Mr O'Dowd: On the subject of weddings, you all know Fra McCann: he got married yesterday to his lifelong partner, Janette. I think that he waited until the lockdown because he did not want to buy any of us a dinner, but that is a different matter. *[Laughter.]* On economic support for businesses, Minister, many businesses have found it difficult, if not impossible, to wade their way through the different schemes in your Department. Is your Department considering expanding or changing the criteria of those schemes to ensure that as many businesses as possible receive support?

Mrs Dodds: First, I pass on my congratulations to Fra McCann. I suppose that it is better late than never, but we wish him well.

The issue around schemes, as you understand, is complex and costly. We need businesses to be able to reopen, and to reopen as soon as possible. I was talking to businesspeople in Banbridge, my home town, and they were indicating to me the sales that they had lost

since Christmas because of the restrictions and the need to shut down non-essential retail. No grant — no amount of money that we can give people, no matter how valuable and important that is — will replace reopening the economy. Many of those businesses, and particularly retail, really need to see that date. They need to see that timeline. They need to know that they can reopen. Many of them are just getting in spring stock. I spoke to one young shop owner in Portadown who was really distressed by the fact that, unless she was given some hope, she did not know how this stock would either be paid for or sold.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with the Minister on the importance of our hospitality trade. Will she engage with the Communities Minister on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill, which is going through? At the minute, we have a very regressive, unreformed, old licensing system, which is driving rural pubs to shut, and that is damaging our tourism offer.

Secondly, I agree that we want to attract tourists from across the UK and Ireland, but does the Minister agree that what is guaranteed to keep tourists away is looking at their screens and seeing a summer of protest in Northern Ireland? We need them to come here and we need for them not to be seeing that on their screens.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. We should be very clear that Northern Ireland is a peaceful and largely prosperous society that is very resilient. Communities across Northern Ireland are very resilient and have withstood an enormous amount of violence that has been foisted on them over the years. We now need to move into that positive space where we talk about opportunity and the needs of an economy that has reinvented itself over the last number of years into one of the most promising tech economies in Europe. Belfast was rated as one of the best tech cities in the whole of the United Kingdom. We need to make sure that the positive message of Northern Ireland goes out, while dealing with the political and social problems that may lead to unrest. I want us to have a perspective of what, I believe, is an absolutely brilliant place to live, work and do business.

Ms Sugden: I agree with the Minister. Businesses need to open as soon as possible. In her responses, there are suggestions that others in the Executive are tentative about reopening. Given that the rate of infection is going down significantly, what reasons are

being given by her Executive colleagues to continue staying closed?

Mrs Dodds: I do not want to pre-empt any Executive discussion or to discuss the business of the Executive. Some are that way, and we understand that because our community in Northern Ireland has suffered enormously through COVID. Today, I was talking to a Member who told me of one family in his constituency that buried three family members within four or five weeks. Communities, families and individuals have had to face dreadful things. Of course, there is a lot of nervousness, but we have a tremendous vaccine roll-out programme. Everyone involved should be praised for that. Transmission rates are now very low, and we cannot keep people in lockdown in their homes in the way that they have been. People have made enormous sacrifices. It is now time to reopen and regrow our economy, to rebuild and recover and to work together to do that. I look forward to working with others across the House in an effort to do that.

North/South Student Mobility

5. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any discussions she has had with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in relation to North/South student mobility. (AQO 1867/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science about North/South student mobility. The most recent statistics for 2018-19 confirm that the total number of Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland was 1,500. The total number of Republic of Ireland domiciled students enrolled at Northern Ireland higher education institutions was 2,245. The total number of Republic of Ireland domiciled students enrolled at higher education institutions in Great Britain was 7,375, and the total number of Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in higher education courses in Great Britain, including undergraduate and postgraduate, was 17,425.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to topical questions. Before I call the first Member on the list, I congratulate him on his recent nuptials.

Taxi and Coach Industry: COVID Support

T1. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for the Economy, after thanking Members for the well wishes that he has received, albeit she will be aware that although taxi drivers and coach operators are extremely important to our economy, particularly our tourism offering, workers in those sectors feel that they have been neglected by her Department and the Department for Infrastructure, to explain why, if that is not the case, only one out of 49 applications to part B of the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) was successful. (AQT 1181/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Again, I pass on my best wishes. I wish you and your wife well for the future.

Mr McCann: It took only 39 years.

Mrs Dodds: Taxi drivers, coach drivers and coach operators have been taken under the wing of the Department for Infrastructure, and it is largely the Department for Infrastructure that has administered the grant scheme that is applicable to them. I would be happy to provide the Member with the exact figures relating to that grant scheme, should he require them.

In relation to part B of the CRBSS, I do not have the specific figures for taxi drivers and operators. I am very happy to supply them and will do so as soon as possible.

Mr McCann: Thank you for the information thus far, Minister, and thank you again for your best wishes. It has just been a 39-year engagement. That is how we look at it.

Your economic recovery strategy commits to extending apprenticeships to people of all ages. While that is welcome, does the Minister agree that many older people, who are likely to have higher costs and more commitments, would find it impossible to survive on an apprentice's wage of £4.30 an hour? Do you agree that the best way to address this kind of issue is by transferring the minimum wage powers in accordance with the New Decade, New Approach commitments so that we can set our own incentives?

Mrs Dodds: First, apprenticeships, training and providing job and life prospects are probably the most important things that we can offer to create a stable and prosperous Northern Ireland. Giving people hope, the ability to earn a living and the ability to be part of society are

really important things that we can do for Northern Ireland.

The Member will be glad to know that I spent some time this week talking to my officials about apprenticeships. We talked about how we can extend apprenticeship recovery and retraining and the new apprenticeship package right through this year and into next year. We also talked about how, hopefully, I will, fairly soon, be able to bring to the Assembly the news that we are able to open up apprenticeships to all ages. It is imperative not just that firms are incentivised to take on apprentices but that apprentices can earn appropriate wages. We will look at all those issues as we bring forward the package on all-age apprenticeships.

Mr McCann: Thank you very much, Minister.

Caravan Site Fees

T2. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that she will be aware from correspondence from him and other SDLP MLAs that caravan owners across the North feel deeply aggrieved about the costs that they have incurred over the past year in significant site fees, ranging from between £2,000 and £3,000 in some cases, despite not being able to use their caravans, to outline whether she has engaged with the Minister for Communities or what action has been taken to ensure that all those people with caravans are not severely financially disadvantaged because of COVID-19. (AQT 1182/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Like the Member, I have had an enormous amount of correspondence from caravan owners: some of whom had site fees partially returned last year; some of whom did not. We should remember that those are contractual matters for the individuals and the site owners. By far the largest volume of correspondence that I received from caravan owners was about allowing them to return to using their caravans in a safe, COVID-compliant and socially distanced way.

I hope that we will be able to give them further information on that in the near future, and I know that many of the caravan owners who correspond with me will be glad to hear that.

2.30 pm

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answer and for recognising that there is an issue. Minister, I understand that there is a

contractual arrangement between caravan park owners and caravan owners, but there is also a responsibility in the House to ensure sufficient regulation so that those caravan owners are protected and not abused. Very few have received discounts, given that caravan park owners have received government intervention. Does the Minister believe that there should be government intervention for caravan owners who have had to pay out thousands without being able to access their mobile homes?

Mrs Dodds: As I said, the contractual issue is between the caravan owner and the site owner. If the site owner is amenable, it is reasonable to assume that, if you are unable to use your caravan, you should be able to get a discount.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received no notification that Ms Sinéad Bradley will join us remotely and she is not in her place, so I move on to Mr Justin McNulty.

COVID-19 Study Disruption Payment

T4. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether the Comptroller and Auditor General was correct in his assertion on 25 March at the Public Accounts Committee that her Department is paying third-level institutions a 10% fee to administer the £500 student COVID grant, for which the SDLP campaigned and 40,000 students are eligible. (AQT 1184/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The COVID disruption payment was a unique opportunity to support students who attend institutions in Northern Ireland. In order for us to make that unique payment, we had to ask the universities to do it since they had access to the appropriate information to do so. It is important that we acknowledge the fact that universities incur costs in doing that and should be remunerated for it.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her answer. That means that £2 million has been paid to universities to administer that money. Would that money not be more wisely spent on the students whom you have excluded from the scheme, including those who are studying in Britain, down South or further afield? When will those students be included in the scheme?

Mrs Dodds: The Member is absolutely aware that we took advice on the remit for students studying in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland. We have supported the students in the institutions that we publicly fund in Northern Ireland. Of course, students from Northern

Ireland who are in Great Britain will be able to claim funding from the universities that they attend. In Scotland, I think, some £30 million of additional funding was made available for student hardship. I know that, in England, just recently, an additional £50 million was made available for student hardship and, in Wales, something in the region of £40 million was made available.

Wet Pubs: COVID-19 Support

T5. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether there has been an underspend in her Department's £10.6 million allocation to the wet pubs business support scheme and to outline whether, if trading is limited when they reopen, she will consider supporting wet pubs going forward. (AQT 1185/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The wet pubs scheme was based on the number of pubs that were identified as being in that category by the Finance Department and through the local rates schemes. We were given the number from those schemes. When we wrote to those businesses, many of them declared that they had been open for part of the summer and therefore would not be eligible as they did not meet the scheme's criteria. I am happy to write to the Member with the exact figures for the uptake of the scheme and how that has worked out. I commend those who forthrightly said, "We were open during that period", even if they were open in only a limited way. That is commendable, and it is very important for us to recognise that.

Going forward, we really want businesses to be open, to be viable and to open safely. As I have said many times in the past number of minutes in the House, we need to give those businesses a date for reopening as soon as we can.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, unfortunately, there is a growing concern in Derry that you are less than enthusiastic about fulfilling the commitment for the expansion of the Magee campus that is in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Can you provide an update on any engagements and work with Ulster University on the commitment to deliver an expansion of the campus to 10,000 students?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. I will write to you with all the specific details of my engagement with Ulster University and about the Magee campus. It is, of course, for the Department of Health to identify a need

and do the business case. We will then administer that in relation to the medical school. Everything, as far as I am aware, is progressing on time and appropriately. I have not been notified of any bumps along the road.

Recently, I signed off the strategic outline business cases for two projects for the Magee campus that are being delivered in relation to the city deals. Both projects are worth in the region of £50 million to the university and will substantially increase its ability and its research base at that location. Ulster University is a three-campus university, however, and we would like to see its plan for all the campuses across its sites.

FE Colleges: Face-to-face Teaching

T6. Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy when further education colleges will return to face-to-face teaching, in line with this week's return of post-primary schools. (AQT 1186/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member, as this is a really important issue for many FE learners and those associated with the colleges. I hope that, after Thursday's Executive meeting, there will be definite dates in the pipeline. Of course, FE colleges have been open throughout for those who needed to go in to college to do practical subjects, with the rest of their course being taught by remote learning. As we come up to those crucial professional exams, however, many of those young people need to have the required practical experience in order to pass them. For example, it has been difficult for young people who are studying health and social care or hairdressing to gain the practical experience that they need to progress, because those parts of the economy have been closed. We need to work urgently to make sure that all those young people can succeed and get the qualifications that they need in the summer.

Ms Sugden: I forgot to declare an interest: my husband is a college lecturer. I am not asking on his behalf; rather, I am asking on behalf of a concerned constituent whose daughter chose an FE pathway instead of going into sixth form. She is worried that FE students will be disadvantaged, because sixth-formers are now back at school but FE students are not. I look forward to hearing about dates on Thursday, hopefully. It is important that no one be disadvantaged in our school system.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree with you. Our FE colleges are amazing places of learning. They are not just about learning but about the

whole community of people at the college. It is such a broad range of people, from those doing foundation degrees to some of the most vulnerable young people in our society. No one should be disadvantaged. The Executive and the House should be concerned about the future for young people. That is the future of Northern Ireland, and we must work to build it.

Adjourned at 2.40 pm.

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