



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 September 2020

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Stalford:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Infrastructure Minister, via social media, said:

*"I do not have the powers to provide support schemes for the taxi industry or for bus operators. I've never had these powers. The Economy Minister has these powers but won't provide support."*

Subsequent to that, I wrote to the Economy Minister yesterday evening:

*"Dear Diane,*

*This evening (Monday 14 September) the Infrastructure Minister made a statement via social media regarding financial support for the road freight, taxi and coach hire sectors.*

*Does the Department for the Economy itself have legislative powers to provide financial support to the road freight, taxi and coach hire sectors?*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Christopher Stalford MLA  
Belfast South"*

I have received a detailed response from the Minister, part of which includes the following:

*"In looking to the remit of specific Departments within the Northern Ireland Executive Schedules 1 and 3 to the Budget Act 2020 allocate funding to DFI for 'transport licensing, enforcement and regulation', as well as 'support for transport services including grants in respect of rail and road passenger services including fare concessions'. Therefore, support for transport services is not restricted to fare concessions. On a reasonable interpretation, taxis and ferries would clearly be regarded as transport services."*

The reason that I raise all this and have read it into the record is because it is important that Ministers are honest. I am asking for a ruling on the honesty and veracity of the statements that are being made, in this instance by the Minister for Infrastructure.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will be aware that it would not really be appropriate for me to make a judgement such as the Member is asking for. You have made your points on the record. I also refer Members to the fairly significant amount of debate and commentary on this matter yesterday. The Member has made his point.

## Private Members' Business

### Hardship Fund for Businesses Excluded from Existing COVID-19 Support Packages

**Mr Stewart:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly is deeply concerned at the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the local economy; acknowledges the substantial financial support package put in place by the UK Government to support employers, employees and the self-employed; recognises that thousands of sole traders and microbusinesses in Northern Ireland have not been able to access financial support; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish a new fit-for-purpose business hardship fund targeted at those businesses that have so far been excluded from existing support packages.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Stewart:** I welcome the opportunity to table the motion and I thank the Minister for coming

along today, although it is regrettable that it took a motion from the Ulster Unionist Party to highlight the plight of businesses that have fallen through the cracks and been excluded or unable to avail themselves of all the packages to date.

This issue has gained a lot of traction recently, due in part to the passionate and sustained lobbying from groups such as ExcludedNI, or excellent business organisations such as Enterprise Northern Ireland, that have actively highlighted the plight of many thousands of directors, sole traders and business people who to date have been unable to avail themselves of any government support, along with highlighting the need to see a business-focused economic recovery plan.

It has not taken me until recent weeks to acknowledge their plight — this is an issue that I and others have been actively promoting since early April. When the initial business support grants of £10,000 and £25,000 were rolled out, we all welcomed them and understood the reasons behind getting them out so quickly. However, at that stage, I said that it was imperative that we created additional schemes to sweep up companies that were unable to access those grants.

As the campaign has grown, the Minister for the Economy has repeatedly said that designing and rolling out a new scheme would not be within her remit but would be in that of the Executive. However, in March, the Minister acknowledged the issue and said:

*I hope to be in a position to respond further to meet the particular needs of businesses here, particularly around self-employed people ... and for businesses who cannot avail themselves of other measures that are available. — [Official Report (Hansard), 24 March 2020, p53, col 2].*

The Minister acknowledged back in March that it was within her remit, and I argue today that it still is. Whether it was at the Ad Hoc Committee, or at the Economy Committee, or at debates in the Chamber on economic recovery, I have been at pains to point out from the beginning that, while this was the biggest health crisis in a century, it was quickly becoming the biggest economic crisis we had ever faced. From the outset, I have argued for an ambitious economic recovery plan, but also creative and generous government intervention in the form of economic support packages to businesses that, through no fault of their own, have seen their turnover decimated by the impact of coronavirus and lockdown measures. If that

required a complete reprioritisation of our Government and Executive's spending, so be it.

There is no doubt that via the job retention scheme, the self-employed scheme and the £10,000 and £25,000 grant schemes, a huge broad-brush stroke approach was applied to business support, and I fully acknowledge just how vast the support was and continues to be. That was essential and absolutely necessary and it has saved hundreds of thousands of jobs and countless businesses from going under. For those who were able to avail themselves of that support, it has been an absolute lifeline.

However, given the nature of those schemes, a significant minority of businesses and entrepreneurs did not meet the qualifying criteria. That was quickly recognised and, as far back as March, I joined Economy Committee colleagues in calling for a bespoke hardship grant, targeting those people, to be established. When the Department for the Economy finally announced its business hardship grant back in May, it was cautiously welcomed and it was felt that it would be able to provide the safety net for businesses that had missed out. It was then hugely lamentable that not only did the qualifying criteria change three times in the 24 hours prior to its launch, but, ultimately, the criteria led to thousands of self-employed directors, sole traders and social enterprises again being excluded or being unable to avail themselves of the grant.

So obtuse were the criteria that almost a quarter of the hardship grant funding was returned unspent. That underspend, along with funds returned from the original business grant schemes, ran to over £53 million returned to the Executive in July. How is it that almost two months on, and despite my protestations and those of other members of the Economy Committee and sustained lobbying from business groups, there is no new bid from the Department for the Economy to create a new support scheme for those businesses that are continuing to cling on by their fingernails?

Scarcely a week passes without a business person from my constituency, or across the country, often in tears at the hardship they face, contacting me or a colleague. We are contacted by private dentists, consultants, architects, promoters, events managers, chefs, drivers, micro-manufacturers. The list goes on. Those people are the personification of the entrepreneurial spirit that we as an Assembly are supposed to champion. They are individuals who, in the past two or three years, perhaps, have given up lucrative careers in the private or public sector to start their own career and

become self-employed, blissfully unaware of the devastation around the corner. Unable to access schemes, they, initially, knuckled down, praying that support would come. Many have taken out loans, maxed out credit cards or borrowed from family members, but they were resolute in their determination to survive. They were convinced that they would not be forgotten about by the Minister or the Executive. Sadly, they have been forgotten about, and it has taken today's motion to get the issue on the agenda.

I understand that there are always practical areas, grey areas and funding implications, and I understand that the Minister has many plates to spin in her portfolio, but the fundamental responsibility for a package of support for excluded businesses and business owners must, and does, rest with the Department for the Economy. The Minister cannot take credit for the previous schemes when rolling them out and simply wash her hands of them when the new versions are not coming forward.

Departmental officials told the Committee that they are unable to provide a new self-employed hardship scheme, potentially, because the raw data is not available from HMRC, but the Minister tells us that it is not her responsibility. What is it: the Department cannot, or will not? Or, is it the case that the Minister agrees with her permanent secretary who told the Economy Committee, two weeks ago, that, if it is only to keep businesses going for six or eight weeks as we head into more turbulent times, we have to wonder if the resources would be better deployed elsewhere. Tell that to a company director who is lying awake at night, wondering how to pay the bills — a company director who has maxed out every line of credit that they have got, but is resolute in their determination to survive and, whilst other businesses receive help, is told that they are not worth saving, or, if they have survived this long, they will be OK. Is that the sort of support that we want to see from the Executive and the Minister?

In Ad Hoc Committees and briefings to the Economy Committee, the Minister has rightly said that she will not be found wanting when it comes to an economic recovery plan, or providing support for businesses. When I questioned her about a similar scheme to the Welsh resilience fund, at the Ad Hoc Committee in April, she said:

*"We will be looking for a package for the Northern Ireland economy. We will be looking at something along the lines of the Welsh resilience fund, for instance, but we will not be looking at just its mitigation*

*measures; we will be looking at something to take us a step further."*

Four months later, we have no sight of any bespoke resilience fund, bids or plans for a new hardship grant scheme or of a full economic recovery plan.

I finish with a heartfelt plea to the Minister on behalf of all business owners in Northern Ireland who are committed to survival and crying out for similar support measures to those that others have received. I implore the Minister and her officials to urgently create a new fit-for-purpose hardship scheme that will target those who have been excluded to date. If there are difficulties, or if the rest of the Executive will not commit to releasing funds, our focus will turn to them, but there must be a bid from the Department for the Economy that is based on a credible, shovel-ready scheme that will show businesses that they are committed to supporting them and easing their financial woes. In the absence of any such proposal or commitment, we can only assume that the Department is being led by the remarks of the permanent secretary and is saying that they are not worth saving. Thank you for the time today. I urge all Members to support the motion.

**Mr Dunne:** I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. We all recognise the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on the local economy. We acknowledge the significant amount of real financial support that has been delivered by our UK Government and Executive over the past six months, particularly through the Department for the Economy.

The Department has provided £340 million support to over 30,000 businesses through the business support schemes for large, small and microbusinesses throughout Northern Ireland. We must recognise and commend the efforts of the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, in supporting the local economy through such a challenging period, and the Department's staff, LPS and Invest NI staff, all of whom have been involved in grant administration and dealing with the day-to-day queries from constituents.

Those support measures, alongside the UK Government initiatives, including the furlough scheme, the self-employed income support scheme and the various rate relief measures introduced, have all been absolutely critical for the survival of so many businesses and the protection of thousands of jobs right across Northern Ireland.

**10.45 am**

The Minister has rightly prioritised our economic recovery and published the economic recovery strategy, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', which sets out the framework to deliver higher-paying jobs, a highly skilled workforce and a more regionally balanced economy. The establishment of an expert-led economic advisory group and a tourism recovery steering group are other progressive measures aimed at stimulating, rebuilding and reviewing our economy, and, importantly, giving confidence for the future.

There is also the immediate challenge of avoiding another lockdown, which would have a devastating impact on our economy and our ability to recover from the past six months. Every sector has been affected over those six months. However, certain sectors have undoubtedly been hit hardest, and some are still unable to trade given the restrictions that remain. Some sectors have been more significantly impacted than others, including tourism, travel, hospitality, aerospace, leisure and the arts, which will require ongoing tailored support.

There are many small business owners out there — they have been mentioned — who initially took great risks to start their own business. That is highly commendable, and we fully support it. However, COVID-19 has hit those businesses hard, with a drop in demand, a loss of production and, indeed, as we are all aware, the reduction in footfall in cities, towns and villages. All that has had a detrimental effect and a major impact on those businesses.

The internet remains a growing challenge for the retail and service sectors, but it is also an opportunity for business growth. More could be done through our various agencies to support and encourage those businesses to adapt and diversify.

While we are actively lobbying for the extension of the furlough scheme, we must be realistic and realise that it will have a limited lifespan. However, its continuation on a phased basis is critical, especially over the next few months. There is a need for additional support to sustain existing jobs and businesses in Northern Ireland. There is a role for Invest NI to look at alternative support measures for businesses and support for upskilling, training, online activity, innovation and research and development.

I believe that the UK Government and the Executive must make strategic interventions to stimulate and protect more sectors that are facing the greatest ongoing challenges in the

immediate term. I urge the Executive to look at all the options to see what support can be given to sole traders and small and microbusinesses. We recognise the pain and the loss that they are suffering. The Executive should come to a decision to utilise any underspend from the various grant support funds and support those hardest hit as we seek to sustain and rebuild our economy for the future.

**Dr Archibald:** I am glad to have the opportunity to speak to the motion. I thank my Economy Committee colleague John Stewart for tabling the motion.

Over the past number of months, I have consistently highlighted those businesses and entrepreneurs who have missed out from the British Government and the Executive support interventions. The Economy Committee has collectively listened and made the case for the extension of supports for those who were missed out from other schemes. We all recognise the scale of the interventions that have been made to support businesses. Over £700 million has been made available by the Executive in rate relief and business grants to support businesses impacted by COVID-19.

We also recognise that there is a need to focus on and to fund the economic recovery. However, simply pointing that out repeatedly to those who have missed out on any support because of their business type or when or how they established their business is neither helpful nor welcome. Many sole traders, the newly self-employed, businesses with no premises and small manufacturing businesses have all missed out simply by the nature of their business.

As Mr Stewart said, we have been told that the necessary data to target newly self-employed individuals, for example, has not been forthcoming from HMRC. Last week, the Economy Committee strongly endorsed enquiring whether the Executive would fund a grant if HMRC would deliver it directly to those individuals. I hope that the Economy Minister, in her response, will indicate whether she is willing to consider that.

I argued for support beyond the original grant schemes. The Minister agreed that we needed a fund for those who fell through the cracks, and we got the hardship fund. When the criteria were published, there were those who still missed out. I argued for the widening of the criteria of the fund to include those still excluded, and was told that there was a limit to the funding. It has since become apparent that there was over £60 million of underspend

across the grant schemes, which showed that support could have been widened. Surely lessons have been learned that would help in the speedy design and delivery of some much-needed and welcome tailored and targeted support.

Every MLA has been contacted by business owners and entrepreneurs unable to access support, some of them not eligible for even universal credit. I have listened to and read about the depths of despair of some of those individuals. With bills mounting and no sign of any income, many have already taken on further debt that they are not sure will ever be repaid. We are all realists here, too. We know that not every business or job will be saved but for those who have missed out, it is about giving them a lifeline to keep the lights on and a chance to reopen, just like all those who got support simply because they had a premises.

These are business owners and entrepreneurs, hairdressers, tradespeople, photographers, taxi drivers and small manufacturing companies that have created jobs and support families. Those small and microbusinesses and their workers are the backbone of our economy. This is not about pouring money into business accounts simply to pay bills. It is about protecting livelihoods and supporting workers and families.

I have consistently argued to the Economy Minister, and to my own Executive colleagues for that matter, that we need to find a way to support those who have missed out on all the support to date. The Finance Minister has made clear that he will consider bids brought forward to support those excluded from other schemes. Other Ministers, in particular the Economy Minister, need to make a bid for funding to support those individuals.

We have heard about the bids that the Economy Minister made in relation to economic recovery, and there is certainly a need to have an economic recovery strategy that addresses the long-term structural issues in the local economy, including low productivity, by focusing on skills development and strengthening workers' rights as well as the economic recovery from COVID-19. In doing that, however, we need to instil confidence in the businesses and entrepreneurs that make up our economy that we are willing to support them through the difficult times as well as to reap the benefits in the good times.

I will, therefore, support the motion, and I urge Members to do likewise.

**Mr Catney:** I want, first, to recognise, as others pointed out, that the Executive have provided a lot of support. They have provided rate relief schemes, grant schemes, microbusiness schemes, help for tourism, apprenticeships, higher education and supply chains but nothing for 100,000 single-person businesses and the newly self-employed. That cannot be right. Even those who have been self-employed for a long time were hit by the subtle differences in the self-employed income support scheme and the job retention scheme. If you were an employee with a salary of over £50,000, you were covered by the furlough scheme to the tune of up to £30,000. If you were self-employed and earned the same amount, you were excluded from any support.

We can see the impact in all our constituencies, with the rise in the number of those on universal credit. Those are people who have worked hard to set up their businesses. They are the backbone of our economy. Surely it is more efficient to support workers to stay in work rather than put them through the hardship of being unemployed.

We all have stories about those who have been left behind. I was contacted by a person who had worked hard to get extra qualifications while working in two retail jobs. After three years borrowing money from their family and friends, and while caring for a young family, they opened the doors of their business at the start of the year. As soon as lockdown was announced, they contacted me about what support was available. One week passed, then two, and I kept telling them that I had asked the questions and hoped that something would be announced soon. One month went by, then two, and now six months have passed, and they have got absolutely nothing. The money that they borrowed from friends and family is gone, the business is gone, and they are on universal credit.

It takes great courage to open a business. You move out of your comfort zone and do the best that you possibly can. That becomes part of your way of life and changes your whole outlook. Believe me, I have never come across anyone in business who is not a hard worker. I can tell you: there is no such thing as working 37 and a half hours or 40 hours. You do what has to be done.

The support did not happen. That person has gone through so much and was contributing positively to our economy. In comparison to the big schemes already announced, it will only take a modest scheme, Minister, to cover those

businesses that have received absolutely nothing.

At this time, it is on all of us in the Chamber to help all our constituents. This is surely more important at this time of crisis. I hope that you all support the motion and that the Minister takes the view of the Chamber on board and puts in place vital support for our businesses, which should be kept going for longer than six months.

Do I have any more time, Mr Speaker?

**Mr Speaker:** You do.

**Mr Catney:** I do. I want to address the point that my colleague from South Belfast made concerning the letter that he wrote to the Department. I have asked numerous times in the Finance Committee who that sits with. On Monday, the news came out that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were going to bestow powers on the Minister for Infrastructure.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Catney, you are up to speak on the motion.

**Mr Catney:** Yes, this is related to the motion, sir.

**Mr Speaker:** In the immortal words from yesterday, could you cut to the chase?

**Mr Catney:** I ask the Economy Minister to look at the powers that she has and stop trying to put the blame on other people. Deliver what powers you have. If you are not able to do that, pass it on to some other Department.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Member who moved the motion. I support the motion, because it is a topic that has been on our minds for the last number of months but, much more importantly, is one that has caused considerable distress and upset to sole traders and others across Northern Ireland.

I am deeply disappointed that we still have no tangible progress. The national support measures have not been perfect but they have provided a substantial structure to keep businesses going through this very difficult time. Nonetheless, there have been gaps where devolved regions have stepped in or, in the case of Northern Ireland, not stepped in. Nonetheless, I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me and representatives of ExcludedNI last week. I think that she will agree that their

arguments were persuasive and clear and that it is now time for action.

Over the past few months, the Minister and the Department have told us that it is too complex to do and that it is too difficult, and some say that, if businesses have survived this long through the worst of the crisis, why do they need any assistance? I will tell you, Mr Speaker, and Minister. They are business people who pay tax, contribute to our economy and sell Northern Ireland to the world. We must not turn our back on them. They have exhausted personal funds and, in some cases, taken on substantial debt to keep their businesses going. Help may be the difference between closure or moving into recovery. The reality is that this can be done, because it is quite clear that it is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom. We all know that Scotland has access to HMRC tax information, but that is not the case in Wales or in any of the English regions, all of which have stepped up to deliver for those businesses. During our meeting last Thursday, it was agreed with the Minister that she will once again contact HMRC to look into how we can overcome these complex information issues, if indeed they are complex. I welcome that, but we now need action.

Why would someone want to take the risk of setting up a business in Northern Ireland? We would not be having this debate today if these businesses were located in any other part of the United Kingdom, so why is the Minister denying businesses here the opportunity to receive help?

Money must, of course, be carefully and responsibly spent. We have heard outrageous figures mentioned in the Chamber by way of support. We need to break these businesses down into small bites and work out what they need. Some can be helped by just a few thousand pounds. Very few are looking for the large sums of money being paid out to others.

**11.00 am**

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for taking an intervention. A response to an Assembly question for written answer I asked indicated that 2,000 people became newly self-employed between April 2019 and December 2019. The scheme in Scotland that you mentioned gives a grant of £2,000 to those individuals. That would be £4 million, which is not a huge amount.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The point is very well made by the Member. I thank her very much.

We must, of course, spend our resources carefully and responsibly, and I understand that the Department is particularly risk-averse following its failures under the renewable heat incentive (RHI). However, the Minister should not sit and wait for the Executive to give a green light to everything that she has the authority to do.

We face a major economic crisis. Our business support schemes should not be underspending by such large magnitudes. I know that, on this, the Minister requires Executive go-ahead, and I note that, at last week's Committee meeting, it was mentioned that an options paper had gone to the Executive. However, that paper does not contain a recommendation to help the particular group of people whom we are talking about today — another ministerial failure.

The great public anger will become even greater if, at the end of this financial year, there are funds that could have been available to support the Northern Ireland economy. That anger will be manifest if the Minister returns that money to the centre or to HM Treasury.

In closing, we need action, and we need it now. Today, the Minister is receiving a very clear message from the House to support our sole traders and microbusinesses. I hope that she will sort this out once and for all. Today is the day for the Minister to bring good news to this sector and to our economy. The spotlight is on her. It is up to her to succeed or fail.

**Mr Middleton:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on all our lives. Faced with the largest public health issue of our time, the Executive and Ministers had to respond. They had to put in place arrangements to treat those who were infected, while trying to limit the spread of the disease by introducing social-distancing regulations, as a result of which many lives have, no doubt, been saved. That was always the priority.

However, those essential regulations also significantly affected our economy. The Economy Minister and the Executive have had to respond rapidly and make decisions to support the many businesses and individuals who were affected and faced a major reduction in income. It will be no surprise to many inside and outside the Chamber that the Health Department was the largest spender on its response to COVID. However, the Department

for the Economy significantly outweighs all the other Departments in its COVID-19 funding response.

We should recognise the significant amounts given in direct support to businesses and other sectors during the crisis. Twenty initiatives launched through the Department for the Economy include the business support grant schemes totalling over £300 million, the microbusiness fund, the apprenticeship intervention packages and the higher education and skills packages. Whilst another Minister in the Chamber had to be instructed to assist those in her remit, the Economy Minister has been proactive in getting support packages in place.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Middleton:** I will indeed.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I just want to correct the inaccuracy. The First Minister and deputy First Minister clearly stated that they had to confer powers on the Infrastructure Minister to enable her to assist the taxi and coach industries etc, because the Economy Minister had failed to do so. I am fed up with this misinformation: the disingenuous nature of comments in the Chamber from others who ought to know better. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order, Members.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for her intervention. However, she is incorrect. Unfortunately, the Minister for Infrastructure did drag her feet on this issue. The public will judge for themselves. Unfortunately, however, that is not the topic of today's debate, which is about the fact that the Department for the Economy has been proactive in trying to get support packages in place.

It is important, however, to recognise that whilst many businesses were able to continue to trade, there were other businesses and individuals who suffered significant economic hardship and fell through the cracks of support. There are also specific sectors that continue to face very challenging times and they need support too. The aerospace, tourism and hospitality industries are just some that need support.

There are significant challenges ahead. We have to deal with the immediate issue of trying to prevent a second lockdown, which would be devastating for the economy, so we need to be mindful of that whenever we have these

conversations. The other issue is the ending of the furlough scheme. I know that the Executive have written to the UK Government to express their feelings on the need to ensure that —.

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much for giving way. Will the Member confirm that all in his party are fully supportive of the measures that the Executive are taking to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

**Mr Speaker:** I should have reminded the Member after the last intervention that he has an additional minute.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I think that the First Minister has clarified that the Executive have been very clear with regard to the measures that are in place. However, I think that in all of this it is important to be mindful that there is a health risk of a second lockdown, which would be completely devastating for our economy. I think that there would not be too much left if coming out of the other end of that.

The Executive must collectively determine what the greatest challenges are and be strategic in the support offered given the budget envelope within which it operates. That could be in the form of further grant schemes, but as the economy opens up I think that it is important that there is further help for skills, training, marketing, exporting and securing supply chains — I know that that is something that is specifically raised with us on a regular basis.

Like the Chair of the Committee for the Economy, I welcome the 32 bids that have been put in and which focus on the economy recovery. They are all aligned with the economic recovery strategy, the aim of which is to help the vulnerable and to ensure that viable businesses and sectors are still there to provide people with jobs.

I thank the Member for tabling the motion. The Minister has been very clear in wanting to get support out as rapidly as possible where she is able to do so, and where we can ensure that those who require the support can get it.

**Ms Dolan:** As Sinn Féin's spokesperson for employment and workers' rights it is deeply concerning to hear of the threat of large-scale redundancies that are facing workers at this time. The Economy Minister has acknowledged that more than 100,000 people could become unemployed by the end of 2020. Of course, we already know that the number of people who are claiming unemployment benefits has more

than doubled from March to August, and it increased by 800 last month to 62,700.

The past few months have seen workers and unions try to negotiate redundancy packages. While not all redundancies can be prevented, redundancies are always an option of last resort. Redundancies in the North have also more than doubled over the year, with August seeing 700 redundancies proposed and 820 redundancies confirmed. Up until yesterday, a further 880 have been proposed this month.

Economic leadership and the right economic interventions can help businesses to mitigate job losses. While I acknowledge that the Minister has attempted to mitigate job losses and to support businesses, her inaction is literally costing people jobs and putting many people out of business. Let us not forget that behind every one of these numbers is a person who has to pay for food, shelter and, more than likely, to raise a family.

The Minister has regularly tried to divert attention for her lack of action to the wider Executive and to the Finance Minister. However, in reality the Finance Minister has consistently provided funding to the Department for the Economy when it was needed. The Department of Finance provided a total of £411 million to the Department for the Economy in order to finance the small business grant, the hospitality, tourism and retail sector grants and the student hardship grant. The responsibility for making bids lies with the Economy Minister, who is responsible for economic policy. The Minister cannot continue to pick and choose when she wishes to assume that responsibility. For the sake of non-rateable businesses, small manufacturing businesses, the newly self-employed, sole traders and microbusinesses, I urge the Minister to take heed of the comments that have been made today and to make the necessary funding bid to support those who have been left behind by the previous schemes.

**Mr Stalford:** Over the last eight months, the word "unprecedented" has managed to become a cliché, because we all refer to the "unprecedented" times in which we live. They are unprecedented times. At the time that devolution was first restored, I do not think that any of us could have foreseen what this year would bring. Not only has there been, obviously, a significant health crisis but, as a direct consequence of that and as a consequence of the decisions that we made, there is an economic crisis, because we decided to put vast swathes of the Northern Ireland economy into cold storage. Those are

the decisions that we took on the basis of the advice that was given.

As a general principle, everyone should accept that the best and speediest way to economic recovery will be not government largesse but the opening up of as much of the economy as we can as quickly as we can within the advice that it is given to us. Government is not the solution to every problem, but, on the whole, the Northern Ireland Executive can stand over the record that they have. We can point to the significant investment that has been made in order to help keep our country alive, literally, and to keep our economy alive

**Ms Dillon:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mr Stalford:** I am happy to.

**Ms Dillon:** Thank you very much. I accept that government is not the answer to every problem, but why is it the answer to every problem for some and no problem for others?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Stalford:** I am not quite sure what the point is that the Member makes, but I certainly accept that there have been people who have missed the opportunity for help, and it is important that we, if we are in a position to and can afford to, should assist them; of course we should. As I was about to say, it takes a lot of courage and bravery to start a business. People invest their life savings in businesses and new projects and trying to provide a means of income for their family and support for their kids. Of course, if we are in a position to assist those people, we absolutely should do so. The question is whether we are in a position to do so. Is the budget line there? Does the resource exist? What options are the Executive looking at? I welcome the fact that the Economy Minister has said that an options paper has been forwarded to the Executive for consideration.

I am interested in this, and I hope that the Minister will outline it. I have no intention of attempting to play the Economy Minister off against the Finance Minister — that is not useful or helpful — but, when members of the Finance Minister's party take to their feet and attack the Economy Minister, it is worth asking how many bids the Department for the Economy has lodged with the Department of Finance, awaiting a response. I would be interested in that, and I hope that the Minister

will be in a position to answer that in her summing up.

**Ms Sugden:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** One moment, then I will.

In these times, it is important that we should have a singular direction and a singular focus from the Executive. There have been occasions throughout the past eight months where that has been undermined, but it is important, especially when, as I have said, we are talking about people who, in many cases, have invested their life savings in starting an enterprise. Of course it is important that we should examine the options that are available for us to help them.

**Ms Sugden:** I recognise that this is a whole-of-the-Northern-Ireland-Executive to try to help the people of Northern Ireland — we are one Government, after all — but it has to be led by the Economy Minister. Will the Member acknowledge that there are other financial supports — for example, rate relief — that could be extended to some of those who have been excluded? I know from questions that I have asked the Finance Minister that he is not prepared to do that, so I think that this has to be a whole-government approach, rather than one of pointing fingers.

**11.15 am**

**Mr Stalford:** The Member is absolutely right. Almost every Department has made a positive contribution to helping our economy to keep going. It is not just the grant schemes from the Department for the Economy. It is also, as the Member mentioned, rates relief from the Department of Finance; childcare support from the Department of Education; support for charities from the Department for Communities; and interventions from DAERA and the Minister for Agriculture. The Executive are pointing in the right direction on that.

One final point is that there are other instruments that can be used to help our economy, beyond simple cash handouts from the Government. Money can be spent on training, marketing and attracting investment. I think that, in particular, marketing this place as a good place to do business is something that we —

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

**Mr Stalford:** No. I have four seconds.

**Mr Speaker:** No seconds.

**Mr Stalford:** Marketing this place as a good place to do business is something that we should be doing.

I think that I filled my four seconds better than Stewart Dickson ever could.

**Mr Speaker:** Actually, it took, maybe, 10. Anyway, I call Linda Dillon.

**Ms Dillon:** My point was about those who were excluded, Mr Stalford. Mr Dunne outlined that any underspend should be directed towards the Economy Minister. The Economy Minister had a £60 million underspend. Maybe that should have been directed towards those people.

I welcome the motion and the calls for a fund to be implemented to support those impacted by COVID and left behind by previous schemes. A report published in April by the Centre for Progressive Policy found that Mid-Ulster is likely to suffer much more than many other areas. Mid-Ulster is my constituency. It is a constituency that I am very proud of. I am very proud of all of the hard work that people of the area have put in, against all the odds, to build up their businesses.

As stated before in this Chamber, Mid-Ulster has the highest rate of VAT-registered business outside of Belfast. That is in spite of the fact that we get no foreign direct investment and in spite of poor infrastructure in terms of good roads and facilities such as electricity. It is because we are very lucky to have a strong history of engineering and small manufacturing entrepreneurs in Mid-Ulster, who, against all odds and in very difficult, challenging times and despite historical underinvestment, have built their businesses. Now, yet again, they have been left out and abandoned by our Economy Minister.

The Mid-Ulster economy is heavily reliant on manufacturing, and according to Manufacturing NI, 12% of firms believe that they will not survive until the end of the year. Other economic projections show that the closure of the furlough scheme is also likely to result in significant job losses in that sector. With that in mind, it is difficult to understand why the Minister continues to leave small manufacturers behind in support schemes. The Minister insists that she has made bids for funding, but we would like to see the detail of those bids and how they will benefit our small manufacturers.

I could give many examples, as others in the House have done today, of how the lack of support has impacted on some businesses. I have also a number of examples involving couples whose businesses happen to share the same premises. That will not address the issue that Claire Sugden raised around rate relief, because these are couples who have two separate businesses that happen to share the same premises, but only one business could actually benefit from the scheme and claim £10,000. That meant that, if you were part of a couple who happened to share one premises, but your business was separate, you paid all your bills separately, you lost out on any form of support. Those people need assistance.

**Ms Sugden:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Dillon:** Yes.

**Ms Sugden:** I recognise the issue that the Member is raising. I intend to raise that issue with the Finance Minister because I believe that it is a flaw in the scheme. Those businesses should have been supported because the intent behind the scheme was to provide financial assistance, not to pay off bills to do with the premises. Would the Member support me in lobbying the Finance Minister to try to ensure that businesses that exist in one property and have only one rates bill are entitled to the same support?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Ms Dillon:** Thank you. I believe that scheme is the responsibility of the Economy Minister. It was delivered by LPS simply because that was the quickest way to get the money out, but the Economy Minister is the Minister we need to lobby. I absolutely will support you in doing that.

My last point is that all Ministers need to carry out their own responsibilities. It is the responsibility of the Economy Minister to come up with proposals and schemes. It is her responsibility to make bids to the Finance Minister. It is then his responsibility — I sincerely hope that he does this — to finance the schemes. As I said, we have all been lobbied by the excluded groups. They need support. The fact that they have survived to date does not mean that they do not need support. They have many outstanding bills, but, as was outlined by Mr Stewart, despite many challenges with their mental health, they have struggled on. They need support, and they need it now. I have asked questions of the Economy Minister on a number of occasions in the Chamber. I do not believe that I have

received a simple, straight answer to any of them around how we are going to support those excluded people.

I ask everybody to support the motion so that we support those who are newly self-employed and those who have worked hard to establish businesses and yet, to date, have received no support.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for bringing this important motion before the House today, which I am happy to support. Over the past six months, I have been inundated with pleas for help from businesses in my constituency. Although we were able to guide them to many of the support packages, including grants, the furlough scheme and the package for the self-employed, a significant number of people and businesses have fallen through the safety net of support.

I come from a border constituency. One of the major issues that I have come across is the lack of support for cross-border workers. They have not been able to access the Irish Government's pandemic payment scheme or the job retention scheme here and have been left to fare on universal credit. Those highly skilled people are struggling to keep their families going on universal credit. I have raised this issue with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Economy and Communities Ministers, and the Finance Minister. I have also written to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Social Protection Minister in Dublin.

Many of my constituents who cross the border daily for work are highly skilled workers who engage mainly in the construction sector. They pay their taxes and feel abandoned, North and South. The responses from all the people whom I wrote to were uniform; they all pointed to the relevant EU law and agreed that the responsibility to bring forward a bespoke package for the cross-border worker is with the Department for Communities. Everyone said that the responsibility lay with the Minister for Communities, apart from the Minister for Communities and her party colleagues. I agree with the Member who spoke previously: every Minister should fulfil their responsibility.

All those who are newly self-employed and the self-employed who are deemed to be company directors are frustrated, scared and financially on their knees. They are the entrepreneurs who are the bedrock of our economy. They have bravely taken the risk to establish a business. Their staff can be furloughed, and yet they have nothing. There are then the businesses that have multiple premises. They were ruled

ineligible for business support grants. They are our small independent traders. They have shops and outlets in different towns or cities. They, too, are entrepreneurs and are the backbone of our high streets, and yet someone in Netherleigh thought that they should not be eligible for support, despite a package being put in place by the Scottish Government for similar companies in Scotland.

Finally, there has been dreadful treatment of our bus, coach, taxi and haulage industry.

**Ms Dillon:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mr McNulty:** No.

After months of denying responsibility, the Minister for the Economy surrendered the power and responsibility to the Executive last week. It has now been passed to the Infrastructure Minister to deal with. I am confident that the Minister, with, hopefully, the support of the Finance Minister, will deliver a package of support that the sector so badly needs, and quickly. Some in the House try to suggest that it was a game of ping-pong. Take the politics and the politicians out of it and listen to the sector. One of its leaders — Karen Magill — spoke unequivocally on the radio yesterday; she called it as she saw it. She noted who has been consistently honest and supportive of the sector through all these months: Nichola Mallon.

I strongly support the delivery of support and/or a support package for those who have fallen through the safety net of support.

**Ms S Bradley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate that a lot of this arrived in the House very fast and there was an initial learning curve on who should step up for what issue, but does the Member agree that, when we resolve the issues, at every point, we have to find the fastest vehicle for getting help to those who need it? There are examples of that not happening, and that deeply concerns me.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for her contribution. I agree: people who are on their knees financially just want support. They do not care where it comes from.

I strongly support the delivery of supports and/or a support package for those who have fallen through the safety nets of supports. That

is imperative for services in our community, for businesses and for jobs. If this place is to mean anything to the people whom we represent, we must act collectively and deliver a package of support for those who need it most and need it now.

**Mr O'Dowd:** It has been an interesting debate with a bit of ping-pong in it around political responsibility or roles in the Executive. I suspect that businesses and sole traders and the self-employed will not care which Minister delivers it as long as it is delivered and that the minutiae and the workings of the Executive are of little interest to them. Unfortunately, we all have to work the processes that are in place in the Executive and in the Assembly and the financial management of all those processes to ensure that proper processes are followed.

I admire any Minister who rolls up their sleeves and says, "I'll have a bit of that. I am going to stick my neb into somebody else's affairs, and I am going to work to try and ensure that a project is delivered", whether it is in response to COVID-19 or anything else. That is what is needed across the Executive, and that is what is needed now.

I want to take one step back before getting into the heart of the motion. Before COVID-19 hit us, we had another major economic crisis looming over us: Brexit. The uncertainty around Brexit, the implications of Brexit and the ongoing political shenanigans around Brexit would be hard enough for any economy to deal with without having to add COVID-19. Then COVID-19 came, and we had that added to us. However, before all those things, it is worth noting that our economy, even prior to the pandemic, had fewer businesses per head than England, Scotland and Wales and had the lowest number of business start-ups anywhere across these islands. Our economy was in bad shape before all these things. The economy, under the charge of successive DUP Ministers, has never been kick-started. It has never seen the promise of the Good Friday Agreement and of the institutions being driven forward in that economic regeneration.

In fairness to those Economy Ministers and to the Executive, we had a worldwide recession in 2008, so it was always going to be difficult for anybody who was in charge, but the point that I am trying to make is this: following the same old will not get us out of the crisis. I have serious concerns — listening to the presentations today from the DUP Benches only confirms those concerns — that the DUP's thinking behind this is driven by a number of factors. One, it does not like government intervention in the

economy. Mr Stalford has more than hinted at that, if not confirmed that, today. It does not see that as an economic way forward: I do. Even in normal times, there is a responsibility on the Government to make economic interventions. Even the most right-wing of Tories intervene in the economy, but they intervene in the economy for the favour of a certain section of society. Two, I am of the view — I said it at the Economy Committee the other day —

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** Just let me finish this point. The Minister has made a decision in that regard, and she has decided not to fund those groups. I will let Mr Stalford in, and then I will finish my point.

**Mr Stalford:** It is interesting to hear the Member for Upper Bann proclaim himself an interventionist. That being the case, why is he so determined to keep us living under EU state aid rules?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**11.30 am**

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not a defender of the EU fiscal policy and nor is my party. The EU has many merits, but there are also things wrong with the EU, and I disagree with him on the need for the Government to intervene.

The point I am making is that the Minister has made a decision. The evidence points me in that direction. The contributions today point me in that direction, as do the most recent bids from the Department for the Economy to the Executive and to the Finance Minister. There were 32 bids, totalling £78 million, and not one of the bids was for the excluded, the sole traders and the directors that we are discussing today. If there is no bid, that says to me that there is no proposal in the Department for the Economy to support those groups.

I am also concerned about the prioritisation of those bids. They are prioritised from 1 to 32. The first bid is for the technology sector. You could say, "Yes, that's very valid. It is a sector with a future", but it is also one of the sectors that have weathered the storm of COVID-19 best. Parts of it have actually flourished during COVID-19, so why is it the number-one priority? That says to me that the same old thinking is going on that was there under previous Economy Ministers and meant that we had the fewest business start-ups, the lowest productivity and higher levels of economic

inactivity than many parts of these islands. We need a new direction and new thinking, and part of that has to be an acceptance that the groups that are holding up and shoring up our economy need support. Yes, we should chase international investment, technology firms and all those things, but the people who are maintaining the economy now are many of the people who are listed in the motion and need support. If we lose them, we will certainly have 100,000 unemployed by the end of this year and more.

I appeal to the Minister to change her decision — my view is that a decision has been made — and make a recommendation to the Finance Minister and the Executive for a viable proposal —

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** — an affordable proposal to support these bodies.

**Mr Muir:** On a Friday night in mid May, businesses across my constituency and across Northern Ireland learned that they would be excluded from the much trailed hardship scheme. Trailed for weeks, the details of the scheme were eventually released at 9.00 pm on a Friday, leaving many in tears, desperate for help and hoping that they would not be forgotten and would be picked up by a further scheme. It is nothing short of disgraceful that, exactly four months on from that Friday night announcement, we are having this debate today because of inaction and failure to provide the required support.

From the start of the crisis, I have been in regular contact with businesses in my constituency that have been left in utter despair. Schemes are announced in other parts of the UK covering businesses just like theirs; Northern Ireland receives the equivalent funding; owners await announcements from the Minister for the Economy; and, if anything eventually gets brought forward, they are excluded from it. I have so many examples of businesses in North Down and beyond that are not able to access business support grants for so many reasons, including those whose business rates were over the NAV thresholds, some very marginally — in one example, by £1; company directors with no PAYE employees who could not apply for the hardship fund; domestic ratepayers, such as bed-and-breakfast owners; those who did not operate out of fixed property, who could not apply for grants based on rateable value; and the newly self-employed who did not meet the criteria for

the UK self-employed support scheme. Unfortunately, a number of those businesses have not survived the last six months of inaction. Those that have desperately need financial assistance now if they are not to go the same way as the others.

Not only is providing help for those currently excluded morally the right thing to do, but it is the right thing for the economy today. The Minister has said that she does not have the data to provide the support that is being asked for, but that is to fail to understand that the issue is beyond the newly self-employed and does not look at what Wales was available to achieve without the HMRC data. Minister, where there is a will, there is a way.

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the member for giving way. While I appreciate that the argument has been made by officials and by the Minister about the lack of data, the key to other schemes has been demonstrating hardship.

Some businesses are doing very well. They are not asking for support. They have managed to ride the storm and actually grow their businesses. Others are experiencing massive hardship. If that criteria can be demonstrated, raw data are not needed. The bank account information is there. If their turnover has been decimated, surely they should be able to access a fund without that raw data.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I agree entirely with the Member. Unfortunately, my impression is that there is not the will, so a way is not being found. We are able to look at hardship funds and other schemes that have been rolled out across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Finally, on the subject of money, we hear that the funding is not available to support everyone. I acknowledge the financial challenges that face the Executive. However, today, I have received news from the Finance Minister that over £124 million has been assigned to a pending economic recovery strategy, but is yet unallocated because of non-submitted or delayed bids. That does not inspire confidence in the Department or the Minister. Figures such as £300 million to support the excluded are bandied about without drilling into the potential demand, and with the assumption that everyone needs £10,000. Proper examination of the issue would, I suggest, reveal a different result. However, unfortunately, it was only last week when the Minister met representatives

from ExcludedNI to explore their needs and how they could be met. That was after I had requested the meeting on BBC Radio Ulster and questioned whether the Minister would go to it.

In conclusion, it is long beyond time that the Minister for the Economy should have brought forward a hardship scheme for businesses that have been excluded from existing support packages. I have written to her on numerous occasions about the issues that have arisen in the debate. Unfortunately, I eventually received only generic responses, offering little more than tea and sympathy. Minister, the time for tea and sympathy is up. The time for action is now.

**Mr Speaker:** I now call Roy Beggs. I advise the Member that he has four minutes.

**Mr Beggs:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I support the motion. It begins by talking about the Kickstart scheme, which helps 16- to 24-year-olds who are on universal credit to get into employment. It was announced that it would apply to England, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland was not mentioned. It has been operational since 2 September. What is happening in Northern Ireland? That scheme helps young people, the businesses they work in and the economy. What we do not want to do is experiment with our own individual system and then find out that it is flawed. We should have learnt from the renewable heat incentive scheme that if there is a system that is widely applied, we can learn from it quickly and get it on the ground.

We all have to recognise that much support has been provided in Northern Ireland. We are fortunate to be part of the United Kingdom. There is the furlough scheme, for which the Chancellor has footed the bill. Thank goodness that it has been there to date. Clearly, it cannot disappear. We need there to be a continuation of some sort to assist those who rely on it. Otherwise, Northern Ireland, in particular, will lose out. We are at huge risk of losing thousands of jobs; jobs in skilled teams that have been put together and risk being decimated. We need to look carefully at that and ensure that funding continues.

There has also been COVID-related support through a range of other measures. For example, the business support grant that has been paid out through the rate system was a good, quick way in which to get money out on the ground. However, we have to recognise that there is a degree of concern that it may not always go where it is needed. I have heard of wind farm owners getting additional money

when they still have their wind turbines turning. Clearly, some people have benefited who may not have needed it. There has also been a range of other business support grants and, in particular, help for apprentices. We have to recognise that.

We also have to recognise, however, that many people have been excluded. There have been attempts to address that in other parts of the United Kingdom. The question is why it has not been worked on here. The excluded include those who are newly self-employed and many microbusinesses, which may actually operate from home and therefore have not benefited from the business support grant. Many of those business owners will have taken great risk — perhaps remortgaged their homes and taken loans — and may not be in a position to take further loans that are on offer. We need to recognise that those additional loans that have to be repaid are more likely to benefit larger, more established businesses. We also have to recognise that many of those people who have set up their businesses, perhaps employ only themselves and may even be paid through dividends — so are unwaged and do not qualify — are our entrepreneurs. These are the people who put their neck out, who think of new ideas and who can generate new employment in the future. It is important that we recognise that they are important to our economy and that they are not excluded.

I am pleased that, this week, the Executive Office granted powers to the Infrastructure Minister so that the taxi industry and the coach industry, and perhaps the wider transport sector, can benefit. However, why has it taken so long to widen those power so that someone can address the issue? As asked by my colleagues, why have all of those people who have been excluded to date not been included in a hardship intervention scheme? Such schemes are operating in other parts of the UK, and we must ensure that businesses, companies and employees can survive without facing huge burdens of debt and going under.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Economy Minister, Mrs Diane Dodds. The Minister will have 15 minutes.

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you, Members, for the motion and debate. A range of important and relevant areas have been covered this morning. I will take each of the key issues that have been discussed in turn.

First, I share the deep concern expressed in the House for the significant impact that COVID-19

has had on the Northern Ireland economy. It is undeniable that the economic impact has been significant and has had implications across the entire economy. Huge economic impacts, which might normally take months or years to unfold, occurred within weeks as a result of lockdown and industry shutdowns. My Department estimates that, during lockdown, our economic output was operating at 25% below normal. Nearly all sectors were affected by the social-distancing measures, and many businesses have availed themselves of business support schemes and grants from the national Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

The motion references the extensive range of support put in place by our Government. That has provided a much-needed lifeline for many local businesses and individuals. The shutdown of many industries resulted in the widespread furloughing of workers, with just under 250,000 — almost a third of those eligible here — being furloughed and around 78,000 availing themselves of the self-employed income support scheme. Together, these claims amounted to over £1 billion in support for jobs in Northern Ireland.

Despite this, there has been a spike in the claimant count over the past three months. July was the third month in a row where the number of claimants was above 60,000; levels last seen in 2012 and 2013 after the previous recession. To put it another way, around seven years of jobs' growth has been wiped out in a matter of weeks. Although the local economy is showing signs of recovery, with many sectors improving, it may take some time before we see overall economic activity back to its pre-pandemic levels. I do not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead of us. That is why, from the Chamber this morning, I reiterate my call for an extension of the furlough scheme. It is important that we continue to support jobs in our local economy and in sectors where that tail of recovery will perhaps be longer than it is in others.

The Executive have difficult decisions —

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

**Mrs Dodds:** No, I am not giving way. I have a lot to get through and I will reference many of the points that Members made during the debate.

The Executive have difficult decisions to take about what and where interventions can and should be made and what form of support is offered. They need to ensure that spending can

be justified as providing value for money and that it will make a positive impact in the medium to long term. Not all businesses or individuals have been impacted by COVID in the same way. Some businesses effectively stopped trading, whilst others continued as normal or even saw an increase in productivity. It was a delight yesterday to announce a further 50 jobs in the digital sector, created by one of our own who has gone to America and who is responsible for much of the foreign direct investment that has come to Northern Ireland.

**11.45 am**

Since we moved to reopen the economy, some sectors have seen immediate pickup, while others will face much lengthier challenges or face challenges further down the line. I have already referenced hospitality and aerospace. I make the point because the Executive, with a limited amount of financial firepower, must target that firepower and be strategic with it. The Executive must recognise that the economy is in a different place today from where it was during lockdown and that support will come in different forms. When the economy was in lockdown, we clearly needed to get money out to businesses quickly. As part of our immediate Northern Ireland response to the pandemic, my Executive colleagues and I introduced an unprecedented range of local financial support to help those on whom COVID-19 had impacted. That support had the objective of protecting jobs, preventing business closures and promoting economic recovery. My Department led on the business support grant schemes and the microbusiness hardship fund. We have paid out over £340 million to date across the schemes, providing much-needed support to many businesses experiencing hardship.

As well as the business support measures administered by my Department, a range of further support has been provided locally. The Executive put in place a four-month rates holiday for all businesses and 12 months' rate relief for businesses in targeted sectors. Funds have also been made available for childcare, charities and sports clubs, amongst others. Although an extensive range of support was provided, it is simply not possible for the Executive to support every individual and business facing hardship with the funding envelope available, and I will say more on that later.

The Executive are currently preparing an economic recovery framework. I recommend as essential reading to the proposer of the motion 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. That

document has guided our path in the Department over the past number of weeks. It provides a framework for the next 12 to 18 months to build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy by addressing the key structural weaknesses in our economy and by focusing on sectors in which there is potential for growth and higher-paying jobs. That does not mean that other sectors will be ignored. All sectors bring their own unique benefits to our economic ecosystem.

To drive forward that agenda, I have secured £25 million to deliver digital and online selling, improvements to operational processes and supply chain resilience, the use of new technologies, business planning and the provision of loans and equity investment. I have reallocated £13.6 million from my budget to address pressures and skills in education. I have submitted 32 bids to the Department of Finance to deliver a wide-ranging and comprehensive programme of interventions to further the rebuilding agenda. I must say that I agree with Mr Dickson that it would be inexcusable that money should be returned at the end of what will be an extremely difficult and challenging period. That is why again today in the Chamber I am urging the Finance Minister to get on with allocating the funding that he received after the Chancellor's July economic update.

**Miss Woods:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** No. I am not giving way.

I have established the tourism recovery steering group and am working on the draft tourism recovery action plan. Many of the 32 bids would support actions in that plan. I have allocated £14 million to fund an apprenticeship return, retain and result initiative, over £12 million to fund an apprenticeship recruitment incentive initiative and over half a million pounds to an apprenticeship challenge fund.

I will address Mr Beggs's point about the Kickstart scheme. I agree with him that Northern Ireland could benefit from a Kickstart scheme. Last week, I spoke to the Minister for Communities, because Kickstart is essentially an employment scheme as opposed to a training scheme. I offered her my and my Department's help in the development of the scheme. She has confirmed to me that her Department is currently scoping out such a scheme for Northern Ireland, and I hope that it will come forward fairly quickly.

Recently, along with Invest NI, I have announced a £1 million digital selling capability

grant and a £5 million equity investment fund targeted at early- and seed-stage SMEs, both of which opened for applications last week. The Department for the Economy has a record of working to provide support. I thank my colleague from Foyle for referencing the Audit Office report which indicates that, by far and away, after the Department of Health — where you would expect actions in a health pandemic — the Economy Department has been prolific in its support for the economy and businesses in Northern Ireland. Again, I recommend that report as essential reading.

The motion specifically references sole traders and microbusinesses that were unable to access the business support measures because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. Within the available funding, the hardship fund aimed to support as many businesses as possible. However, with approximately 125,000 businesses in Northern Ireland and a budget of £40 million, difficult choices had to be made about the number and type of businesses that could be supported. Also, the Executive, as a whole, supported my decisions on the hardship scheme.

However, I know that people are still hurting and that there is still more work to do. Whilst the majority of self-employed people were eligible for the self-employed income support scheme if their business was adversely affected by COVID, I recognise that those who have recently become self-employed have been unable to access the scheme. I think that everyone would acknowledge that establishing a local scheme would be challenging because it requires access to a national database via HMRC. I have written to HMRC to enquire about such database access.

I also understand that the Department of Finance has contacted Her Majesty's Treasury about a number of issues in the UK-wide schemes, including widening the eligibility of criteria of the self-employed income support scheme to include those who have recently become self-employed. Furthermore, I have proposed that the Executive should write to the Chancellor to ask him to look again at some of the people who have been omitted from the scheme and to consider bringing forward measures across the UK. I will, of course, also work with my colleagues in Westminster who have been extremely vocal in support of that UK-wide scheme and the need for UK-wide measures to bring in these levels of support. Should support not be forthcoming, and should the Executive collectively determine that a bespoke local scheme is required, I will be happy to deliver such a scheme.

Members have referenced the money that has been underutilised from the three business support measures led by my Department.

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

**Mrs Dodds:** No.

I will make it clear — particularly for Ms Dillon who seems to be under some misunderstanding on these matters — that my Department administered the business support measures on behalf of the Executive — this was not Department for the Economy core funding. Underutilised funds have been returned to the Department of Finance, as was requested, from the very outset of the schemes. Those funds will be reallocated for further funding and support. To aid that process, I have provided an options paper to the Executive with a wide-ranging list of areas where there will be gaps.

**Ms Dillon:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** No.

That has been discussed on a number of occasions. On 13 August, at the proposal of the Finance Minister, it was agreed that the reallocation of the underspend from the business support measures would be considered as part of the overall funding allocation to deliver the Executive's recovery framework. I look forward to moving ahead with that recovery framework, seeing the list of proposals — including those in my options paper — from the Executive and getting down to work to make those things happen.

Again, at my instigation, we widened the scope of the £10,000 scheme to include those small manufacturing businesses that benefited from industrial derating. I would be happy to join Ms Dillon in writing to the Finance Minister to indicate that I would also support further rating relief for manufacturing businesses, not just in Mid Ulster, which I visited recently, but right across Northern Ireland.

**Ms Dillon:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** No.

In conclusion, let me be absolutely clear: the scale of the challenge that is facing our economy is unprecedented. Getting our economic, societal and health-focused response to recovery right is absolutely vital. We must all ensure that the decisions that we

take are strategically focused but also support families and jobs in Northern Ireland. I remain committed to working with my Executive colleagues to continue to support businesses and individuals as best we can moving forward, recognising that the next few months will be extremely challenging, not just for the Executive but for families and for prosperity in Northern Ireland.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank everybody who was involved in the debate. I am sure that Members will grant me the indulgence of directing most of my remarks to the Minister for the Economy

There is a fundamental issue here. The Northern Ireland economy is driven by the small and medium enterprise sector. It is an entrepreneurial economy. In January of this year, the Ulster University business school said that Northern Ireland has created an ecosystem for entrepreneurs, with 100,000-odd SME companies. We have more SME companies and entrepreneurs in Northern Ireland than there are per capita in Wales, Scotland and the north of England, but we can say that we had that ecosystem that was supportive of our entrepreneurial sector.

We have heard from people across Northern Ireland about the importance of the manufacturing sector — small companies with directors who take risks. One of the biggest issues that we have in Northern Ireland is that we need to encourage more of that risk-taking. We need to encourage companies and people to become involved in business. We have a manufacturing sector in west Tyrone that is unique across these islands in its ability to develop new ideas and products. We have people in our creative industries sector who have ideas and are willing to take risks and do something that, quite frankly, was not even there nine months ago. These are people who are willing to do those things.

These are people who are the future of Northern Ireland and who are going to transform our economy. That should not come as a surprise to anybody, particularly the Minister for the Economy or her Department. That ecosystem has been growing steadily, not because of what the Department for the Economy and Economy Ministers have done but because those people have had to do it on their own. They have succeeded in ways that very few people have seen. However, right now, because of a system that they have no control over, with the added implications of a pandemic, that ecosystem is being killed off.

We hear about papers and proposals and bids, but we are eight months into this process. Many of those people have already gone to the wall. How many times have MLAs listened to people saying that they have gone to the bank and the bank says, "Unless you get support we are going to have to pull the plug"?

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that the Minister actually supported my colleague Mr O'Dowd's point when she said that 50 additional jobs had been created in the IT sector? That industry is flourishing at the moment, yet that is where her number-one bid to the Executive is going.

**12.00 noon**

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much for your intervention.

I was struck by the remarks that the permanent secretary of the Department for the Economy made to the Committee. I find it extraordinary that even a sentiment by a senior civil servant in Northern Ireland would be that some of those businesses are not worth saving. For somebody who is on a superannuated salary, has a pension and is the permanent secretary of a Department that, to say the least, has not had a stellar record in promoting jobs or in good governance to say that is absolutely shocking. The Minister should go back today and have the permanent secretary in her office and ask him to apologise and to make sure that his remarks are changed. That sent a message out to every entrepreneur in Northern Ireland. We have another example.

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

**Dr Aiken:** Yes, please.

**Mr Allister:** The Member deals with an important point. The Minister today had the perfect opportunity to disavow those callous, cavalier comments by the permanent secretary, but she did not take that opportunity. Does that create a fear that, in fact, those comments still drive the approach of the Department?

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much for your intervention. That takes me on to the next point, which is about the culture in the Department for the Economy and the culture of what we are trying to do to support small businesses and entrepreneurs. They are asking for our help. They are not asking for our help because they just want another handout or they want to do something else; they want our help so that they

are actually still here when we get to the end of this year.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Member for giving way. In talking about those small businesses and entrepreneurs, does he agree that the entire House should be appalled by the statement that the Minister made when she described them as "difficult choices"? It is her job to deal with difficult choices.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank you very much. Again, one of the things that we have heard through here is that we want to see some leadership. We have had eight months of committees, groups, papers and whatever: we need to see some leadership. We need to see somebody saying, "We need to do this". We do not want a Minister who gives £53 million back without asking some fairly substantial questions about what extra resources are needed and what we are doing to sort out this part of the economy. We are hearing this in the United Kingdom, from a Minister who sees clearly what happens in England, Scotland and Wales but sees Northern Ireland as different in some way. Her answer is not righteous indignation and a demand for more money to do it; her answer is, "Let us form another committee. Let's send another paper". That is not what the people of Northern Ireland want to hear.

I was very disappointed to hear from the Minister today. I thought that the Minister would see where the concerns are. I thought that she would come to the House and say, "These are substantial issues that need to be sorted out. I have heard. I want to do something. I want to do something for 99% of our economy". That is the size of our SME economy.

**Mr Catney:** I thank the Member for giving way. It may have come out on Monday that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister were going to bestow powers on a different Minister. I need to know where they come from and how they come out. Rather than give out under the grant scheme, there are powers that sit in your Department, Minister, that you are not using, but you are asking them to move to a different Department. I hope that you are *[Inaudible.]*

**Dr Aiken:** I thank you very much for that.

Here is a question, and it is a question that everybody in the Assembly should ask: is the Department for the Economy fit for purpose? Is it capable of carrying out its role? Now, we have heard evidence from the Economy Committee about the language being used by the permanent secretary, but we see something else here, and this is the fundamental bit: where

is that support for our SME sector? Where is that support for our entrepreneurial sector? Does nobody in the Department for the Economy or the Minister understand what our economy is built on? I am not hearing any understanding from the Minister. I have heard absolutely no —.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Member for giving way. With regard to the language and understanding of the Department and the Minister, does the Member agree that generic written responses outlining all the government financial support that a business is not eligible for and pointing to indirect, when individual circumstances are raised with the Minister, could be described as nothing more than a kick in the teeth?

**Dr Aiken:** One of the most disappointing things is the number of times that people have been told, "the computer says no. The fact is that you do not meet this criterion or that one". We are coming to the end of the time, and I could continue pointing out the inconsistencies of the Department for the Economy and the Minister.

**Ms S Bradley:** I thank the Member, because he has been very generous in giving way, unlike the Minister, it has to be said. Does the Member agree that this is the bread and butter of Northern Ireland? In our constituency offices, we are all aware of the nature of these businesses. They are often family-owned, and they are the fundamental building blocks of our economy. I had hoped that the motion would nudge the Minister in the right direction. I am bitterly disappointed that that appears not to be the case. I take the Member's point that we really start to move into the realms of, "Do we understand our economy?".

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has about 10 seconds.

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much. It comes as no surprise that I think that every Member should support the motion. My final appeal to the Minister is, "Show some leadership. Sort out your Department, and do something for the entrepreneurs of Northern Ireland".

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly is deeply concerned at the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the local economy; acknowledges the substantial financial support package put in place by the UK Government to support*

*employers, employees and the self-employed; recognises that thousands of sole traders and microbusinesses in Northern Ireland have not been able to access financial support; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish a new fit-for-purpose business hardship fund targeted at those businesses that have so far been excluded from existing support packages.*

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

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

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order. I ask Members leaving the Chamber to do so.

## **Mental Health Crisis Support**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes. I call on Mr Alex Easton to open the debate on the motion.

**Mr Easton:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis across Northern Ireland; notes with concern a COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University Belfast, which found that one third of people locally met the criteria for depression; highlights the success of the multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis; and calls on the Minister of Health to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of this project to all health and social care trusts.*

As everybody knows, we as an Assembly have been very much united recently on the urgent need to tackle mental health issues in our society. We are all aware of the significant increase in mental health issues due to COVID-19 and the results of lockdown. In order to try to tackle that, a study by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University has been recently undertaken, and the results on the state of the population's mental health are extremely worrying.

Some of the statistics and findings are as follows: of the 470 people surveyed, three out of 10, which is 30%, met the criteria for anxiety, and one out of every three met the criteria for depression. For COVID-19-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 20% met the criteria. On becoming infected with COVID-19, 41% were extremely worried and 64% were extremely worried about infecting others. Concerns were expressed about the health service, with 72% of individuals being highly concerned about the ability of the health service to care for COVID-19 patients if the situation became worse. On job security, 28% were highly concerned about their job security because of COVID-19, and 50% were highly concerned about the financial implications of COVID-19. There were concerns about school closures, with 41% being highly concerned about the impact of school closures on children during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also concerns about the Government, with 49% being extremely worried about the Government's ability to manage the COVID-19 situation.

Overall, the findings showed that those with prior mental health conditions, those who had high exposure to COVID-related information via the media, the young, those highly concerned about being infected and key workers suffered the most with mental health issues. I found it very interesting that the media have been identified as affecting the well-being of our population, and that is something to think about.

The following recommendations were made in the study. I believe that the Health Minister and his Department should look at these, and they have probably already done so. There are groups of individuals who may be more vulnerable to experiencing mental health issues during this time. The study states that government bodies and other relevant:

*"decision-makers should be mindful ... to these groups when creating, amending ... COVID19 related policy."*

Given the impact of COVID-19 media exposure on mental ill-health, "clear media guidelines" on the reporting of COVID-19 information "should be drafted and implemented". The study states that there should be:

*"A public health campaign to educate the public about reputable sources"*

of COVID-19 information in the media and how to manage their consumption of COVID-19 news. On that point, at the Health Committee, I

recently mentioned to the Health Minister the issue of how we can promote the COVID-19 vaccine when it arrives, because there is a clear mistrust among some in the wider community due to misinformation, lies and other factors.

Concerns about the financial implications of the pandemic, including job security, must be "carefully considered by the Government". The study states:

*"A priority at policy level should be to plan efficiently and effectively for how a potential increase in the need for mental health services will be handled in light of this pandemic."*

The study reports that service provision:

*"will be important to improve the outreach of services to those who may have difficulty accessing them due to the nature of their diagnosis ... those with concerns about social distancing or infection, individuals who are considered 'high-risk' and may be shielding for prolonged periods and those who may not be able to access services digitally. Academics and clinicians must work together in order to help bridge the gap for those who are unable to access services. This includes the implementation of more regular follow-ups with clients ... Further consideration from both a research and service provider standpoint should consider how positive mental health and well-being could be fostered during periods of isolation."*

It also states:

*"Mental health organisations, particularly in the charitable sector, will need to be adequately funded to ensure easily accessible mental health support is available when needed and that they are supported with the resources needed to deliver services".*

## 12.15 pm

Funding should be considered for a mental health workforce to support the potential influx of individuals needing mental health support, including psychological well-being practitioners. That may free up waiting lists for higher-intensity mental health services. The Department of Health launched its mental health action plan in response to COVID-19 on 19 May. The strategy outlined key points, which are supported by the survey, including the use

of innovative approaches to service delivery, the importance of helping and supporting those who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19, and the importance of multidisciplinary and multisectoral collaboration. It is important that the strategy is well coordinated, well resourced, that it addresses those in need in hard-to-reach groups, and that it ensures that the mental health workforce is well supported.

The multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership operates between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to provide on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis. Mental health practitioners and paramedics work alongside police officers to assess and respond to calls made either to the police or ambulance control using 999 or 101. That has had the associated benefit of reducing reliance on hospital, ambulance and PSNI resources.

MATT has been operational in the Belfast and South Eastern Trust areas since the start of July 2018 and has been supported by the Public Health Agency (PHA). More than 55 skilled staff across the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, the PSNI and the South Eastern Trust volunteered to take part in the project initially. After COVID-19-related disruption, it resumed operating on 12 June. A team of two police officers, one paramedic and one mental health practitioner is on duty over a 12-hour night shift on Friday and Saturday. The team was initially funded, until March 2020, by the Department of Health transformation fund. The Minister previously stated that he urgently wanted to examine the potential for a significant expansion of the multi-agency triage team partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. However, MATT's future remains unclear. We would like to see more regular reporting.

As recently as 10 September, the Minister referenced the project as part of the Department's initiatives to prevent suicide. We would like to see that continuing, Minister. MATT provides a vital and essential intervention at a most critical point, and it should be maintained. However, building resilience and taking a preventative approach to the roots of mental illness is as important, if not more important, than treating mental illness. It is important that we do not neglect the need for a holistic approach as we continue to exist with this virus, and we look to the Minister as he leads on the mental health strategy, as continued MATT services will be critical. The

crucial role of voluntary and community services must also be recognised. In conclusion, we must recognise the impact of COVID-19 on our population's mental health. We recognise the importance of MATT and call on the Minister to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of that project to all health and social care trusts.

**Ms Flynn:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion. I thank Alex and Paula for bringing such a crucial issue to the Assembly. As the motion says, poor mental health has been identified and, I think it is fair to say, universally accepted as an area of concern, given recent events that populations across the world have faced due to COVID-19.

While I am glad that this area of health is receiving the attention that it deserves, what we need to do next to help those in crisis must be more than just positive mental health slogans; it must be more than interdepartmental working groups' reports and recommendations. It needs to be the delivery of true parity of esteem between physical and mental health. Strategies need to be funded, and communities need services. Importantly, however, if a person is unfortunate enough to find themselves in that moment of crisis wanting to end their own life, help needs to be accessible.

A great example of how on-the-ground crisis support and intervention can help to save a person's life is that of the multi-agency triage team.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. We spend a lot of time together on the all-party group (APG) on mental health and suicide prevention and the recently facilitated APG, from the Member for East Londonderry, on dual diagnosis. You mentioned the need for collaboration and for agencies to work together to tackle this problem, and that is absolutely true. Do you agree that it is to the detriment of some Departments that the Desertcreat College did not go ahead, given that a lot of time spent together, between these services, is multi-agency? A training opportunity would have been really useful so that they could be better at their jobs when on the streets serving the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before I call Ms Flynn, the Ulster Unionist Party have only given me one name. If the Member wishes to make a speech, I can add his name to the list.

The Member has an additional minute.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Member for his comments. The important thing to focus on now is moving forward into the future. Thankfully, we now have the recognition that it will take a lot more intervention, cross-departmental working and that, obviously, includes the agencies on the ground who are doing brilliant work. Thank you.

I was about to say that I am sure that all the agencies involved, and the respective Ministers, appreciate the value of sustaining such partnerships and interventions, just like the multi-agency triage team. Hopefully, that will continue into the future.

I am also pleased to comment that, since taking up my role as an MLA and as Chair of the Assembly all-party group on suicide prevention, the members of that APG, along with many cross-community groups and organisations from statutory, community and voluntary backgrounds, all wholeheartedly supported and encouraged this model. We all recognise that emergency departments are not a suitable place or an appropriate environment for anyone who is suffering and in a state of crisis. We recognise that, when helping someone in a mental health crisis, working in silos, whether in the justice or the health system, does little to de-escalate or effectively assess and treat the person who needs the help. In fact, many with lived experience advised that it can have the opposite impact and make that person feel worse.

I know that the Department of Health is conducting a review into crisis services, as part of its mental health action plan, as referenced by the previous Member to speak. I also want to highlight that other crisis services currently exist, for example, the crisis centres in Derry and Belfast, the CAMHS Crisis Teams, adult crisis services, Lifeline: 24/7 Crisis Support Service and last, but not least, the vast network of groups and individuals, who are rooted within their communities and who people, instinctively, think of when they need help.

Therefore, I call on the Minister of Health, following that review, to invest in crisis services and in communities. For me, the expansion and funding of this project would signify another small step in the right direction towards genuine parity of esteem for mental health. More progress towards the full implementation and funding of the suicide prevention strategy could signify hope to someone watching the debate at home, someone who has lived through such experiences or, indeed, currently living through such an experience.

It is important to note that, although this multi-agency model which is made up of ambulance staff, PSNI officers and community psychiatric nurses (CPNs) has successfully operated within the Belfast and South Eastern Trust areas — which lies in my constituency so I know it well — it has done so only at a limited capacity, operating over the weekends. The reality is that a mental health crisis can take hold at any time and therefore it is right to have access to such services throughout the week.

It is also important for Members to note that one of the key aims within the suicide prevention strategy is

*"Ensure suicide prevention services and support are delivered appropriately in deprived areas where suicide and self-harm rates are highest."*

This, rightfully, includes urban and rural communities. At present, with the multi-agency team servicing only two out of five of our trust areas across the North, there is definitely room to expand.

In closing, the most striking feedback that I have received about this project has been both from families in receipt of the service and from the ambulance and policing staff who have visited people in their homes. The staff have spoken of a sense of confidence in working together to help someone in what can be extremely difficult, challenging and complex circumstances. Families have described a feeling of understanding and compassion for the person receiving the treatment in what is a much more safe and familiar environment for them.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That is probably the very best point at which, I am afraid, I have to bring your comments to an end.

**Ms Flynn:** OK. Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you.

**Mr McGrath:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this motion. This is an incredibly important discussion that is being held in homes, schools and workplaces the length and breadth of the North. No matter what our age, job or background, all of us are affected by, and must give due consideration to, our mental health. I agree with the spirit and content of the motion. Never has a collaborative and well-resourced mental health service been more needed.

We are in the midst of a mental health crisis. The most recent health survey for Northern Ireland presented some distressing statistics. Around one fifth of respondents scored highly on the GHQ-12, suggesting that they may have a mental health problem. The motion makes reference to a more up-to-date figure that one third meet the criteria for depression. The report also highlighted that the most deprived areas continue to be more likely to have a higher score, almost 25%, than those in the least deprived areas, where it is only 12%.

We need a committed and adequately resourced response to this issue. We all accept, for example, the need for a mental health champion and the importance of the role. I welcome Minister Swann's recent appointment of Professor Siobhán O'Neill to the post. I have met her, and there is no doubt that she is committed to, and ready for, the task at hand. However, I ask this genuinely: are the Executive committed to that as well? She has no budget, no staff and no direct authority. This is certainly not about playing politics or who is to blame. It is just about ensuring that we get the best possible outcome. If she does, it would be great to hear about that.

It is clear that the voluntary sector is taking the lead on this and achieving some phenomenal results. I look at my own area in south Down and see the fantastic responses being made on the ground by MYMY (Mind Your Mate and Yourself), Life Changes Changes Lives, PIPS (Public Initiative for Prevention of Suicide and Self Harm) and Newcastle Community Outreach. Those are some of the groups that I work with. I am proud to try to help and support them with what they do. That is to say nothing about the great work being done by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Football Association (IFA) and many other sporting groups. However, why should organisations and charities have to struggle year on year to pick up the slack and find funding and volunteers? Why are we leaning so heavily on the voluntary sector and not supporting them more?

I spent 18 years of my life working with such issues as a youth worker. I have seen at first-hand how this problem has evolved, and I can tell you that we are failing our children. We need further support as well for perinatal mental health care and early intervention for primary and post-primary school anxiety. We have no legislation on cyberbullying despite the NSPCC highlighting how important this is. Our children are being exploited in the most heinous and horrific way. We need to find legislation to

combat this online scourge and not minimise the abuse that they suffer.

In the last year before the formation of the Education Authority (EA), £1.5 million was spent on post-primary school counselling services, and nearly £2 million was spent on primary school counselling services; that is £3.5 million. In the last financial year, the EA spent only £2.3 million to cover all primary and post-primary. Why is that? Has there been a change in budget or a change in priority? Perhaps the Health Minister could liaise with the Education Minister to try to find out.

Being impacted on by other issues, such as addiction to drugs, alcohol and gambling, means that many of the young people in our society are not equipped with the skills to sustain a job or a housing agreement. Social deprivation in some areas results in third generation unemployment. What do we do? Well, last year, we had nearly 15,000 children and young adults under the age of 24 being prescribed and dispensed diazepam, and nearly 3,000 prescribed and dispensed pregabalin. Throwing a pill at the issue and hoping that it will go away will not cut it. The issue is not going away. In fact, too many are being left to be seen by our trusts. The Health Minister has told me that nobody should be waiting more than nine weeks for access to either adult or child and adolescent mental health services, or 13 weeks to access psychological therapies.

Yet, I have been told that, in one trust, some children are waiting more than 57 weeks for an appointment and the average waiting time in one trust to access adult mental health services is 92 weeks. Does that scare you? It certainly frightens the life out of me.

I know that I paint a bleak picture, but it does not compare with the darkness that envelops all too many in our society. We must do more. We can do more. I wholeheartedly support the motion.

**12.30 pm**

**Mr Chambers:** It is a stark fact that one in four people across Northern Ireland is likely to suffer poor mental health. It can strike at anyone: young or old, strong or weak, rich or poor. It can have a trigger point or none. For far too many people it is an unspoken illness. The message that "It is good to talk" is one that cannot be repeated often enough, yet, for too long, it was not given the focus or the resources that it needed or deserved. There is an unlimited body

of evidence to show that mental illness is associated with greater risk of physical illness. Physical illness, in turn, increases the risk of mental illness, and one should no longer be viewed in isolation from the other. That is why, when the Ulster Unionist Party took up the Health portfolio, after it was passed over in the House, sometimes repeatedly, by other parties in January, we said that we would make mental health a key priority.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the need for this area of healthcare for our community and its absolute importance in supporting the mental resilience of all our citizens. Despite the immense challenges of recent months, the Ulster Unionist Party has been able to deliver on a number of its key manifesto priorities. Minister Robin Swann established the position of an Interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland, and his choice of Professor Siobhán O'Neill has been widely supported. He also moved quickly to publish the mental health action plan, along with the 38 actions in it. Given the immediacy of the challenges associated with the pandemic, it was only right and proper that it was accompanied by the COVID response plan, detailing the psychological well-being and mental health response to it. In addition, there has been more progress made in relation to specialist perinatal mental health services, the development of managed care networks for child and adolescent mental health services and improving the role and profile of mental health in primary care in the last few months than in the years before.

Despite the progress, nothing could have prepared us for COVID-19. I fear, therefore, that some in our society will live with the consequences of anxiety and depression well beyond the immediate physical risk. In the longer term, we need a service that is fit for purpose and is funded to meet the often complex needs of our population, but, in the short term, we also need a service in place that can provide immediate and urgent mental health support. The work of the multi-agency triage team is one such form of support, and, after it was piloted successfully, it was little wonder that it was quickly extended to cover the Belfast area. At a time of COVID, with all the additional pressures that that puts on our hospitals and staff, there has never been a more important time to avoid unnecessary attendances at our emergency departments. By putting in place preventative and early intervention practices, that is exactly what the multi-agency triage team does. Of course, it is not just the service leavers or the health service

that benefits; it also provides clear benefits for the PSNI.

Before I sit down, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will once again repeat the phrase "It is good to talk". No problem exists in anyone's life that cannot be resolved. There is no weight on your shoulders that cannot be lifted, and there are no bad thoughts that cannot be eradicated. Just sitting down with someone — a professional or a trusted friend — to talk about your issues can be the start of the journey to recovery and taking back control of your life. There is no shame or sign of weakness in doing so.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank those who tabled the motion. I also, regardless of our political differences, take the opportunity to thank Mr Easton for being so open about his mental health challenges during the summer. That took immense coverage, but I have no doubt that, by doing so, he helped a lot of people.

I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the motion. Its wording is clear, and I hope that the Minister's response to it is as positive as his response last week.

The report of the stress, trauma and related conditions lab was stark, but it was also, in many ways, unsurprising. As long ago as March, Lord Alderdice, speaking from a position of direct professional experience, raised the prospect in Parliament of a mental health pandemic caused by the sheer inhumanity and, thus, inevitable severe psychological impact of what we were asking people to do. Going without human touch, social contact or anything that delivers the sense of camaraderie and belonging that makes us human will have a deep psychological impact, particularly on those who live alone or in isolated households or communities. A word such as "loneliness" seems relatively tame, but it has a profound impact on our mental health. Being detached from social contact and social norms leads to a proven disturbance in the ability to assess others' intentions and, thus, maintain and build human relationships. One consequence of that will, in some cases, inevitably be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and disorders that seem to be associated, such as borderline personality disorder. The stress, trauma and related conditions lab report endorses that view. As we have heard, one fifth of the people studied and, therefore, more than likely, one fifth of the population have exhibited symptoms of PTSD associated with the experience of lockdown, and almost one third show symptoms of depression and anxiety. That could be an underestimate.

What lockdown asked of us, as fundamentally social animals, was necessary to manage our initial response to the virus, but it was inhuman in the literal sense. Therefore I take the opportunity to re-emphasise that, in every response to the coronavirus restrictions legislation, my colleague Paula Bradshaw cautioned that it must remain in place for not a second longer than necessary. There are many reasons for that, but the main reason is the profound and appalling impact that it has on mental well-being. I also caution against anyone making public statements about reinstating lockdown. We need to be sensitive to people's experiences of it and recognise that, if we tighten restrictions in a targeted way, that is not remotely the same as reinforcing lockdown. It is important for our collective mental well-being that we get the phraseology correct and do not create a wholly unnecessary fear of a return to where we once were.

I put on record my frustration that the mental health strategy has been set back from its original timescale. It is more urgent now than ever. We can be clear that one of the defining aspects of the pandemic, when we look back on it in a few years' time, firmly in the rear-view mirror, hopefully, will be the mental health issues arising from it. We will need to proof almost everything that we do for its impact on mental well-being. This is the time for speeding up that work, not delaying it.

The MATT partnership that others have spoken about, which began in the South Eastern Trust two years ago, seems to have been a clear success. As much as anything, it reinforces the need to consider mental health and well-being in everything that we do and to have people trained to deal with it in their everyday life, particularly in professions in the health sector and the police. I have no hesitation in recommending its roll-out across Northern Ireland. The experience of the past few months reinforces the urgency of that.

Although it is not mentioned in the motion, I expect that the Minister will work with Education to ensure that the mental health and well-being of our young people will be supported, given that their young lives have been so impacted. We do not want their legacy to fall to Health. I hope that we can get clarity on that from the Minister. The Alliance Party supports the motion.

**Ms Bunting:** Before I make my remarks, I declare that I am a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board and am on the advisory committee of the East Belfast Survivors of Suicide group.

I am immensely grateful to my DUP colleagues for tabling this timely motion. For all manner of reasons, a significant section of people in Northern Ireland have poor mental health, and, without doubt, the restrictions arising from COVID-19 have exacerbated an already bad situation. Those who serve on the Policing Board are all too aware of the time that officers spend dealing with people in mental health crisis. Numerous officers spend many shifts in A&E, either guarding a vulnerable person who presents a danger to themselves or others or searching for a vulnerable person who has left hospital grounds. Several hours can often be spent on such a search. The police return the person to hospital, and, at the first opportunity, due to desperation and despair, they run away again. The circle, which ultimately helps no one, continues, as does crime. To be clear, it is absolutely not that the police or the board begrudge such time or resources but rather that the police find themselves in circumstances of last resort, filling a gap in provision that is not really theirs to fill. No one else wants to take responsibility. That is not good enough.

There is an infamous photograph showing a room that looks like a break room in a police station after a significant event. Many officers are standing, some are seated, some are sipping hot drinks. All are waiting, apparently to resume their tasks at the finish of their break. It is no break room in a station; it is a hospital corridor. That is no place for police officers to spend their shifts when there is so much more going on outside that they must also address. There has to be a better way, and MATT may well be that better way. I have been delighted to see its implementation. From personal experience, I know that it is a terrible and frightening thing to come upon someone deep in crisis. One wrong word could have immense consequences. The partnership approach will not only address numerous problems but, most importantly, is a preferable way for a vulnerable person to be given the immediate treatment and support that they need from professionals equipped to deal with such a scenario.

Members will be aware that last Thursday was World Suicide Prevention Day. Those who represent Belfast will also know that City Hall was lit up on two consecutive evenings to raise awareness of the issue. Thanks should go to the Lord Mayor, Frank McCoubrey, for obliging that request. I also commend and thank those who give so selflessly to come voluntarily to the aid of those who find themselves in crisis. That is far from easy work, but they can do only so much.

For the long-term approach to the matter, it was a welcome development to have seen the much-awaited Protect Life 2 strategy published and superb news to hear about Professor Siobhán O'Neill, with whom I have worked at East Belfast Survivors of Suicide, being appointed as our Mental Health Champion. I was grateful to hear the First Minister speak yesterday during Question Time of the scoping exercise to understand the full extent of the mental ill health problem in Northern Ireland. I do not envy anyone that task, and, quite honestly, I am nervous about the result. However, fear is no reason for inaction, and movement on the issue is desperately needed and long overdue. That is the long term. Belfast — east Belfast in particular — in recent weeks has seen a number of people reach the end of their tether. Their crisis had become absolute, their coping mechanisms exhausted, with the most tragic of consequences. Today, I implore our Health Minister to consider a short-term, urgent intervention in Belfast to prevent more lives being needlessly lost to suicide and before ideation takes hold. We are all somewhere on the line between good and bad mental health. Some of us in the Chamber will have had personal experience of struggling and just not doing so well. For those who have not, the mantra must be, "There but for the grace of God go I". How dreadful it must be to reach crisis point and feel that you just have no options.

MATT has proved to work well. I suspect that the Minister has little to lose and much to gain by the expansion of the project across Northern Ireland. Accordingly —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry to interrupt the Member.

**Ms Bunting:** — I urge him to take this action as a matter of urgency.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** It is a part of the job that you hate, when someone is doing well. I am really sorry, but the rules are the rules, Joanne.

**12.45 pm**

**Mr Gildernew:** I thank the Members for tabling this — cuirim fáilte roimhe seo — important motion and for bringing focus to the challenging area of mental health. I am deeply impressed with the genuine empathy that Members have shown for the issue, and that is to be welcomed.

I declare an interest in the sense of my social work career and working in this area, particularly the invaluable training that I received on placement with a home treatment crisis response team.

The North's long-term record on mental ill health, high numbers of suicides and low spending on mental health is well-documented and has been considered by the Health Committee. The pandemic has, no doubt, exacerbated mental ill health for many, whether through isolation, bereavement, loss of income or the virus itself and the fear and anxiety that it has created.

While since January most of the Committee's time has been focused on issues arising from the pandemic, rebuilding services as well as the broader transformation agenda, the Committee has raised mental health aspects of the crisis, and mental health is an issue to which it intends to return in detail as soon as possible.

One of the Committee's first sessions after being re-established in late January was with Koulla Yiasouma, the Children's Commissioner, in relation to children's mental health. A commitment cancelled due to the pandemic was an informal meeting with the mental health policy group, which we hope to rearrange as soon as we can.

Mental health issues have continued to be threaded through all the Committee's work, with members raising issues about the percentage share of the budget allocation to this area, and acknowledging the inclusion of perinatal mental health in the action plan.

In May, to mark mental health week, the Committee discussed the increased hardship suffered by those with addictions due to COVID-19. The North of Ireland Alcohol and Drugs Alliance (NIADA) advised the Committee of an increase in desperation among substance users, long waiting times for access to opioid substitution treatment, and regional variations in access. It also highlighted the lack of local content testing services for new street drugs, and the difficulties that that brings, the difficulties for that group to engage virtually, and the challenge of accessing PPE. NIADA warned that its experience, which is substantial, suggested that a rise in substance abuse often accompanied a recession.

On a more positive note, we heard of effective support from the Public Health Agency to organisations within NIADA, good partnership working across organisations, and imaginative solutions during the difficult period at the start of

COVID, which we welcomed. The Committee made follow-up enquiries to the Department on the matters raised, including issues outside the Department's immediate remit, such as the availability of broadband, which can have a significant impact on access to services and healthcare, particularly given the current reliance on virtual engagements.

Remaining to be scheduled are the Committee's consideration of the mental health action plan and a future mental health strategy. To that end, we intend to engage with the mental health champion.

Consideration of mental health care links to the review of urgent and emergency care. The Committee wrote to the Minister recently seeking an update on that work as we know that the pandemic has increased the pressures on emergency services and departments, impacting on crisis response times and capacity.

The Health Committee is very much aware of the range of mental health challenges that we face, and the collaborative inter-departmental and cross-agency working that is required to address them. The Committee hopes to play its part in delivering the change that we need in that respect.

I want to touch on the issue of media guidelines, which I think was mentioned. The Samaritans have produced extensive media guidelines in the reporting of suicide. An alarming issue raised its head again this week in reporting sometimes inaccurate figures and engaging on social media in a way that is not helpful. Indeed, it can sometimes be deeply hurtful to the impacted families and those working in the sector day and night with those people, and we should acknowledge their input. This project is one of many health transformation projects, and will work properly only if properly funded and co-production applied.

I acknowledge the debate taking place later today on the crisis response service in Derry. It is important that we provide services in a way that meets the needs of people, and that are accessible and meaningful. Colin McGrath mentioned the nine weeks, which is, obviously, not even being reached. Nine weeks can seem like a year; nine weeks can be too long. We need to deliver services in an accessible way.

I welcome the developments that the Minister of Health has brought in this area and the appointment of a mental health champion, and I

welcome the fact that the Executive have made a significant commitment.

**Ms Hunter:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this topic. I thank the Members for tabling this important motion. As our party's mental health spokesperson, I can say that it is definitely needed and I wholeheartedly support it.

I am sure that Members right across the House can agree that it is extremely distressing when a constituent approaches our office about waiting lists or lack of counselling support and there is so little that we can do. I recognise the value of the multi-agency triage team. Its work reinforces the need for on-the-spot mental health support and shows the importance of collaborative work and policies in the delivery of mental health care.

In my time serving as a councillor for Derry City and Strabane District Council and now as an MLA for East Derry, I have been greatly impressed by the work on and commitment to mental health care from local voluntary groups that I have met. They are providing vital services to their local communities in the midst of our ongoing mental health crisis and during COVID-19. One such service is the community crisis intervention service (CCIS) provided by Extern in the north-west, which provides a safe space for those in that area who suffer from mental ill health and, often, suicidal ideation. It operates an out-of-hours service on Thursday evenings right through to Sunday mornings, and I welcome the debate later today about CCIS. While last week's news that funding has now been secured until next March is most welcome, longer-term funding must be ring-fenced for organisations that are as crucial as this.

Since CCIS opened in January 2019, it has carried out 467 time-critical and immediate interventions, saving lives. The mental health action plan published earlier this year noted that the focus on:

*"crisis services requires close work between officials and services going forward."*

That includes de-escalation services. It is, therefore, disappointing that CCIS continues to fight for long-term funding. We cannot put a price on work such as that.

Last week, I chaired the first meeting of the all-party group on addiction and dual diagnosis, and I thank all Members who helped me to establish the group. It shows the support in the House for that important topic. I hope that the

APG will bring together a wide range of stakeholders and continue to better inform all our work on the sensitive and complex topic of mental illness and addiction. After speaking with the Northern Ireland Alcohol and Drug Alliance, I am mindful of the members of society who come into contact with the criminal justice system. They have unmet health needs, with mental ill health and addiction often being primary issues.

As we work towards removing the stigma around mental illness, I ask the Minister to please continue to keep mental health at the top of his agenda. We want our young people to grow up in a better, improved and inclusive Northern Ireland. They look to us, as politicians, to lead on mental health, so that is what we must do.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Given that it is 12.53 pm, if I were to call another Member, they would not have time to take an intervention and be finished before 1.00 pm, which is when the Business Committee is meeting, and I understand that Mr McGrath wants to run down to the basement to get some lunch.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm, and I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when the sitting resumes will be Question Time with the Minister of Education. This debate will resume after Question Time and the questions for urgent oral answer that have been tabled. The next Member to be called will be Karen Mullen.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.54 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Education

#### Face Coverings: Home to School Transport

1. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Education whether he will consider making face coverings mandatory for all post-primary students travelling on home to school transport. (AQO 651/17-22)

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** I thank the Member for his question. I believe that my Department has maintained a simple, clear and consistent message: that it is strongly recommended that all pupils using school transport, irrespective of age or the form of transport, should wear a face covering. That has been widely publicised through a range of communication channels. It is mandatory for all people aged 13 and over, unless they are exempt for a medical reason, to wear face coverings on public transport. The distinction between dedicated school transport and public transport services are because members of the public do not use dedicated school transport, which means that there is an overall lower level of risk.

The guidance took account of the advice of the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), who both input into the drafting process and did not recommend that face coverings were to be made mandatory on dedicated school transport. While I believe that the current position of strongly recommending their use is appropriate, the advice will be kept under review and it will continue to take account of the expert advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser.

**Mr McGuigan:** I hear what the Minister is saying about clear guidance. I do not accept that this guidance is clear; parents and young people have expressed concern about the inconsistency around the issue. We have mandatory face coverings for over-13s in public transport, and the Minister advised for the use of face coverings in communal areas in post-primary schools. Surely, Minister, you would agree with me that it makes more sense to make face coverings mandatory for post-

primary students who are travelling on a bus to school.

**Mr Weir:** If I agreed with you about making it mandatory, we would have made it mandatory. I think that what we need is a balance of things. We need to ensure what is appropriate advice for the circumstances. Dedicated school transport is different to general transport because there is not the same mix of ages.

The big problem, particularly with COVID-19, with regard to risks are not, generally speaking, between children; we know that there is a relatively low risk. It is actually about a mixture of children and older adults, with older adults being more vulnerable. Because school transport is dedicated purely to those who are using it for that purpose, a different approach is taken. However, I think that it is also appropriate that a balance is struck. If we have something that is mandatory, but not enforceable in practical terms, then it becomes a little bit of a bit of paper exercise. It is like saying, "Here is something which has to happen", when actually, from a practical point of view, schoolchildren will not be subject to fines or to any level of punishment as a result of not wearing face coverings. I think that if we simply say that something is mandatory but we have no means or practical measures of enforcement, then there is a slight danger that it becomes a bit of a toothless tiger.

Adjustments have been made to advice on a range of issues and, as I have indicated, I will be liaising closely with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. For example, there was a change made with regard to movement around schools on the basis of advice received from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser. I will always be guided by what is there with regard to public health, and we will always try to be responsive, so the advice on a range of things will have to be agile.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for his answers. Face masks are one form of prevention. Is the Minister confident that enough time, facilities and resources are being made available for the cleaning of buses during and after use?

**Mr Weir:** There are always things that can be done more perfectly. As part of the overall provision that was made to restart, as the Member may be aware, about £42 million was made available. Off the top of my head, around £3 million of that is for school transport. That is to try to ensure that there is additional cleaning

of buses and additional transport provision to try to ease the burden.

We have also sent out a clear signal that parents should explore active travel where it is doable and that, in the absence of that, parents should explore whether it is possible for them to take children to school directly themselves. Those are all measures that will mitigate the pressures on school buses.

In many ways, the Member in his question makes a valid point, which is that, if we home in on one aspect of things, we miss the wider picture. As with all measures that are being done to combat the threat of COVID, it is about providing a cocktail of measures, all of which play a role in trying to deal with the threat that is there.

**Mr Carroll:** I disagree: the Minister has been anything but consistent. He has performed U-turns left, right and centre all over the place throughout the crisis. Following recent changes announced by the Executive, can the Minister explain to me and the House how the virus spreads in the home but not in the school?

**Mr Weir:** I would, perhaps, be more worried if the Member were to get up and say that he agreed with me on something. I maybe would start questioning my advice at that point.

This may be a wider question for the Executive as a whole. The Executive as a whole have taken a view on the education of our young people and the major damage that would be done to our young people if schools were not being made available as much as possible and as normally as possible. That not only impacts on their education but has wider implications for society. It has wider implications for mental health, and, if we do not in the long run provide education for our young people, it will fuel poverty. It will have financial and economic implications and health implications.

The Member asked about homes. Obviously, in the context of specific areas in Northern Ireland, the Executive have taken a view that additional restrictions will apply in a home environment. That, in part, has been fuelled by the fact that, in comparison with a school or, indeed, a business, where there is a very controlled environment, the spread of the virus is a lot more uncontrolled in a home environment. The measures that have been taken by the Executive are to alleviate the spread of the virus. As with a lot of things, it means that there is a level of restriction on people who are behaving perfectly and observing every

conceivable action to prevent the spread of the virus, but, unfortunately, the irresponsible behaviour of some is creating problems for all of us.

## AS levels

2. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact of the exclusion of this year's AS-level work and grades on next year's student cohort. (AQO 652/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** It was made clear when the revised arrangements on grading were put out that the purpose of awarding AS grades this year was to enable young people who were not planning to continue to the full A level in 2021 to at least have an outcome that would enable them to progress to the next stage. The learning at AS level is an integral part of developing the necessary knowledge and skills, regardless of the assessment arrangements. The position taken on the cohort is in common with other jurisdictions. The normal procedure on AS levels towards A levels in Northern Ireland is therefore that you can take a percentage of a mark that was received at A level and then add that to a percentage of the mark taken at the A2 part of A level. Effectively, you are combining two marks. It becomes a lot more difficult — indeed, impossible — if you are trying to have a percentage of a grade, particularly an assessed grade, and are trying to combine that with a raw mark. You are trying, effectively, to combine a percentage of a letter grade with a numerical value, so to marry the two is difficult. Also, that would put in place a range of issues around equality for many of our students doing A levels. There would be implications if it were tried to marry the two together.

**Mr McGrath:** I am sure that that answer meant something, but you lost me halfway through it.

Is there not simply a change whereby pupils have done an awful lot of work over the past year and, in ordinary circumstances, that work and effort would contribute to their result next year and that is not the case this year? Students have spent a full year doing work that would normally contribute to a grade but is now not being considered. All of the pressure will be on their one year's worth of work, going forward.

**Mr Weir:** We are in unusual situations. The awarding of exam results this year was not, I think, what any of us would have wanted, but it is also the case that the situation around A-level results in 2021 will be the same for everybody,

irrespective of where they come from. In Northern Ireland, in particular, that is important, and it is certainly in line with what is happening in England and Wales and with the Scottish approach to Highers. With A levels, more than with any other qualification, our students are in direct competition with students from other jurisdictions. That means that the comparability and portability of our A levels are critical, because we represent around 2.5% of the overall number of A levels. It is critical that the universities and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) cannot say, "Your A levels are not of the same standard because they are not based on the objective evidence of exams. They are based in part on a level of assessment". We cannot face a situation in which our A levels are downgraded or considered to be of less worth than their counterparts across the water.

Not only is there direct competition there, but we need to ensure that all students in Northern Ireland are treated equally. We have direct control over the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) A-level grades, which represent about 80% of A levels here, but 20% of the A levels done in Northern Ireland are set by English and Welsh boards. If they are awarded on a completely different basis from those in Northern Ireland, you are not creating equality between students; indeed, you are not even creating equality between the different A levels. A student may get 2 CCEA grades and one from Pearson, AQA or Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) or another awarding body.

**Mr Irwin:** Are there any plans to decouple the AS level from the A level permanently?

**Mr Weir:** No. When it was made clear, in March or April of this year, what the arrangements for 2020 would be, there was reflection on the implications of a one-year decoupling. The ideal situation is having the AS examinations, with the mark contributing to the A level. Generally speaking, that is a sound system. The current situation, if you like, is to deal with the particular circumstances of COVID, and, if we can get back to a greater level of normality in exams, that is all the better. Certainly, the intention is that the actions taken as regards the 2020 AS levels will be a one-year solution. It is not something that I would like to see pertain for any longer than it has to.

**Ms Armstrong:** Minister, you mentioned that other jurisdictions were doing the same as we are doing here. Can you guarantee absolutely that that will not change during the year? A

number of our students sit exams that are not only from CCEA but from other areas, and, if the other areas take the AS, it will have a detrimental impact.

**Mr Weir:** I cannot guarantee what other jurisdictions will do; that is clearly the case. From that point of view, we will always need to keep an eye on what happens elsewhere and keep in close coordination. The overriding concern is to ensure not simply the integrity of examination results but, in particular, that none of our Northern Ireland students are treated unfairly in any way in comparison with their compatriots elsewhere or, as the Member rightly pointed out, with Northern Ireland students who take examinations from bodies outside Northern Ireland. There will always be an examination of what is happening, and I will make sure that, at any stage, our students are not disadvantaged when it comes to A-level results.

A levels, more so than any other examinations, become a national and international gateway to university places, in particular; more so than, for example, the GCSE market, which is a lot more self-contained in Northern Ireland and is, principally but not exclusively, used for progression and employment in Northern Ireland.

I certainly give the assurance that we will make sure that we are on a level playing field with other jurisdictions. The dilemma that will sometimes come is that different jurisdictions also go in different directions, but the one thing that I am certain of is that it would be utterly wrong for Northern Ireland to go on a solo run as regards A levels, particularly given our size and because I do not want to see any student in Northern Ireland being disadvantaged.

**2.15 pm**

### **Schools: Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Area**

3. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the current arrangement between Carrickfergus Grammar School and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, whereby the school is using a council-owned building, which is also used and run as a community centre, as a satellite classroom. (AQO 653/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The COVID-19 pandemic had a very significant impact on society. In seeking to get pupils back in to education, my Department

provided guidance for schools on how to achieve that while enacting measures to minimise risk. Although I had no direct role in the discussions between Carrick Grammar and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, I had the opportunity to visit the school to see the arrangements that had been put in place. It is part of a wider, deeper partnership that allows the school to use nearby council premises, which relieves some of the pressure directly in the school. I am also aware from the visit that good work is ongoing — I think that it is at planning stage — on shared facilities such as sports pitches. Although I cannot comment on individual school arrangements, I welcome the cooperative arrangement between local government and, in this case, Carrick Grammar.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Minister for his answer. As he alluded to, it is one of a number of projects that have taken us to a new level of collaborative working between educators, local government, elected reps and other agencies, such as Sport NI, in my constituency. The project was due, of course, to the current pandemic, but does the Minister agree that those partnerships could really be the new norm, reflecting previous reports?

**Mr Weir:** I am always wary of the phrase "the new normal" given the events of the last number of months. That level of cooperation, co-design and working together is very much a shining example. I was very impressed by the work in Carrickfergus between the council and the school. Although none of us has a crystal ball to be able to gaze in to the future, we will be moving ahead in what may well be a fairly tough financial situation, so we need to ensure that we get the best possible delivery for society and communities as a whole. If there is one good thing to emerge out of COVID, it is that it can help to break down barriers and make sure that, across government and different institutions, there is less of a silo mentality and we look to see where there can be the best possible benefit for schools and wider delivery for the public. I encourage others to look at what is happening at Carrick Grammar; it is a shining exemplar of some of the things that can be done in the future.

**Ms C Kelly:** Minister, is your Department undertaking to look at the potential of utilising community and other civic buildings for schools in the event of localised outbreaks and school closures?

**Mr Weir:** We will liaise with schools, the EA and others in relation to that. To some extent, it is

something that can be drawn out at a later stage. If we are talking about localised lockdowns — we have seen what has happened over the last week or two — the aim must be to try to protect schools as much as possible from that happening. If, next year, there is a need for a greater spread of pupils to enable examinations to take place, people in the community have been in contact to say that they would be happy for their local hall of whatever description to be used. There is an opportunity that can be utilised. At the moment, it is not one that needs to be actioned. Where there has been a further spread of coronavirus in schools, the direct impact has been that pupils or staff members have been asked to self-isolate, which, in and of itself, means that people will be at home rather than using additional facilities. However, we are certainly very open to those sorts of solutions.

### Post-primary Transfer Test

4. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to introduce a single post-primary transfer test. (AQO 654/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** My Department does not provide the transfer tests. It is a matter, ultimately, for the Association for Quality Education (AQE Ltd) and the Post Primary Test Consortium (PPTC), which provides the GL test, to determine the most appropriate way forward for the delivery of the tests, including consideration of a single transfer test option. However, I have great sympathy for the Member's question. If we could reach a point where there is a single set of tests, that would be an advantage.

I understand that some work has gone on between the organisations. There may be a question mark over whether that has been slightly delayed or slowed by COVID. From the point of view of provision, roughly 1,000 pupils each year tend to do both sets of tests. So, there is a subset there. We could spend all day talking about the transfer test, but I do not think that there would be a consensus in this House on the subject. However, at least if the two organisations providing it could work together to provide a single robust test, that would ease the pressures for a lot of our parents.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you for your answer. It is in the best interests of children to find a way forward that is inclusive for all children. If a single test were eventually established, do you envisage that that would be cost neutral to parents?

**Mr Weir:** We are probably going some distance from the question. One of the issues, to some extent, would be that the overall cost would be considerably reduced because the mechanisms for having two sets of tests would not necessarily be there. Ultimately, there will be some cost, and assuming that those would still be private tests, there would then be a balance to be struck between what would be provided by those schools that are using it to provide for the children and whether there can be a contribution from parents. That is an element of detail that could prove part of that. The more that we can create a situation in which there is no direct financial burden on parents, the more it would be welcomed by everybody.

**Mr Lyttle:** The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is consulting on proposals for an alternative approach to GCSE, AS and A2-level curriculum and assessment for this academic year due to exceptional circumstances. Why does the Education Minister support that, albeit, out of time, consultation for an alternative approach to those examinations, but he is dogmatically opposed to any such consideration of alternatives to requiring 10-year-old children to sit five examinations for post-primary transfer during a global pandemic?

**Mr Weir:** I admire the Member's ingenuity at being able to engineer the transfer test into the latter part of that question. Academic selection is legally allowable, and it is right that schools have the opportunity to use it. The only robust way that this can actually take place is with tests. Whatever one's view, particularly on the awards during the summer, tests are clearly highly more preferable than having a situation in which there is any form of CCEA-based or assessment-centre-based assessment.

The reality is that there is no methodology at primary-school level through which assessment can take place without tests. I have more sympathy for the position of the SDLP or Sinn Féin, who are abundantly clear on their position, but, at the heart of this, if the Member is saying, "Let us abolish academic selection completely", the logical output of what he is saying is, "Let us end the grammar school system". The Member cannot have his cake and eat it. If he wants to say that, on the one hand, he is pro-grammar but anti-academic selection, that is a matter of intellectual gymnastics that the Member may feel he is able to pull off, but I do not think that he is fooling anybody. While I do not agree with it, I at least admire the much greater openness of the position of those parties that are simply

opposed to academic selection. I make that very clear.

**Ms Mullan:** Minister, you recently announced £5 million for schools to support our young people's mental health and well-being. While this is very welcome, it is at odds with the pressure of academic testing. Is it not time to bring an end to academic selection and stop putting this pressure on our very young children?

**Mr Weir:** That question is maybe a little bit closer to the centre. I admire the Member's ability to work that in. I believe, first of all, that while there is a right to academic selection, it needs to be respected. There is both strong support for and strong opposition to academic selection, but it needs to be facilitated while it is legal. The next question from the Member's colleague is on the broader issue of the well-being initiative, so I will try to pick up that detail more when Mr McHugh raises it. No, I do not think this is the time, and I am sure the Member would be very surprised if I suddenly said yes.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, the transfer test has been postponed until January. Is Christmas cancelled for young people and the families of the children who are affected?

**Mr Weir:** No, it is not. The position with the dates is as I indicated in my opening response. The dates of the tests are set by AQE and PPTC, so it is their choice as to when to do that. The role of the Department, arising out of the areas of implementation from the Education Authority, is whether or not, from the point at which tests are done, there is sufficient time to complete the processes to ensure that everybody is able to transfer on time. It is clear that, on the basis either of earlier tests in November/December or of later tests in January, the response from the EA is that it can be done in time to ensure that everybody transfers. The choice ultimately lay with the test providers, but it is able to be done within that.

There are mixed arguments about what the best possible date is. I appreciate that some parents have said that their children are ready to do it in November/December and would prefer to do that. Others will say that, actually, given some of the interruptions that there have been, a bit of additional preparation time will be beneficial. In many ways, it is a slightly moot point, because the choice lies with the two organisations that are setting the tests.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Iarraimse ceist ghairid ar Maoliosa McHugh agus freagra

gairid uirthi sin. If we can get a quick question and quick answer, we can just about fit it in.

## **Schools: Well-being Initiatives**

**Mr McHugh:** Go raibh maith agat, ceist uimhir a cúig anois.

**Mr Weir:** I am making the assumption that that is question No 5.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Yes.

5. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the £5 million allocation to schools for well-being initiatives. (AQO 655/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I am not 100% clear. Unfortunately, perhaps, the £5 million figure has actually been used in two different contexts. I presume that the Member is talking about the £5 million that was part of the wider package for the restart. It is anticipated that the £5 million Education Restart well-being project funding will be allocated directly to schools, subject to business case approval. By receiving their own allocation, schools will benefit from having the flexibility to use the money to provide health and well-being support and to draw down support for their pupils and staff. There is also, separately — it was previously mentioned as part of the overall budget — an addition of £5 million in general well-being initiatives. I believe that, with some support from our Health colleagues, we will be able to make that a slightly bigger picture in connection with that, so two streams of money will be made available. One will probably go to particular projects that will support the school sector, and one is likely to be directly allocated to schools for them to decide where they feel it is best to deploy that resource and to use their knowledge on the ground.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Maoliosa. Just a brief supplementary. We will get you in.

**Mr McHugh:** It is of utmost importance that you take into consideration the emotional health and well-being of students now that they are back in the classroom, so how will CCEA's consultation on the curriculum and exams take into consideration the mental health and well-being of students? In a sense, too, that very much relates to the previous question about the 11-plus. I come from a community where people have long memories. They remember how children did in the 11-plus, but they do not remember how they graduated after it.

**2.30 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Can you give a very brief answer, Minister?

**Mr Weir:** I think that time is, effectively, gone. On all three points, it is important that there is that level of support. That is why there is separate funding for the engage programme, which will deal with academic catch-up, and it was important that that was not done simply as an exercise in and of itself, but that specific money was directed towards well-being. For all of us, being able to establish the impact on well-being of COVID's interruption to education — even today, there is probably not an absolutely clear picture —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Minister, we have run over a wee bit. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to topical questions. Number 4 has been withdrawn.

### **Craigavon Senior High School: Lurgan Campus**

T1. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Education, after stating that he appreciates the pressures that the Minister and his Department are under because of COVID-19 and asking the Minister to forgive him for going back to an important local issue, whether, given that a report from as far back as 2015 identified that there are serious safeguarding and educational output issues at the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School, he can provide an update on where we are in dealing with those issues and the school estate. (AQT 361/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Yes, if the Member will give me a minute or so. I have had the opportunity, both when I was Minister previously and in the interim, to visit the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School. I am entirely aware of some safeguarding issues there and also of the physical state of building.

As the Member will be aware, a development proposal was made which was then, effectively, stopped by way of a court case. That has meant that matters have had to go back to a previous situation. As such, as I understand it, the EA has agreed a range of options. It will update a draft case for change consultation document which reflects the judicial review ruling. That has been completed. EA officers will update the data that is contained in the draft case for change. The EA, in conjunction with the Controlled Schools Support Council, met

the principal and board of governors at the end of August with regard to the updated case for change, and will seek approval to rerun the pre-publication consultation on what has been put forward.

I am somewhat constrained in giving an answer because any development proposal will ultimately come back to the Department and to me as the final legal arbiter. Obviously, I am then constrained and cannot make any comment that is either favourable or negative towards any development proposal without potentially prejudicing the process.

**Mr Beattie:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I absolutely understand the constraints that he is under. However, the Minister will know that working-class families and children in the non-selective education sector in Lurgan, who deserve the same standard of education as those in the selective sector, do not see a two-year post-primary school — the only one in the UK, I must add — as a way to improve those children's educational attainment. Nor will bussing them to Portadown help them. Is the Minister willing, within the next month, to meet parents of children from that school to discuss the issue, free from politicians and the spin that, in some way, it is damaging the Dickson plan?

**Mr Weir:** I am happy to meet whoever. I cannot comment on any particular aspect of any proposal. If there are solutions, either in Lurgan or the wider Craigavon context, it would be wrong of me to comment on their merits. It is important that all children get the best possible opportunities. The current position with Lurgan has not been helpful in that regard.

I appreciate that there are different views on the issue. There is a need to bring as much certainty as possible to it. I do not have any problem, in principle, with meeting whoever. I would need to check on the propriety of any meeting, because I know that, when a development proposal process is initiated, there is a period when the Minister can meet various individuals and receive representations, for example, and there are periods when the Minister is barred from doing that. Subject to not being barred from having a meeting, I would be more than happy to have one.

### **Education Restart: Parental Anxiety**

T2. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education, after commending staff and parents for the extra work that they have put in to allow schools to reopen, what his Department is doing to engage with parents who have not yet

sent their children back to school either because they, their children or someone else in the family home has an underlying health condition, particularly because, although schools have been open for quite some time, for many people, the anxiety that they felt at the onset of the pandemic has not abated at all. (AQT 362/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** There is a small range of children that have very specific medical conditions. The EA and ourselves will be working with them to ensure that resources and online learning can be put in place. There are two aspects to this. The level of return to school that we saw maybe showed that, in Northern Ireland, we took advantage of taking that little bit longer to put things in place. For example, what we saw in other jurisdictions that returned to school at an earlier stage, was that they had a large percentage of parents and children staying away.

The figures for Northern Ireland would suggest a willingness of parents for their children to be there. I think I saw the Member's colleague expressing great joy with his own family getting in. I will not comment on whether he was just keen to get rid of his family or whether he was just keen to see schools resuming. It is undoubtedly the case that if you look at attendance in the first week or two of the school term, the figures are, broadly speaking, very comparable to what they would normally be. That would suggest that overall the number of parents who feel that they have to hold back their children is fairly minimal.

One of the major challenges that is out there is to ensure that parents have the most up-to-date and precise information. Working with the Public Health Agency, we produced a very simple flowchart that provides information for parents on what to do in particular circumstances, and that has been sent out through schools.

Perhaps understandably, one of the issues at the very start of schools resuming was a large volume of calls from parents to the Public Health Agency with concerns, for example, about whether their child needed a test. On the first day, I think in well over 90% of those calls, no test was needed.

It is about trying to ensure that parents have the maximum amount of information and communication.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thank you for your answer, Minister. Can you give us some assurance to those parents who are concerned and do not

think that their child should be returning to school, that there will not be a penalty and that you will deal with each case on a case-by-case basis and treat the parents with sensitivity and flexibility?

**Mr Weir:** There is a broad duty to educate young people, and I want to see that duty fulfilled. Neither the Department nor I — or anybody else — want to be punitive. It is about a pastoral way of working alongside parents. Clearly, there is a requirement that if a child is registered with a school, that that child should attend, but I think that, given the circumstances, there will be a sympathetic and understanding approach taken. Sometimes, the message to parents will have to be that the safest place for their child is in school, with a few exceptions if there are medical complaints.

We do have to give an indication, particularly to parents, that the risks to children in the pandemic are extremely low. Statistically, there is a greater risk of a child having an accident and injuring themselves, or even dying, at home. That perhaps puts it in context.

I have no desire to be punitive towards parents. It is understandable that some parents will have a strong reaction. As with a number of issues, and judging by the correspondence that I get, there will be a number of parents that will be at opposite ends of the spectrum on some of these issues, while the vast majority are probably relatively silent in the middle.

## Schools: Hygiene Levels

T3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Education, after offering his appreciation for the work of the Minister and his officials in preparing for the return to school, with the processes and procedures that have been put in place, for an assurance that schools are clean and hygienic places for all children and that ongoing cleanliness is maintained. (AQT 363/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Member raises a very valid point. With a lot of things related to COVID, we tend to focus in on some issues and almost pass by others. The issues around hygiene, good hand sanitisation and ensuring that schools are cleaned, are critical. As part of that, the overall package that the Executive agreed — and I think that there have been indications that it is not the final position — of £42 million support for the restart of schools, included money specifically for additional cleaning, and also in the wider context, for PPE. When people think of PPE, they think of face coverings and gloves, but the vast bulk of the money that is

earmarked for PPE is for cleaning materials and hand sanitiser. It is also the case that, through my working alongside the Executive, further support has been made available since that announcement to ensure that, projecting into the future, provision of hand sanitisers is the Department's number-one priority. That has been accepted by the Executive as a whole, and we will see support emerging for that.

We have seen particular incidents happen. There have been occasions on which schools have either been closed for a period or partially closed for a deep clean, and that has been facilitated as well.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his response. Can he give us an assurance that the funding will continue, as it is necessary that proper resources be put in place, that overtime be available and that contract cleaners be available? Can he give an assurance that funding of that will not fall to boards of governors, which are already under pressure to manage their school with limited resources?

**Mr Weir:** What I will say in response to that is twofold. First, the Executive have agreed an overall package that goes beyond the £42 million. It covers cleaning materials and PPE beyond the period of the situation as is but also meets the assessed needs for the rest of the financial year.

Secondly, on the broader issue of additional overtime and cleaning, within the overall provision, a certain amount has been made available to schools for them to have the flexibility to spend the money themselves to meet additional pressures as they see fit. To some extent, what has been put in place will carry us only so far. At later stages, there will probably be a need for additional support from the Executive, and I will be making that clear when bidding for that money.

It is a little bit of a false dichotomy to say that a particular resource comes from a certain budget, be it the from Department of Education's, the EA's or an individual school's, because, ultimately, the money comes out of the system as a whole. It is therefore wrong of us to draw that level of false division. There is a need for resources to be supplied, and the health and safety of our pupils and staff will be the number-one priority. That is why, when additional money was being sought from the Executive in the past couple of weeks, PPE, including hand sanitiser, soap and other materials, was highest in the ranked order of priority in our bid to the Executive.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call Mr Christopher Stalford. We should be able to fit in a quick question and a quick answer.

## Arellian Nursery School

T5. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Education whether he will take a direct interest in Arellian Nursery School in South Belfast and ensure that any child who applies for a place at that school is in the position to get one, given that, every year that Mr Stalford has been a Member of the House, Arellian Nursery School has turned away children, leading to, this year, he and the school's principal seeking a temporary flexibility request for eight additional places, which was refused by the Education Authority on the ludicrous pretext of insufficient demand. (AQT 365/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I have perhaps been accused of being more Orwellian than Arellian in my approach to things.

It is probably wrong for me to comment on an individual school without having the information. We will look into the wider situation at the nursery school. Traditionally, a slightly different policy approach has been taken for preschool that has suggested that numbers are a lot tighter. It has also sometimes been the case that, on the broader preschool side of things, there will be a restriction on the numbers that can be in a preschool that is not necessarily the case for primary and post-primary schools, because of restrictions on what numbers can be fitted in safely. As Minister, however, I am certainly happy to look into the situation at the nursery school.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** You have time for a very brief supplementary question.

**Mr Stalford:** Very briefly, can the Minister outline to the House whether he has any plans to review the criteria that are used for allocating nursery school places, in order to ensure that no parents are discriminated against when applying for a place for their child?

**Mr Weir:** I do not want to see anybody discriminated against, so, as part of a wider range of things, that will probably be looked at.

As Members can appreciate, particularly as a result of COVID, issues that normally might have been a little ahead in the agenda have probably been backed up to an extent. It is therefore a question of working through a wide range of issues, but I will be keen to look at the level of nursery provision that there will be.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two to allow the Minister and Members to enter the Chamber for the next item of business.

2.45 pm

## Finance

### RHI Inquiry Recommendations: NICS Implementation

1. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Finance what work has been undertaken to action the recommendations relating to the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) inquiry report. (AQO 666/17-22)

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** The Executive have accepted in principle the recommendations of the RHI inquiry report and, in line with the NDNA commitment, established a subcommittee to consider the recommendations of the RHI report in full and to oversee their implementation. That subcommittee met for the first time in July.

The subcommittee heard that significant work has already been done in response to the evidence given to the inquiry, including new codes of conduct for Ministers and special advisers. The Executive subcommittee is due to meet again in October and it will bring a full report on the actions taken and proposed for each recommendation to the Assembly before the Christmas recess.

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Minister for his answer. In the spirit of openness and transparency, as identified in the RHI report, for which you are the lead Minister, will you publish in full all unclassified emails that refer to the non-order of PPE made by his Department with the Irish Government? The unclassified emails may be of particular relevance to the forthcoming Northern Ireland Audit Office report.

**Mr Murphy:** I have no difficulty in supplying the Committee with information that it has asked for, and we have supplied it with information that it asked for. I am, of course, happy to comply with any of the guidance and regulations in the ministerial code of conduct or the code for special advisers.

**Mr Boylan:** Will the Minister give us any further update on the Executive subcommittee?

**Mr Murphy:** As I said in my initial answer, the subcommittee met in July. It is an Executive subcommittee and is made up of a number of Executive Ministers. Work had already been undertaken in advance of the conclusion of the RHI inquiry. There has been a review of risk management across the Departments by group internal audit and fraud investigation services; a revision of guidance for project management; an initiation of a project delivery profession within the NICS; an NICS people strategy; a review of business case and expenditure approvals; an initiation of reviews into record management policy and the electronic management system; a review of whistle-blowing; the institution of a more senior grade for the role of private secretary; and new practice guidance for private offices. All of that work began in advance of the subcommittee sitting.

Obviously, work was done on the ministerial code and the special advisers code, and that has been published and adopted by the Executive. We will analyse that work and the work that has yet to be completed as per the NDNA commitments and the inquiry recommendations that the Executive have agreed to accept in full and to implement. As I said, the intention is for the subcommittee to sit again in October and to bring out a report before the Christmas recess.

**Mr O'Toole:** Given what the Minister has just said and given that a new head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service will be appointed in the next few days, what conversations will the Minister and the First Ministers be having with the new appointee about urgently implementing the findings of the RHI inquiry? Minister, you will agree that the public in Northern Ireland have yet to be convinced that we are seeing real structural reform in our Civil Service following the scandal of RHI and other things.

**Mr Murphy:** If a person is, indeed, appointed in the next couple of days, that person, from what I have seen of the shortlist, will be a permanent secretary, so they will be very much cognisant not only of the outworkings of the RHI Inquiry but the Executive's clear view in accepting the Inquiry's recommendations and undertaking to implement those recommendations and the work that has been done to date on the various codes.

Of course, there is a wider piece of work, as the Member mentioned, around the reform of the Civil Service, and that is something that will fall to my Department. We have already started that work and we have begun discussions with senior civil servants in that regard. I intend to

bring that work forward to complement the findings and outworkings of the RHI Inquiry.

**Mr Blair:** Flowing from the RHI report, is there in existence a list of targeted recommendations with actions that have deadlines and do those actions have owners who can be identified for progressing them?

**Mr Murphy:** The RHI report and the outworkings of the inquiry are about restoring confidence and about ensuring that the things that caused the RHI scandal are not done in the way they were before, so that we can ensure that there is a different way of approaching things. There is a huge number of lessons within that, so it is important for public confidence that it is seen that the recommendations from that report are implemented in a timely fashion with urgent actions attached to them.

We have already undertaken and implemented some of the recommendations; some of the work began before the inquiry had even reported. I am not sure whether the Member was on the working group prior to the Executive being reformed, in which the five parties were already looking at some of the issues and making recommendations. A significant amount of work has already taken place but we want to ensure that confidence in the working of this institution is restored. The experience of the RHI debacle has deeply dented confidence in that working, so the recommendations and the actions that flow from the inquiry and from the work being done by the RHI subcommittee need to be done — and be seen to be done — in a way that restores public confidence.

## COVID-19: Treasury Funding

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance how much extra funding has been provided for the people of Northern Ireland by HM Treasury since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. (AQO 667/17-22)

6. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the scale of the additional financial support provided to Northern Ireland by HM Treasury in response to COVID-19. (AQO 671/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to group questions 2 and 6. The Executive has received £2.2 billion of funding from the Treasury as part of its COVID-19 response.

**Mr Allister:** In addition to that, of course, there was the extensive support for the furlough scheme. The Economy Minister told the House this morning that up to a quarter of a million people benefited from that scheme. When we add in that direct aid, is it a reasonable assumption to conclude that there must have been aid of the order of about £5 billion of extra funding to Northern Ireland since the onset of COVID? Is it the case that £800 million or thereabouts remains unspent at the centre?

**Mr Murphy:** I cannot attribute the level of funding that the Member does to the employee retention scheme. Of course, there is also a scheme for self-employed people, from which about 78,000 people benefited. We do not have the exact figures for that. I know that the Member is extrapolating, but the figure that we were allocated for the Executive to dispose of was £2.2 billion. The Member is correct; perhaps not that figure in total but in the region of £600 million is with the Health Department and was allocated as part of its COVID response. We are working with the Health Department to ascertain how that will be spent, because it has to be spent within this financial year.

Obviously, the Health Department is, quite rightly, preparing for the distinct possibility of a second surge of COVID and for what will be required to meet and manage that. It has other challenges to face, then, as a consequence of the COVID experience, in the other health services that it provides. We are working closely with the Department to examine whether it will need all of that money or be able to spend all of it and, if need be, whether it can be surrendered and spent on other Executive priorities.

It is my intention, then, to bring a paper to the Executive on Thursday, which will allocate the bulk of the remaining money that the Member identified. However, some will be held because, as he will know, we have yet to agree as to how we will support some sectors. I understand that there has been some movement on that between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the Economy Minister and the Infrastructure Minister. Rather than allocate it, we have decided to hold back a certain amount of money to be able to deal with some of those sectors that have missed out thus far. The bulk of the money resides with the Health Department at the moment, and once we determine whether it will be able to spend all of that, we will know whether that is catered for or whether there will be more returns to the centre for further distribution.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. It has already been said that the Northern Ireland Audit Office announced on 2 September that £2 billion extra had come from Her Majesty's Treasury. That is another benefit of being part of the Union. Has the Finance Minister had further conversations with Her Majesty's Treasury about the furlough scheme being extended in Northern Ireland as the scheme come close to its end and does he have the support of the Finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales for that?

**Mr Murphy:** Yes. I have had discussions with Treasury about the furlough scheme. I have made no secret of the fact, probably, that I think that it is premature to end the furlough scheme in October. When it was originally envisaged back in April, which is when I think that it came in, people clearly hoped to be well beyond the COVID experience by the end of October, but, quite clearly, given the experience here and in Britain in the last number of weeks, COVID is going to be with us for some time and we may well experience a resurgence. We had figures shared with us today, I think, to say that the number of people who are on the unemployment register has doubled in the last while. I notice that a lot of that has been attributed to young people who are becoming unemployed.

Clearly, to abruptly end the furlough scheme at the end of October is premature, and I made that representation to Treasury on a number of occasions. I wrote on behalf of the Executive a week or so ago to reinforce that view, again on behalf of the whole Executive, and to argue for an extension to the furlough scheme, and I have spoken on a number of occasions, and will be speaking again in the morning, to the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. Collectively, we will make that point to Treasury as well.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Will the Minister oblige me by providing, although maybe not today, in writing a per capita breakdown of COVID support for the people of Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic? Should the data evidence that the people of Northern Ireland are receiving above-average support, would he concede that there are benefits for Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom?

**Mr Murphy:** If the Member's idea of selling the Union is to say that we are and will always be dependent on handouts — those handouts are particularly from a Government that Members on the opposite Benches have accused of

betrayal on a number of occasions — putting your eggs in that basket to advance your argument for the Union is rather weak. Of course, we are taxpayers, and we received a share back, as the Government in Britain has distributed COVID response money. I can get him the breakdown that he wishes, but if I was a neutral in this argument, which I am clearly not, the idea that we will get handouts and that we are and will always continue to be dependent is not one that will sell the Union to me.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for his answers. Given that we are just over 100 days away from exiting and that there will be an accompanying loss of EU funding for rural development programmes, will the Minister give us any update that he might have from the UK shared prosperity fund (SPF) on the possibility of getting it transferred here?

**Mr Murphy:** One of the associated frustrations with how Brexit has been handled in London is that we have no clarity yet about the shared prosperity fund. That view is shared by colleagues that I speak to in the Scottish and the Welsh Administrations. We had expected some degree of certainty. The Executive have a very clear view on lost EU funding that the commitment to replace like with like and their desire to be in charge of designing the programmes and distributing the money for them is shared right across the Executive. We continue to press the case on Whitehall, but, as yet, we have had very little clarity on how much the fund might be and how it might be operated.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Question 3 has been withdrawn.

## Living Wage

4. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the New Decade, New Approach commitment that the Executive will become a living wage employer. (AQO 669/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** When setting public-sector pay policy for 2020-21 at the beginning of this month, I required all public bodies to actively consider how pay awards can be targeted to ensure the payment of the Living Wage Foundation's living wage. My officials will shortly begin to engage with each of the Departments to examine the practical implications for the public sector in taking that forward.

**Mr McGuigan:** Go raibh maith agat, Minister. Further to your response, Minister, do you agree that where wages and terms and conditions for workers are concerned, the Executive should be an exemplar of good practice and a model for other employers to follow?

**Mr Murphy:** My answer is yes we should. This policy is part of an NDNA commitment, which all the Executive parties signed up to. The living wage is, of course, a commitment where the Executive have an obligation to set a standard. The vast majority of civil servants are paid above the living wage but, nonetheless, there are the public bodies, which we can encourage along that route as well.

**3.00 pm**

As I said, in settling pay policy, I give flexibility for Departments and public bodies to meet this, and I encourage them to meet the living wage foundations: a living wage that is above what might be considered the national living wage.

**Mr Catney:** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he agree that, as the furlough scheme comes to an end, workers in certain sectors will be hit harder than others? Will he outline whether any further targeted wage-support schemes, to help workers in these struggling sectors, are planned?

**Mr Murphy:** As I said in an answer to Mr Humphrey, the continuation of that employee retention scheme, commonly known as the furlough scheme, is one that I have raised with Treasury on many occasions. I argued that it is premature to bring it to an end in October. Of course, there are particular sectors where, we have argued, if the Treasury is not to continue wage support in full, it should certainly look at specific sectors that will continue to struggle in these conditions. Even with a partial reopening of the economy, or an attempt to reopen it as fully as can be, there are sectors that will continue to struggle. We have seen unemployment numbers dramatically increase. That is evidence already, before the end of October, of the impact that there will be.

Of course, I agree with the Member that we need to target that, and we will continue to raise that question with the Treasury. My intention is to have more direct engagement, perhaps over in the Treasury, before the end of the month, if it can be arranged. I will continue to engage with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts; indeed, I will be speaking to them in the morning. We continue to sing off the same

hymn sheet about the need for a continuation of that scheme.

## Fiscal Council

5. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the appointment and terms of reference of the fiscal council, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 670/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** My officials began examining the options for establishing a fiscal council earlier this year, but work did not progress as intended, given the need to focus on the immediate COVID-19 response. However, my Department is now actively refocusing on the issue and consideration is being given to what the council's terms of reference might be and how members could be appointed. I will be able to provide a further update once the work has been sufficiently advanced.

**Dr Aiken:** Bearing in mind that it is eight months since New Decade, New Approach, we are having significant issues with getting details of budgets, what is happening with money supplies, what is happening in Departments and the fact that we do not yet have an economic plan — at least one that Members of the Assembly have had sight of — to get us out of COVID, will the Minister expedite the formation of the fiscal council so that not only are we able to, hand in glove, bring in an economic plan to get us out of COVID but be in a position to look at it and monitor it carefully to make sure that it is affordable and deliverable?

**Mr Murphy:** I agree that we have all lost time as a consequence of COVID. If the Member questions Ministers from all Departments, there will be work that we had all envisaged doing, particularly work related to NDNA commitments, of which the fiscal council is one, that has suffered a time lag because people have been so busy trying to respond to the challenge of COVID. We are picking that up, and will do so at pace. It is important, though, to get it right, to get the right powers and terms of reference for a fiscal council and to appoint the right people to it. We do not wish to delay any further. We want to get this done. It is a commitment that I intend to fulfil, but we need to make sure that it is done correctly.

Of course, among the difficulties, we have been on a cycle of annual budgets. We are now on a cycle that has been interrupted by the response to COVID. We are trying to deal with the additional money that was moved across, trying to spend it quickly, get it out there and make sure that it is properly audited and accounted

for. Following the spending review that has begun in Whitehall, I hope to be in a position, in the autumn, to announce multi-annual budgets. Then we will have greater clarity and advance sight of how Departments will spend the money, and that will allow Committees, the Finance Committee and others, to apply the appropriate level of scrutiny to Departments.

**Ms Armstrong:** I am delighted to hear the Minister say that we are working towards multi-annual budgets. Does he believe that a fiscal council needs to be up and running prior to the introduction of a multi-annual budget?

**Mr Murphy:** I do not think that the two events are necessarily linked. As I say, we have been told that there will be an autumn statement or an autumn Budget event in London. That could happen as late as November; sometimes these autumn statements have even run into December. We are not in control of that timetable, to be quite honest. Our intention is to get the fiscal council up and working properly, with the right people appointed and the right terms of reference. There is a linkage with the British Government in doing that, because they have a role in it, so that process is not entirely of our making. As I say, we have no control over trying to time that with what emerges from Whitehall in the autumn. If we get the right council in place and give it the right remit, hopefully, the two things will coincide, and they should have roughly the same time frame, but, as I say, we cannot exactly say when either of them will happen.

**Ms Dolan:** Can the Minister give an update on the fiscal powers commission?

**Mr Murphy:** Similarly, that is another piece of work that we had undertaken to do when we came into office in January, and it is another piece of work for which, unfortunately, the time frame has slipped, as is the case for work in a lot of other Departments, given the emergency that we were faced with during the COVID pandemic. Similarly, we are back looking very actively at the fiscal commission, at agreeing its terms of reference, at who might be on that commission and at how they might be appointed. We want to make sure that the fiscal commission can look, as they have done already in Wales and Scotland, at what other tax levers and financial levers the Executive might request to be transferred to here so that we can have much more control over our spending power.

**Mr O'Toole:** Further to that point, I have two quick questions. First, can he confirm that the

fiscal council and the fiscal powers commission will have real economic forecasting powers, given that simply bean counting will not be enough to solve the structural challenges that face this place?

Secondly, what conversations has he had with his counterparts in Scotland, Wales and elsewhere, including inside the Executive, about the appalling powers being taken in the Internal Market Bill to undermine the core tenets of devolution not just in this part of the world but across the UK? What is he doing to stand up, with other Finance Ministers, to what the UK Government are doing to breach the fundamental basis of devolution across these islands?

**Mr Murphy:** The remits of the fiscal commission and the fiscal council have yet to be decided, but, yes, we want to make sure that both can do the jobs that we expect of them.

On the other matter of the legislation that is going through Westminster, of course, he will know that the Executive are divided on that. We in the Executive have very different views on Brexit in its entirety but in particular on that Bill. I share the concerns that the Member has expressed. It is on the agenda for my discussion tomorrow morning with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. I know in advance that they share the same concerns that we have about the implications of that Bill for devolution. There will be an opportunity tomorrow for us, Wales and Scotland to agree a position and to make that position together to the British Government.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Question 6 was grouped with question 2 and has been answered.

## **Arm's-length Bodies: Review Update**

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the review of arm's-length bodies. (AQO 672/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The Executive agreed to a review of arm's-length bodies (ALBs), which, again, is a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. That committed us to carrying out a review of their efficiency and effectiveness, with a view to their rationalisation. The number of arm's-length bodies being considered is 116, with a total cost of approximately £11 billion and an estimated staffing complement of 135,000.

We have initiated a two-stage review. The first stage is about gathering background information from Departments on the bodies themselves: the budget; the staffing; the functions; internal and external board members and their remuneration; frequency of meetings etc; details of what the ALB has achieved and when it was subjected to a review, as well as the conclusion of that review; and where the ALB is located.

The second stage will involve looking at the rationale for the arm's-length body and considering whether the functions that it carries out can be delivered in the Department itself. Does it require political impartiality? Does it have a technical function that would be inappropriate for a Department to carry out? Are there overlaps with other ALBs? Has it outlived its purpose? Should it be abolished? Does it have sufficient transparency to the public about its activities and could that be improved?

That work is progressing well, and it is my intention that it will be brought to the Executive for consideration in the near future. It will include proposals for the rationalisation, efficiency and effectiveness of arm's-length bodies considered in the review.

**Mr McHugh:** Minister, do you agree that this will provide an opportunity for good governance, increased accountability and democracy and improved service delivery that will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy in arm's-length bodies?

**Mr Murphy:** I agree with the Member that the purpose of the review was to improve efficiency and effectiveness, and it has already identified emerging themes in the area of governance, including the regulation of boards, relationships with sponsorship officials, accountability to Ministers and regular reviews. We are considering all those issues. The outcome should be better public services delivered more efficiently, more effectively and more transparently. That is the overarching principle, and we want to see that achieved. As I say, work is ongoing and is progressing very well, and it is my intention to bring the report to the Executive in the not too distant future.

**Mr Frew:** Given the fact that I think we all support the review of arm's-length bodies, can the Minister assure the House that he will review governance and transparency in his own Department, and, indeed, the Department's information management policy so that his Department is completely transparent and

accountable and so that scrutiny Committees do not have to threaten court action in order to get information?

**Mr Murphy:** As I say, the retention of information policy is a Civil Service-wide one; it is not the Department's. It was adopted by the Civil Service some time ago when, possibly, one of the Member's colleagues might have been Minister of Finance. That is the policy that pertains today. It is my view that the Department is transparent and accountable and, of course, responsive to the Committee. It has always been my position in the Department that Committees are entitled to information that they request and that such information should be provided in a efficient and effective manner.

**Ms Armstrong:** Will the Minister consider extending the review to local government to assess whether additional functions could be added or transferred over.

**Mr Murphy:** I am afraid that that is not within the remit of this investigation. We do not consider local government to be an arm's-length body, as it has a degree of autonomy. Broadly, responsibility for the management of local government lies with the Department for Communities.

However, the Member makes a fair point. Big changes have been in place for some time in local government, so it is, perhaps, an appropriate time for the Executive to look at the powers that have been transferred to local government to see what has worked and what perhaps has not worked. I am always open to the idea of transferring further powers to local government. Local government has had an opportunity to step up to the plate in response to the pandemic, and I think that it has done so very well. Increased cooperation and collaboration between government and local government is a very good thing.

As I say, ultimately we are about providing better services to the public, and we are both in the same place in that regard. Therefore, the Member's suggestion could be timely. I would certainly support reviewing the powers of local government. However, that is not part of the review of arm's-length bodies.

## COVID-19: In-year Monitoring

8. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the impact current spending on COVID-19-related matters will have on future in-year monitoring rounds. (AQO 673/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The Executive are rightly considering the impact of COVID-19 as they make allocations, first, in response to the pandemic and then to aid our economic recovery. Alongside that, the Executive have considered all the other pressures faced by Departments in the context of the resources available, and allocations were made in the June monitoring round. In that round, Departments were given extra flexibility to reallocate budgets, and that will again be the case in the October monitoring round. The additional flexibility will assist Ministers to respond dynamically to the impact of COVID-19 in their respective Departments.

**Mr Robinson:** With the serious financial impact that COVID-19 could have on our finances, is there a possibility that the Minister will have to lobby the Treasury for additional block grant funding before the end of the financial year?

**Mr Murphy:** In the first case, we will want an assessment of what Departments have spent. In answering an earlier question, I discussed the money that I was able to allocate in response to COVID-19. We have spent a significant amount, and there will be further allocations this Thursday. There is, hopefully, sufficient money in Health to meet the challenges that it faces — perhaps more than a sufficient amount. So we need to look at that.

We need to look at where Department budgets sit, because Departments will not have done the business that they intended to do in the first half of this financial year. We had some returns in June monitoring. We are currently in the exercise of October monitoring, and we will bring a position to the Executive and the Assembly in the next number of weeks. We will see how Departments spend the money that they have. Some will have additional challenges because of COVID; others will have money that they would have spent but will not be able to spend because of the pandemic and the way that things have closed down. In the first instance, we need to look at our resources and see what we have before we decide on further interventions.

**3.15 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Question 8 has been withdrawn.

## **Review of Arm's-length Bodies**

**T1. Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Finance when the review of arm's-length bodies, which is focusing on efficiencies, effectiveness, governance and transparency, will be completed, given that conversations and discussions that the Public Accounts Committee has had with the Northern Ireland Audit Office have shown that it is an issue that, across government, has huge implications on finance and budgets, involving money that could perhaps be used much more efficiently and effectively. (AQT 371/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** There were something like 116 bodies, £11 billion worth of budget and 135,000 staff. The Member rightly asks whether some of that work can be carried out within Departments. There is no formula for the creation of arm's-length bodies. If you look into them, you find completely different times that they were set up. Most of them, I imagine, come from the direct rule era, when there was an attempt to create some veneer of local democratic input into decision making. The question is, post Good Friday Agreement and devolution, whether that is still appropriate. Of course, we need to look at all of that — efficiencies, effectiveness and transparency — and we have had and continue to have conversations with the Comptroller and Auditor General. I had a conversation when we started this exercise to outline our view and to take his feelings on some of these. Like the Member, I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee many times and know the questions that come through it. We are very cognisant of their view of what the outcome needs to be. It is well beyond time that we had a long, hard look at some of the arm's-length bodies and what is required in the future.

**Mr Humphrey:** Will the efficiency, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of North/South bodies be included in this work?

**Mr Murphy:** I would argue that the North/South bodies have probably not been able to get to their full remit for various reasons. Some of us, indeed, have a view that perhaps better, more efficient and more effective North/South bodies should have been created back in 1998-99, but that is another argument. Clearly, they are a joint agreement between this Administration and the Administration in Dublin; they are not singularly a matter for review by this Administration

## **COVID-19: Local Councils**

**T2. Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his Department's consideration of,

or any work that might be ongoing with the Department for Communities in relation to, the potential financial plight of local councils owing to income deficits that have been caused by the COVID-19 crisis. (AQT 372/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** We have a very good working relationship with the Department for Communities, as we do with all Departments. Finance works closely with every Department. We have had many engagements with the Minister and the Department for Communities. I think that we have another meeting scheduled for Thursday morning. We have already given, I think, an additional £20 million to councils this year for their COVID response. I am on record, in response to a previous question, acknowledging the role that councils have played and how they have stepped up in assisting with the public response to the pandemic and the public service response. I will make an allocation on Thursday from some of the remaining COVID money. There has been a bid with regard to councils, and I hope to make a proposition to the Executive on that.

**Mr Blair:** Further to that, can the Minister detail any scoping or investigation that is being done on behalf of his Department with the council representative bodies to assess the level of help needed as we move towards another financial year?

**Mr Murphy:** I had the opportunity, I think, on Friday to address a NILGA delegation and take questions from councillors from all 11 councils. It is hugely important to have that engagement. The closer the working relationship between central government here and local government, the better the public services that we will collectively provide. My Department, through Land and Property Services (LPS) and others, is working with the councils on rates. Engagement is happening on council spend and projecting council spend over the financial year. Yes, I absolutely want officials to continue to work with councils to assess their needs; of course, communities have a role there as well. While bearing in mind the limited pot that we have to go round all Departments, we must make sure that we support them as best we can.

### Arts Sector: COVID Support Funding

T3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Finance what progress has been made in seeking to secure funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQT 373/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** As the Member will know, money that comes across as a Barnett consequential is

unhypothesized; it is not ring-fenced for any particular area. In and around the time that that money came across, we made a £4 million allocation of some resilience money for the arts. As with the bid for the councils and local government, there has been a bid from the Department for Communities to support the arts. I see that very much as economic support as well, because arts venues are very much part of our tourism product and economic product. I am sympathetic to the arguments that were made and intend to bring a proposition on that to the Executive on Thursday.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister. On 31 March, the Minister informed the House of his strategy for coping with the COVID crisis:

*"We can be flexible and agile in our response" — [Official Report (Hansard), 31 March 2020, p12, col 1].*

Further:

*"We have allowed people to be agile. That is what the public would expect of us: to be as agile as we can, to be on our toes" — [Official Report (Hansard), 31 March 2020, p13, col 2].*

What is agile about sitting on £33 million for two and a half months, when the arts sector that it is supposed to protect is crumbling?

**Mr Murphy:** Over the summer months, we have been endeavouring to get an agreed economic recovery strategy from the Executive. I have said that I want to allocate the remaining money. We have a limited remaining pot of COVID money. The Treasury has made it clear that that is it as far as this financial year is concerned. Of course, we have the money sitting with Health, but, as regards what is at our disposal, that is it. I wanted to make sure that it was allocated against economic recovery proposals that the Executive had endorsed. We did not have those over the summer. We now have those, and I am in a position to make an allocation this week. I will bring a proposal to the Executive on Thursday.

### Victims' Payment Scheme: Progress

T4. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance what progress has been made in seeking to secure funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQT 374/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** As the Member will know, according to the statement of funding policy from Whitehall, the party that proposes and legislates for the policy carries the cost of the implementation of that policy. That is the Executive's position. The people who have done that are the British Government and the NIO. Now, what they have legislated for and the policy that they have put forward is not what was agreed at Stormont House. It is different from what was agreed at Stormont House, and, therefore, they own it. Acting on behalf of the Executive, it is my clear view — it is a clear argument that I have made to Treasury and the NIO on behalf of the Executive — that they are responsible for paying whatever this costs. As yet, we have no clear figures for what it would cost. The Northern Ireland Office and the British Government are responsible for paying out on the scheme.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Will the Minister accept that it was totally absurd for his party to seek to block the scheme, resulting in a court case? Will he give the House a commitment that he will now do all that he can in his position to secure the funding for the scheme so that there are no further delays?

**Mr Murphy:** I assure the Member that that is what I have been trying to do: seeking to secure the funding. We do not know what the funding will be. We do not know what the cost is. The Minister of Justice put out an estimate that it will perhaps be up to £800 million. That is completely different from the estimate that the Northern Ireland Office gave us a number of months back. I have been attempting to secure a commitment from the British Government to live up to their own statement of funding policy. It is part of their rule book. They created the policy and legislated for it and, therefore, own the cost of it. That is what I intend to do. There is an idea that the NIO was trying to steamroller us into accepting responsibility for it. Of course, a Department here has to be designated to carry it forward, but the real argument in relation to who pays for the scheme is still to be accepted by the British Government. That is what I intend to pursue, and that is what the Executive have asked me to pursue.

## **Building Regulations: Changing Places**

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to make Changing Places mandatory in building regulations. (AQT 375/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I am committed to incorporating Changing Places toilets into local building regulations as soon as possible. During the summer, I had the opportunity to meet Christine McClements, who has campaigned tirelessly for changes to building regulations in respect of Changing Places toilets. Following my meeting with Christine, I invited her to be part of the technical working group, and I am delighted that she accepted that invitation. The Department is now working through the necessary changes to make Changing Places toilets a requirement in new buildings that meet the specified criteria. Working with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, the Department is developing proposals for the mandatory provision of Changing Places toilets.

**Mr McAleer:** Given his responsibility for the Stormont estate, will the Minister provide Changing Places facilities in the grounds of the estate?

**Mr Murphy:** I am pleased to say that work is progressing to install a Changing Places toilet near to the Mo Mowlam play park, which is a fantastic facility on this estate. The promotion of Changing Places toilets represents an important step in ensuring dignity and equality for all. I have had an opportunity to speak to Christine and other campaigners, and I am aware that there are Members in the Chamber who have been campaigning on the issue as well. Particularly in relation to play parks, when you see the wonderful facilities, the fact that some children cannot access them or cannot access proper toilet facilities while they access the facility is clearly an equality issue. I am pleased that we will bring that forward in building regulations. We will take our own initiative in the estate we have authority over, and I am doing that right away.

## **Clear Face Coverings**

T6. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance whether Enterprise Shared Services in his Department could work, or is working, on delivering a video relay service or on coming up with a way to bulk-buy clear masks for customer-facing areas across the Civil Service, given that one of the outcomes of the COVID pandemic has been the effect that face coverings and the lack of face-to-face meetings have had on people such as her who have a hearing disability. (AQT 376/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I share the Member's difficulty, because I have a hearing difficulty and find it difficult, with the wearing of face coverings, to engage. I also find Zoom meetings difficult at

times in terms of trying to hear what people are saying. It is a real challenge for those who have a hearing impairment. I am not certain about what work has been carried out, but I am happy to take her question back to the Department and provide her with a written answer.

**Ms Armstrong:** I would like to just use my supplementary question to thank the Minister for getting to question 6 in topical questions. *[Laughter.]*

### Health Workers' Strike Pay

T7. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Finance when health workers will receive the money that they are owed, given that, as he will be aware, nine months on, money that was deducted from their pay, following justifiable strike action, has not yet been reimbursed. (AQT 377/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The Executive agreed, as far back as May, I think, to provide £1.6 million to reimburse health workers who had been striking, as they went back in to face the front line of taking on the COVID pandemic. I made that money available to the Department of Health, and it is, of course, a matter for the Health Minister to allocate that money.

**Mr McAleer:** It is incredible that the health workers have been working on the front line through COVID and the Health Minister is now saying that the matter lies with the Executive. Will the Minister clarify where the matter lies? Is it with him or the Health Minister?

**Mr Murphy:** The Health Minister has asked further questions of the Executive in relation to what he sees as a repercussive element to this. I am of a clear view, and I think that the Executive, when they endorsed the proposition to make the funding available, viewed the health workers, particularly those heading in to face the COVID pandemic, as a unique set of circumstances worthy of our support that does not apply to any other public sector employment circumstance. Of course, the Health Minister will want to satisfy himself about any questions that he has in this regard, but I am clear as Finance Minister and, I think, the Executive are clear in relation to paying those people.

3.30 pm

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That concludes topical questions. Members, take your ease while we prepare for the next item of business.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

### Infrastructure

#### North/South Electricity Interconnector

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

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why she announced her decision to approve planning for the North/South electricity interconnector on social media rather than in the Assembly.

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** The Member may not be aware that planning decisions have never been announced in the Assembly in the past. The long-established procedure is that, once the Minister has fully considered the application and taken a decision, it is normal practice for a letter indicating the outcome of that decision to be issued to the Speaker, the Chair of the Committee and all MLAs. That is the process that was followed, and my officials went over and beyond that to give early indications. At 12.10 pm and, again, at 12.15 pm, my official telephoned the Business Office to advise that a letter was coming for immediate issue to all MLAs; at 12.25 pm, my official telephoned the Infrastructure Committee Clerk to advise that a letter was coming; at 12.45 pm, letters were issued from my private office to the Speaker, the Chair of the Committee and to the Business Office, for all MLAs; and, at 1.22 pm, I announced the positive news via social media. As that timeline sets out, the process was correctly followed.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House to give a response. The Minister is well aware that this is a major infrastructure project. Numerous members of the community have relayed major concerns about house values and health issues; there have been thousands of objections. How will the Minister reconcile those concerns with her decision? What interventions or options will she provide to

address those major concerns? A number of groups in Newry and Armagh are very concerned about the introduction of a 400 kV electricity wire on pylons, as such voltage has never been used in this part of the country before.

**Ms Mallon:** I acknowledge the concerns of residents and the local community. Interested third parties were given the opportunity to present evidence to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) and have all issues debated at the public inquiry. The PAC carefully considered and reported on the issues raised but concluded that the various objections raised by third parties had not all been sustained. All issues were addressed in the PAC report. The Department has also independently considered those issues as well as all new representations made since the applications were remitted to the Department in the light of the Buick judgement, and it considers that a grant of planning permission is the correct decision.

I recognise the strength of feeling in the community and the concerns around the proposal. A development of this nature is such that it cannot be delivered without some impact. However, that has to be balanced against the imperative need for the development. I maintain my position that the need for the development outweighs any potential impacts and that, on balance, planning permission should be granted, subject to appropriate conditions to protect the surrounding environment.

**Miss McIlveen:** I share Mr Boylan's concerns about the manner in which this was announced. Regardless of the merits or otherwise of the decision, the fundamental issue is that, given the scale and implications of the announcement, it perhaps warranted, at the very least, a written statement. Will the Minister, who has been known to chastise others, give a commitment that any future announcement on this scale will be brought to the Assembly in a timely manner?

**Ms Mallon:** As I outlined, at 12.25 pm, my official telephoned the Infrastructure Committee Clerk to advise that a letter on the issue was coming. At 12.45 pm, my private office issued a letter to the Speaker, to the Chair of the Committee — her good self — and to the Business Office for all MLAs. There is a long-established process for doing that. My predecessor, Chris Hazzard, took two planning decisions: one to approve a major mixed-use development in Comber, and one to refuse a mixed-use development at Crescent Link in Derry. In both cases, he issued the relevant

letters, and no announcement was made in the Assembly. The same process was followed in this instance, and it has been followed by all former Ministers.

**Dr Aiken:** Can the Minister tell the Assembly whether anyone in her Department had briefed the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI)/EirGrid or the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment before the Assembly, any MLAs or Committees were informed?

**Ms Mallon:** The answer is no.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the Minister coming before the House. I am sure that she shares my concern, but not shock, about the double standards emanating from Sinn Féin, a party whose senior figures are under investigation for alleged breaches of this very House's COVID regulations. Does the Minister share my concerns?

**Ms Mallon:** I am the Minister for Infrastructure, and part of my responsibilities is to take decisions on strategic planning applications. As I outlined in answer to the original question, processes were correctly followed in this instance. I cannot speak or be held responsible for the actions of any other Minister in the House.

**Mr Muir:** I welcome the planning decision that was made on the back of the Executive Committee (Functions) Act, which gives the Minister permission to take the decision. Will the Minister outline what implications the lack of devolution for the past three years and the failure to form an Executive have had on the ability to take such decisions?

**Ms Mallon:** I very much share the Member's frustrations. We could be much further advanced on applications and policies to improve the lives of our citizens if we had been doing our jobs for the three years that we were suspended. There are planning applications of various levels of interest to all parties. I have no doubt that all would be at a more advanced stage if we had had a functioning Assembly and an Executive.

**Ms Bailey:** With the environmental impact of the new interconnector, the expense of construction and the recent drop in supply demand by up to 290 megawatts — SONI predicted that that will be the case until about 2029 — is the interconnector still our best option, or could public funds be better spent on

greener generation schemes, such as the Camlough hydro-electric pump scheme?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. There is still very much a need for this interconnector. It is of huge strategic importance in not just the area of energy security but in enhancing our ability to maximise our potential from renewable energies. In addition, it will provide an important boost to the construction sector during the construction phase, and, subsequently, we should be able to see an increase in employment opportunities in the area of renewable energy. I think that that has been confirmed by the level of support across all sectors, including the renewable energy sector, following the announcement yesterday.

**Mr Frew:** How often, when the Department for Infrastructure tweets about planning decisions, does it link the applicant to the tweet? Is the Minister assured, given the issues ongoing with SONI's governance, which is being investigated by the Utility Regulator, that she has been provided with all the relevant information from the applicant and that that information is accurate?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. The Member will be aware that I have to give very careful consideration to the planning application that is before me. He will also be aware that this application has undergone a rigorous process and was subject to detailed examination at the public inquiry. I do believe that there has been a rigorous process and that all the statutory processes that are required have been completed.

The departmental tweet was, obviously, tweeted from the press office in my Department. I do not suspect that there is any difficulty with that. I cannot say whether that is always done but I can provide that information to you.

**Mr Carroll:** Can the Minister confirm whether it was the Executive Committee (Functions) Act that allowed her to announce this decision? If that was the case, are there any further decisions on that scale to be announced by her Department in the coming weeks and months?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. The Executive Committee agreed that a Bill be brought forward by accelerated passage before the summer recess to address the implications of the Buick judgement. The Bill received Royal Assent on 21 August. Now that Royal Assent has been received, according to

the clear legal advice received by my Department, I, as the Minister, can take planning decisions without referral to the Executive Committee and prior to the updating of the ministerial code.

A number of other applications are being considered. For sound decisions to be reached, we have to ensure that all due processes and statutory processes are completed.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House to speak on this important issue. I am devastated today for Safe Electricity Armagh and Tyrone, local communities, campaigners, businesses, farmers and householders. There is going to be a terrible scar across our beautiful countryside in County Armagh.

I am pleased that we are able to meet here today with the lights on. If we were to listen to the arguments presented by SONI, the lights would be off. The interconnector should be underground. EirGrid recently demonstrated that it is laying a cable underground in County Clare and County Meath. Why is that not possible in County Armagh and County Tyrone?

That ugly line of unsightly pylons is going to be unacceptable through our beautiful countryside. We are all too aware that the lack of a coherent energy strategy has held back our economy and Government. This planning application is the result of an energy strategy decades old. Have the Minister and her officials considered the impact of this approval on the new energy strategy, which has still to be consulted on? Does she consider this decision to be premature, and why is the interconnector not being laid underground?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. His passion on this issue is clear, and I know that it reflects a passion felt by many in his community. I can deal only with the planning application that is before me, and this application was for overhead lines.

The new energy strategy is unlikely to be published until late 2021. Decisions on these planning applications must be taken within the prevailing policy and strategic context. Also, the Department for the Economy advised that the need for the second North/South interconnector has not changed. It is still considered a vital piece of energy infrastructure. The call-for-evidence document assumes increased interconnection and makes specific reference to the benefits of the new North/South interconnector in security of supply, facilitation

of renewables and downward pressure on costs for consumers.

That is consistent with previous energy policy.

**3.45 pm**

**Mr O'Toole:** Notwithstanding the local concerns about this issue, will the Minister confirm that this decision has been widely welcomed by business and industry on both sides of the border, is the most significant piece of strategic all-island infrastructure in generations and is also an important tool in delivering on our climate-change commitments?

**Ms Mallon:** I agree with the Member. This project is of strategic importance at an international, national and regional level. As I said, it is about improving the security of our energy supply and about improving our ability to maximise our renewable energies and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, and it is a strategic all-island project. As I said, I recognise local concerns about this issue, but we could see the reaction yesterday right across the island, where people recognised the strategic and economic importance of this project and, as the Member rightly points out, its importance in tackling the climate emergency.

**Mr Beggs:** Can the Minister quantify the degree to which this project will assist with renewable energy? How can she assure us that generators in Northern Ireland will be on a level playing field when they compete against generators in the Republic of Ireland, where, presently, favouritism is being shown towards new generation in the Dublin area?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. It has been confirmed that it will maximise our potential to draw down and utilise our renewable energy by building capacity and ensuring the free flow and connectivity of energy.

The Member raised other issues. The job for me, as the Minister for Infrastructure, is to give very careful and detailed consideration to the planning application; that is, the planning policy considerations and other material considerations. He may wish to direct his questions to other parties.

**Mr Durkan:** I fully understand local concerns and objections to this application. Indeed, I heard some of them during my tenure as Environment Minister. I recognise the difficulty in making major decisions such as this.

We have heard today of the huge benefits that this will bring to businesses and the welcome that approval has received from businesses. Will the Minister outline what this approval will mean for ordinary people?

**Ms Mallon:** It means that ordinary people will have a secure supply of energy for their home, and it means that businesses will have access to a secure supply of energy. We are working against the predicted backdrop of a deficiency in energy supply by 2025, so this is a big strategic project of great importance. That importance is at a high-level economic level and on an all-island level, but it will also have a hugely important impact in people's homes.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

## Health

### GP Services: Public Accessibility

**Mr Speaker:** Mrs Pam Cameron has given notice of an urgent oral question to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their places. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health how he plans to meet demand for GP appointments and mitigate obstacles encountered by patients seeking to contact their local doctor or practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I want to stress that GP practices are open and they are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed, as they require them. I have made sure that all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely. Information from the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) shows figures that indicate that the number of face-to-face contacts have increased from approximately 4,500 contacts per day in mid-May to just over 8,000 contacts per day by mid-August.

Members will be aware that GPs also have a contractual responsibility to provide core services to the registered patients, and the pandemic does not negate that. However, GPs will use their clinical judgement to decide how to best prioritise patients to provide this core service while maintaining patient safety. GP

practices are operating a telephone-first triage system, which allows patients to seek medical advice from their GP for routine and urgent problems. Then the GP uses clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be managed over the telephone, or whether a face-to-face appointment is required.

There are measures in place to assist GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. Those patients can then be referred for face-to-face assessment to one of the primary care COVID-19 centres. That ensures that those patients do not attend the GP practice or community pharmacy and that they are seen in an appropriate environment, as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimum disruption. Those COVID-19 centres are seeing the highest number of referrals since early May, and it is increasing.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July and asked them, if this had not been done recently, that practices should undertake a review of arrangements for patients who were accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times which are appropriate to meet the needs of patients.

Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available, and on how to access them. That is along with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open. On 7 September GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that while they may be seen in a different way, by phone or video link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and to issue prescriptions. Similar communications were also issued to MLAs.

Finally, Members will also be aware that GPs are responsible for the administration of the majority of the flu vaccines that are given during the annual flu programme. Given the importance of this year's vaccine along with the significant extended lists of those groups who are eligible for it, GPs are already making plans, which may include hiring larger venues or arranging additional flu vaccination sessions. As part of that, earlier today I signed off an additional £1 million of funding for general practice.

I want to take this opportunity to relay the message to all those listening: GP practices are

open. They may be slightly different at the moment, but if people have symptoms or an unexplained illness or have any reason to be concerned, I encourage them in the first instance to pick up the phone, because GPs are there, and they are there to help.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Minister for his answer. At the outset, let me be very clear that I absolutely do value the work of our GPs and understand the need to operate with much caution to ensure that GP services remain in place and open.

Minister, my office has been inundated, as I am sure the offices of most MLAs have been, with complaints around access to GPs. We are entering the winter flu season now, and it is unlikely that we are going to avoid a second wave of COVID-19. It is imperative that GPs are seen to be open for business and not for emergency cases only. It may well be a perception, but it is certainly a problem for the EDs and, indeed, for the pharmacists, who feel that they are bearing the brunt of the lack of access to physical or remote primary care.

Does the Minister recognise the very serious concerns, especially in the case of the more vulnerable and very elderly patients that some people are not always as fully capable of communicating their health problems to their GP by telephone and that more availability of face-to-face GP appointments is absolutely necessary to properly diagnose whatever their issue may be?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her comments regarding the pressure that GPs are currently under, as are our primary care providers. I also thank her for bringing this question for urgent oral answer to the Floor of the House, because I think that the specific issue that she raises is that of perception. That was particularly useful when the Royal College and the BMA issued that joint letter and that joint communication at the start of last week to reassure patients that our GP practices are still open.

Regarding the cohort that cannot use or is not comfortable with using telephone triage, it has been made clear that GPs should be open and accessible to those patients who need that face-to-face appointment. I referred to that ever-increasing accessibility to do face-to-face contact in my opening answer. We realise the number of face-to-face contacts that have been had in the past number of months, and that continues to increase, but we want it to be done safely for the GPs and the staff and especially for the patients. We have always been clear

and GPs have been clear that those people who need to see a GP face to face will get that face-to-face appointment.

**Mr Gildernew:** Thank you, Minister, for coming to the House to answer these questions. Like the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, I am getting constituents with increasing anxiety around access to GPs, and I know that all MLAs are. My colleague Martina Anderson asked in July what steps were being taken. Can the Minister advise what steps are now in place to improve the situation and to deal with the issue of flu vaccinations, given that the winter months are coming in and given distancing requirements?

**Mr Swann:** I will answer the Health Committee Chair's second question first, and I also covered that in my opening answer. We have been working with the BMA committee of general practitioners and the Royal College of General Practitioners on how we support them in delivering the flu vaccine, because we have always been clear that the uptake of the flu vaccine, especially this year, will be critical. So, we have been working with them on how that can be done. One size will not fit all general practices, so that is why we are making the additional funding available today, both for the supply of equipment that they need and the hiring of additional venues. We will be looking at having drive-through centres and large spaces so that we can ensure that our GP services and our GP practices do not become overcrowded and that social distancing does not become a problem.

Regarding how we address the issue that the Member's party colleague raised and which the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee raised earlier, I think that it is about engagement with the general practitioners, the BMA and all of those representative bodies to reassure them that they have this House's support in ensuring that the delivery of the service is done as safely as possible.

However, we encourage them to make sure that those who need a face-to-face appointment can get it. It is about operating through the electronic changes that we have seen but also making sure that they have the support and the ability to use their facilities and the additional PPE to ensure that anybody who needs a face-to-face appointment gets it.

#### 4.00 pm

As I have said before in the House, the reason that somebody goes to see their GP is not

always the real reason for their visit; it is the comment that they make as they turn to go out the door: "By the way, there is one other thing, doctor, that I'd like to ask you about". Our GPs know that, and I do not think that any GPs are deliberately not seeing patients. That is a perception that we must dispel today. Our GPs are there to help us, and they want to help us. That is the nature of their profession.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Minister for his attendance and his answers to questions. It is indeed an increasingly common complaint that we get that people are not getting access to their GP. It creates a lot of frustration and worry, especially among the older members of our community.

You mentioned the COVID centres. Are they having any impact on GPs' ability to deliver their services, or are there mitigations in place to allow them to have cover in their practice while they are out working in the COVID centres? When you say that they are at their busiest since May, for some of those COVID centres, that is a very low workload. Is there any way that they could share the burden that there might be in some GP centres?

**Mr Swann:** If I remember correctly, when we last discussed this, the Member was one of the people advocating the closure of the COVID centres. We did not do that at that stage, and that has been proven to be the right decision. We are seeing a significant increase in the number of people presenting at COVID centres, so that we can ensure safe access to GP services for people who need access that is not threatened by COVID or potentially COVID-positive patients.

For the week ending 15 September, the COVID centres saw 733 people across Northern Ireland; the week before that, they saw 427. That is nearly a 100% increase in one week. Where we are seeing that most significantly is in areas where we have now put in additional restrictions. The centre in Ballymena, in the week ending 15 September, saw 65 patients; the week before, it saw 20. Those COVID centres are proving to be useful. Our GPs, in general, are supportive of them. There are some GPs who do not see them as being fit for purpose, but that happens in any walk of life or profession. There will always be people who do not see the benefit of a COVID centre. However, according to the information that we get and the guidance that I get from the BMA and the Royal College of General Practitioners, COVID centres are proving useful because they allow GP practices to stay open for non-COVID patients or non-COVID-symptomatic patients.

**Ms Bradshaw:** At the all-party group on cancer, this afternoon, one of your departmental officials advised that there had been a 17.5% reduction in red-flag referrals from GP surgeries. Will you put in place some temporary, short-term measures to reverse that and get people into the system?

**Mr Swann:** I have not yet had a read-out from that all-party group, but the departmental official attending that group today was, I think, the Chief Nursing Officer. Any information from an all-party group gets fed back in.

As regards red-flag referrals from GPs, one of the things that I was always adamant about, even at the height of the pandemic, was that anybody who needed to be seen should go to the GP to make sure that they were referred into the system. One thing that we have seen through the pandemic is a far better and closer working relationship between primary care and secondary care. I want that to be maintained so that, when we look at how referrals are made, there is the personal understanding and the personal contact that we had lost, over time, in the health service. The GP would not know the consultant, and there would be no direct line of contact. That has largely broken down in the past number of months and is something that we can build on to improve our service.

**Mr Allister:** I am afraid that I do not share the Minister's confidence that all is as well as he says with the GP service. We have all had cases of people despairing of being able to see their GP. One case from my office comes to mind: a lady who had been waiting for weeks to see her GP. She contacted my office: she should not have to contact an MLA to get to see her GP. She saw her GP the next morning. The symptoms detected meant that she was rushed to treatment for cancer at the City Hospital. What sort of a harvest of cancer cases will we have post COVID? That is a real concern, and the impediment to ready access to GPs contributes to it.

**Mr Swann:** If the Member does not think that I share those concerns, he is mistaken. That is why I am trying to get all the parts of the health service up and operational in a safe way.

The constituent whom the Member referred to should not have had to wait that number of weeks to see a GP; that is what I am saying here today. Our guidance to GPs, who operate as independent contractors to the service, is clear: see as many people as you can face to face. If someone needs to be seen face to face, they should be. That is why the triage system

and that personal contact is there. As I said, I do not believe that there is one GP out there who is doing anything intentionally to deny a patient access to the medical services that they provide and that the patients need.

**Mr Chambers:** I attended a meeting at lunchtime with some representatives of GPs. They certainly appear to be working harder than ever. I got the impression that morale remains high, and their professional dedication continues to shine through. I am sure that the Minister recognises the sterling work being carried out by that sector of the health service. Does he agree that COVID centres take pressure off GP practices, rather than imposing additional unacceptable work on them?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his acknowledgement of the work that GPs do. I think that they recognise that it is not perfect out there at this minute in time. Many of them are not doing what they want to do in regard to getting face-to-face contact with every patient who presents to each practice. I gave answers to Colin McGrath regarding numbers. They almost doubled from the week ending 8 September to the week ending 15 September. That shows the service that those COVID centres provide. A very specific cohort of people who come through the triage system are identified as having COVID symptoms and sent there. The fact that 733 people were triaged through our primary care service to those COVID centres in one week — almost double the number for the previous week — shows that they provide a service that keeps the rest of the GP practices open to the people who present with non-COVID symptoms.

**Ms Sugden:** Thank you, Minister, for responding to the House. As a follow-up to your comments to Mr Allister, I do not think that this is about intent or what GPs will or will not do; it is about capacity. You spoke of the triage system in a number of your responses. Chance would be a fine thing: I hear daily reports of constituents taking up to a week to get through on the phone. When they get through, they are told that the appointment slots have been entirely filled, and then they are referred to A&E. In effect, we are creating a bottleneck in other services, whether it be A&E, pharmacy or other local provision. I appreciate what the Minister said and recognise the challenges that everyone faces in respect of the response to COVID-19, but how is the Minister ensuring that GP surgeries fulfil their contractual responsibilities rather than passing those services on elsewhere and creating pressure

that we may need to bring you back to the House to discuss at another time?

**Mr Swann:** The Member refers to our urgent and emergency care procedure and how the review of that goes hand in hand with how primary care interacts with and supports secondary care. As I said, we need to break down those silos and ensure that that is embedded in our health service.

In accessing GP services, continually having to phone is not good enough. GPs know that. It is about the time that is now being taken up by receptionists triaging as well. There is work going on to further enhance that through GP provision. That is being worked on with the royal college and the British Medical Association to ensure that what we do is in step with what our GP services want. There is no point in us as a Department delivering a service that is non-deliverable in our GP practices. One thing that every Member will realise and acknowledge is that GPs' personal understanding of their patients is paramount as regards how they are guided and treated in the first instance.

**Mr Givan:** I thank my colleague Pam Cameron for asking this timely question. Access, as Members have commented, is an issue, but there is also an issue that, I know, the Minister will be cognisant of, which is that constituents of mine who, because of the messages that have been communicated around protecting the NHS and ensuring capacity, believe that, when they have a problem that, they feel, they can manage themselves, are not presenting themselves to the GP. It is critical that, when messaging goes out on every measure that is taken to contain COVID-19, there is also a message that people must come forward and that their good intentions will lead to very poor outcomes and, for some, that will be fatal.

**Mr Swann:** I appreciate the Member's comments. They follow on from the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee. They also follow on from the clear message that the Chief Medical Officer and I gave at the daily briefings that, if you need to see a GP or to attend hospital, please do it. We do not want a backlog of cases building up in our health service, especially in primary care. That is why the statement that came out at the start of last week from the British Medical Association, the Health and Social Care Board and the Royal College of GPs made it clear to the general public that it was not me saying it. This was the representative bodies of general practitioners

saying, "We are open for business. Please come and see us if you need to".

**Ms Flynn:** Does the Minister have any plans to expand the number of COVID-19 specialist centres? If that is the case, how does he intend to staff them given the pressures that GPs are under?

**Mr Swann:** I have no intention of expanding the current number. We have 10 working across Northern Ireland at this minute in time. The number of people attending those is increasing, and they have been set up with local GP support through local GP federations. It is about making sure that there is buy-in and support from GPs in the local area for the COVID centres that are already working and that the triaging of patients going to those COVID centres is appropriate and proportionate to the people who need it, as I said, to make sure that anyone who has COVID symptoms does not enter a GP practice alongside non-COVID or non-COVID-symptomatic patients.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for coming here today. I had to attend my doctor's surgery — McVerry and McEvoy in Newry — during the pandemic at a heightened time of lockdown, and, whilst the modus operandi of GP surgeries has been completely disrupted, I found it to be very efficient and effective. Thankfully, I did not even have to see a doctor; I was just triaged by a nurse. However, some people have contacted my office and are concerned by the fact that they have not been consulting their doctor. They have been sharing their medical conditions with people who are not their doctor, which makes them uncomfortable. Others have contacted me about delays in accessing their GPs. Those have not necessarily been specifically in Newry and Armagh, but how can you give those people assurances about what to expect going forward?

**Mr Swann:** I am glad that the Member had the experience that he had. It is replicated by many people across Northern Ireland in the support that GPs have been able to provide. The structure of general practice has been changing over the years, with those multi-professional teams and the change in roles of those who work in GP practices. As the Member indicated from his own experience, it is not always necessary to see the GP. There may be somebody else in the multidisciplinary team, should it be a nurse, a physiotherapist or a pharmacist, depending on where the GP practice is located. It is not always necessary to talk to the GP when you phone the surgery, but we need to make sure that patients who contact

their GPs are triaged and signposted to the right individual to provide the level of care that they need.

**4.15 pm**

**Ms Kimmins:** Thank you, Minister, for coming this afternoon to clarify a number of issues that we are all getting at the minute. It highlights the vital service that GP practices provide and what the implications for other services would be without them, as one Member rightly pointed out regarding A&E. You mentioned a need for additional PPE, and I know that the BMA has expressed concerns about a potential second wave. Are you content that the systems are in place for PPE and contact tracing in the event of a second wave?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. PPE is one of the things that her party colleague the Minister of Finance and I have been able to work very closely on, even looking to local manufacture of PPE so that we are not reliant solely on overseas provision. One of the things that we have continued to do as a Department is to make sure that we have a stock of PPE. When we entered this pandemic back at the start of the year, our normal running procedure was to have four weeks' supply. We are now up to 12 weeks' supply, and that is where we continue to maintain that. Recently I signed off a business case for three additional warehouses so that we can ensure that we have that storage and stockpile of PPE.

The supply chains that we were able to put into place for our GPs through the Business Services Organisation proved effective. They were difficult and bumpy at the start, but when we got to being able to deliver to them, we were getting to them and meeting their needs. Those continued supply lines are there, and the PPE is there, so it is a piece of work that we continue to do. Should we get into that second phase — I still think that we can prevent it if we come together and work together as a people across Northern Ireland with our health service — those supply chains and those reassurances are there.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Mental Health Crisis Support

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly recognises the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis across Northern Ireland; notes with concern a COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University Belfast, which found that one third of people locally met the criteria for depression; highlights the success of the multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis; and calls on the Minister of Health to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of this project to all health and social care trusts. — [Mr Easton.]*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The next Member on my list was Karen Mullan, but she does not appear to be here. I will call her once she arrives.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board and of the Ards Suicide Awareness Group. Some time ago, I was alerted to the fact that Mondays represent particular challenges for the staff in the emergency departments of our acute hospitals. Apparently there are well-rehearsed reasons for that. It gave me cause to ask whether I could spend a Monday night as an observer in the emergency department of the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald. What I saw was endless demand, whether it was 10.00 pm, midnight, 2.00 am or 4.00 am — endless demand met by unceasing professionalism, care and courtesy.

While we were discussing trends, I made the mistake of saying that the big issue was people who presented with alcohol on board. The staff — the professionals — almost scoffed at me. They said, "We have been dealing with drunks since the day and hour the health service opened its doors. The real issue today is patients with mental health issues". Even the physical structure of the emergency department at the Ulster Hospital has only one side room that is set aside for mental health patients, so, when the second mental health patient arrives, as they inevitably do, it is a huge challenge. That is not a matter for the Health Minister here in the Chamber; it is a matter, of course, for the senior management team of the South Eastern

Health and Social Care Trust. I want to speak in praise of that management team because, of course, when the multi-agency triage team was being formulated in experimental mode, the trust was first in to say that it wanted to take part in what we now know is an incredibly successful initiative, which deserves to be rolled out.

I also had the pleasure to engage with the senior PSNI officer who was tasked with its input into creating the MATT. I was actually halfway up a ladder putting up one of my election posters on a lamppost in the centre of Ards when he pulled over to chat to me. I thought, "I am going to get arrested for some sort of breach of public decency and taste here". He was full of enthusiasm for his role in tackling mental health. What he said was that, of course, the typical, traditional police reaction was not suitable. Take, for example, Shaftsbury Square late on a Friday night, when people are pouring out of the pubs. Somebody is misbehaving. The typical or standard police reaction would have been to put them in the back of a squad car, take them round to Musgrave Street and maybe make them spend a night in a holding cell. However, if the underlying reason for their behaviour was mental health and well-being issues, a police cell was probably the last place where you would want them to spend the night. In fact, he said, "You know, if the person had a broken leg, we would not take them to a police cell, so why make the distinction between physical health and mental health?"

The multi-agency triage team gets it right because in that team are individuals who, in combination, have all the experience, knowledge and skills to deal with people with mental health issues. That multi-agency approach must include the voluntary and community sector. The Ards Suicide Awareness Group has done great work; civic-minded people coming together, going into schools, going into retail outlets, talking to taxi drivers. Just before lockdown, we were engaged with Hospitality Ulster to try to get training for bar staff because they are in a good position to know when regulars are not themselves. With a bit of training — you do not become a counsellor — you know the right questions to ask and how, perhaps, to signpost them to professionals for help.

What I would like to see is not just multi-agency and multidisciplinary approaches: we need a multi-departmental approach from the Executive. I am delighted to see that the Minister has encouraged very much the green shoots of multi-departmental work in that

regard, because it is not all about the Health Minister and his Department; this is an issue to be faced by every Department. I welcome the Health Minister to the House and look forward to what he has to say. I look forward to his response, and I congratulate him for his fine work to date on the issue of mental health and well-being.

**Ms Mullan:** I apologise, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, for arriving a wee bit late. I thank the Members who tabled this important motion. I support the call for collaboration and properly resourced mental health services that include crisis intervention across all the trust areas.

To effectively support mental health and wider emotional well-being, and address the rising levels of mental health issues, we must get serious about cross-departmental working and collaboration, as has been highlighted by other Members. Someone who experiences mental ill-health does not do so in a silo. In our approach to supporting them, we should not operate in a silo either. As my party's education spokesperson, I am thinking particularly of children and young people and the role that the education system and the Department of Education have the potential to play. The partnership process of developing an emotional health and well-being framework for children and young people by Education, Health, the Public Health Agency, the Health Social Care Board and the Education Authority is an example of the joined-up working that we need to see from now on when dealing with those issues.

Minister, I ask that, when you are reviewing existing crisis intervention services, such as MATT, the Derry crisis service pilot be part of that review and form part of the recommendations going forward. I want to highlight and recognise the contribution and work of the agencies involved in this project. Partnership working is not always easy but it can have great results. One key partner that maybe does not get full recognition is the community and its needs. Behind every person who is in a state of despair or crisis, there is a reason or reasons and there is also a community that needs support.

In conclusion, I fully support the motion. I welcome also the Adjournment debate on Derry's crisis intervention service. The next step must be a joined-up approach to provide an equity of mental health and emotional support services across all trusts, with the inclusion of a fully funded crisis intervention service.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr Chris Lyttle is next on my list but he is not in his place. Ms Bradshaw, were you intending to contribute? No. That is OK. Mr Gerry Carroll.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Members for bringing this important motion to the House. Quite rightly, we have been focusing on tackling one pandemic, COVID-19, but time, energy and resources must be made available to discuss the pandemic of suicide and mental ill-health that has been with us for many years.

Recently, people have asked me why the same focus and resources that have been put into COVID-19 have not been invested in tackling mental health. I do not think that it is an either/or, but I think that it is a fair point for people to raise. Like my colleague Colin McGrath, I welcome the establishment of the mental health champion position and I wish her well in her new role. Whilst the Minister has prioritised and put a focus on mental health with the creation of the role, the question of whether enough is being done needs to be asked. Are enough resources being put in to tackling mental health problems?

Although the Department spends roughly £10 million per year on suicide prevention, we have to say that nowhere near enough is being spent. With that in mind, if we really are to have a zero-suicide strategy, we are spending too little on prevention.

We know that around 200,000 people here — about one fifth of the adult population — will have a mental health problem at some point in their life. Minding Your Head has stated that 57% of the people it surveyed are worried and stressed about COVID-19. On top of that, we have seen a 50% increase in significant stress for people who are working with those who have had COVID-19. The people who are front and centre in tackling this crisis have seen their stress levels increase because of the work that they have been doing and the pressure that they have been under.

It is no accident that my constituency of West Belfast and the neighbouring constituency of North Belfast are consistently the areas with the highest rates of suicide and self-harm. I say no accident because it is precisely these areas, and others across the North, that suffer the highest levels of poverty, deprivation and inequality. Despite general political talk about moving forward and a new Northern Ireland, these communities and their residents have been left behind, ignored and fundamentally failed. That is not to say that middle-class or wealthy individuals cannot be affected by

mental health problems — of course they can — but the problems are more acute, concentrated and higher in areas with high poverty levels. In fact, worryingly, the suicide rate is around 70% higher in deprived areas as compared to non-deprived areas. That is a shocking and worrying statistic. We know, I think it might have been —.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he welcome the fact that, as was mentioned earlier, the Protect Life 2 strategy states that one of its key aims is to ensure that the appropriate services are available for the most deprived constituencies, exactly like the ones that he mentioned? That aim was not in the original Protect Life strategy but has been included in Protect Life 2.

#### 4.30 pm

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr Carroll, you have an additional minute, but please do not use it, because Ms Sugden is looking very anxious over there.

**Mr Carroll:** OK. I will do my best to answer and finish my comments. I agree with the Member. She knows all too well about people in west Belfast who have cried out for services but have not got them, so I agree with her on the need for that strategy.

For men under 50, suicide is a leading cause of death. To follow on from Órlaithi's point, too often I have heard, as, I am sure, she has as well, of people who have been told to reach out and ask for help. They have done so, but the help has not been there or else they have been told to wait a few months for services or treatment. Imagine people who do not feel valued or who have low self-esteem taking the important and difficult step of reaching out to their GP or whomever, only to be told, "Wait. We will come to you when we can". Too many people are failed by an underfunded system.

To conclude, the furlough scheme is due to come to an end in the next few weeks. We have to ascertain how that will impact on people's anxiety, insecurity and mental health problems. The motion rightly talks about the need for a collaborative approach, but I think that the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister have as important a role to play as the Health Minister does.

I will leave the final words to a writer from the US, Mike Davis, who says about coronavirus and mental health:

*"Indeed the combined effects of fear, confinement, income loss and the potential destruction of family savings augur a mental-health crisis on an even larger scale than the pandemic itself. This isn't simply collateral damage but rather an integral and extremely dangerous part of the health threat that has so far been neglected. Consider solidarity an essential vaccine."*

**Ms Sugden:** I support the motion. The reality is that many people across Northern Ireland, disproportionately so compared with other regions, are suffering from poor mental health now. What has led to that cannot be undone. Support, as described by others in the debate, is therefore entirely necessary. That having been said, in parallel with that support, we should have a wider policy vision of how we address our mental health issue: upstream, long before it becomes a crisis for the individual, their family, society and public services.

Like many issues in Northern Ireland, we tend to treat the symptoms rather than understand and address the issue. We spend a lot of public money at the most expensive part of the process: fixing what is broken. Even if we succeed in fixing, there remains a weakness and usually more cost. Surely it therefore makes sense to strengthen so that things are less likely to break.

In talking about the issue, I do not mean to be crude about money. Of course we should spend it where it helps, especially if it saves or improves a life. That is the job of all of us. How many lives could we save and how many could we improve if mental health did not become an issue, however?

I appreciate the Minister taking the lead on the issue and welcome his interventions in his time in office. The Minister of Health cannot tackle the issue alone, however. He needs support from his Executive colleagues in Justice, Education, Communities and even AERA. Mental health in Northern Ireland is its own pandemic. A vaccination will not fix it. Washing hands and socially distancing will not prevent it. If anything, that might even be making it worse, because, as humans, we are tactile, social beings who want to feel loved and touched, and preventing that is having an impact. I am not criticising the public health response to COVID-19. It was and is necessary in order to save lives. I do, however, worry about the consequences of what the public have had to endure, the sacrifices that they have made and, most of all, the lasting mental health effects.

I am not surprised at the findings of the Queen's report. Every day in my constituency, I see and hear the anxiety, depression and fear that exists because of the pandemic. I see people angry and frustrated, which in itself is an outworking of poor mental health. That is even more reason that we need to get a grip on the problem by tackling the issue at source.

I believe that that source is trauma. I find it extraordinary that we, as a post-conflict society, have not addressed the inevitable trauma arising from 30 years of conflict. It is not just those who directly experienced the conflict who are traumatised. It is the couple who strode through Coleraine, where a day later there was an explosion in the very spot where they had walked. It is nurses, paramedics and the girl on the bus.

The body keeps the score: it absolutely does. I am quoting the title of a book by Bessel van der Kolk. Please forgive my pronunciation. It recognises the impact of trauma on both body and mind and how it leads to mental health and addiction issues. From personal experiences and my previous role, I do not doubt that this is the case. Trauma perpetuates a cycle that often manifests into a mental health addiction or domestic abuse issue that then traumatises others, who then take on their own mental health burden and so on. We must break the cycle, and the most effective way of doing that is tackling the abuse.

Trauma is a fact of life. We in Northern Ireland know that more than most. A generation and, sadly, subsequent generations because of intergenerational trauma, are living with the painful aftermath of the conflict. There are over 30,000 victims of domestic abuse a year and there are children raised in alcohol and drug-addicted homes. Are we really surprised that we have a mental health issue?

Poor public services also add to that problem: women not being supported after a traumatic birth, communities that are given no aspirations so drugs and paramilitary gangs seem like a better option. I feel that the Executive are keeping a lid on it until the next election. I have heard nothing about a Programme for Government, nothing about outcomes-based accountability and nothing about cross-departmental strategies. I find that disappointing. I hope I am wrong. I hope that Ministers are setting a direction that truly encourages better governance and are not simply going along with how we have always done it. The increasing mental health figures and the statistics of those who have taken their

own life show that is not working. How we have always done it is not working.

Minister, there is no point emptying the sink if we do not turn off the tap. I appreciate the motion, and I appreciate your efforts so far. However, I encourage you to lead with a wider vision alongside the good work that is only scratching the surface of what we need.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you. I call the Minister for Health, Mr Robin Swann, to respond and he will have 15 minutes.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I thank the Members for proposing this motion that provides us with an opportunity to consider the importance of the mental health crisis service. The STARC study illustrates the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having. The study is well named because the statistics quoted from the report by the Member who moved the motion and the contributions from many Members of the House are stark. They need to be because the House needs to listen to what is being said. I need to hear what is being said, and the Executive need to react to what is being said, and also to pick up on Ms Sugden's closing points.

How we tackle our mental health situation in Northern Ireland is about a whole-Executive approach, a whole-Assembly approach and a whole-society approach. The pandemic continues to have an adverse affect on our population's mental health and emotional well-being. Now is the best time to discuss how to optimise outcomes and the use of resources.

Since taking up the post of Minister for Health, I have been very clear that mental health is a priority for me. To underline that commitment, I recently published the 'Mental Health Action Plan' that aims to kick-start the transformation of mental health services, and includes the commitment to create a new mental health strategy. At one of my first meetings of the Health Committee, Ms Flynn asked how we would tackle mental health alongside the pandemic. I gave her the commitment that mental health remained a priority through the pandemic. I hope my actions have proved that I have kept that commitment and continue to make those steps.

I have appointed Professor Siobhan O'Neill as the interim mental health champion and, just so Mr McGrath is not accused of misleading the House, her office has 5 full-time members of staff. She has her own budget and an ability to spend the moneys in it. Therefore, she is not there acting on her own. The first member of

staff was appointed last week, and there is an ongoing recruitment process. She stands alone, she is not controlled and her spend is not controlled.

The mental health champion's office is financed and supported by every Executive Minister equally, and that is a commitment and dedication to where we are with mental health. As I have said before to the House, the Executive, as a whole, has really taken on the challenge of mental health. A subcommittee has been established on mental health, well-being, resilience and suicide prevention. I do not mean to talk out of school about my Executive colleagues, but the first meeting of that subgroup was one of the most human engagements that I have seen at the Executive. There was understanding, compassion and a desire to do more on the part of every Minister who was present at that meeting. The commitment is there and although there are many other things on the agenda, the fact that the subcommittee continues to meet and engage with other societal representative groups is a testimony to that commitment.

Our mental health services exist to provide care and treatment for those who suffer from mental distress and they cover a wide spectrum of services, from early intervention in primary care to compulsory admission to a mental health inpatient facility. Whilst those services are wide-ranging, it is right that we now discuss crisis services. They exist to provide treatment for some of the most vulnerable patients at a very difficult time in their lives.

However, before I go any further, I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who are dedicated to supporting those who suffer from a mental health crisis — the staff in the health and social care system, the staff in the independent system, the community and voluntary sector and the many people who volunteer to help those who need help and their families as well. Many Members who contributed to the debate mentioned that sector. Those people are vital to our response because of the work that they do and the commitment and knowledge that they have. I want to thank them on behalf of the entire House.

The motion calls on us to recognise:

*"the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis".*

I could not agree more. If we get crisis services right, we can provide timely and good help and support to those who need it, when they need it.

That will not only provide better outcomes but will allow the already stretched mental health system to work more effectively. It is accepted, and has been noted by many, that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a negative impact on our population's mental well-being. Indeed, the STARC survey outlines concerning outcomes with evidence of high levels of anxiety and depression amongst the respondents.

Since the start of the pandemic, I have ensured that there is a strong response to the mental health needs of the population. A dedicated COVID-19 mental health response plan was included in the mental health action plan that was published on 19 May. The response plan outlines the mental health response to the pandemic and provides specific actions such as the public health messaging, which includes a dedicated website for mental health support and advice; an online apps library to help and support self-help; the roll-out of psychological first-aid training; free online stress control classes, which have been available since May and will continue to be available until the end of this year; bereavement guidance; and a workforce framework and dedicated psychological helplines for our front-line staff. The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the population will, undoubtedly, create increased demand for mental health services, including our crisis services.

Currently, all trusts have arrangements in place to provide an urgent mental health response within a targeted two-hour time frame to adults who present in crisis in emergency departments and to referrals from a patient's GP. Nevertheless, Mr Nesbitt was right; the emergency department is not the right place for many of those individuals to be presenting.

Similar services are also available to children and young people. One Member asked what more we could do to work with schools. As regards collaborative working with the Minister of Education, we have recently approved an additional £1.5 million of Department of Health funding for mental health in schools, and that piece of work is now progressing with the Department of Education. When a young person presents in crisis outside normal hours, all the trusts have arrangements in place to respond if necessary and the young person may be admitted to the regional inpatient unit at Beechcroft. Those urgent mental health response services remained available throughout the pandemic.

However, we must acknowledge that our crisis services are not always configured as well as they could be. That is why we are continually

looking for improvements. The multi-agency triage team pilot commenced its service on 6 July 2018.

It was a collaborative project that involved two police officers, a community mental health practitioner and a paramedic working together to respond to people aged 18 and over who were experiencing a mental health crisis and had accessed the 999 or the 101 system. The pilot was initially established as a two-year initiative in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; however, following positive feedback from service users and MATT staff, the service was extended to cover Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in August 2019.

4.45 pm

MATT aims to assist in the de-escalation of crisis with signposting to appropriate services and to reduce presentations at accident and emergency departments. Its key objectives are to reduce attendance at emergency departments (EDs) for those who present with self-harm or suicidal intention; to provide prevention and early intervention approaches to reduce numbers of attendances at EDs resulting in fewer people requiring secondary mental health care services; to reduce the allocation of Card Before You Leave appointments; to free up urgent appointments in mental health assessment centres; to provide the appropriate signposting and support to enable access to services for clients; to reduce the number of detentions under article 130 of the Mental Health Order; and to improve the journey of service users and their family through the emotional crisis.

MATT is considered a positive alternative to the usual way of responding to an individual's experience of a mental health crisis. MATT has positive support from mental health staff, and it has already been very positively received by service users. They felt that they were treated well, they found the response to be calmer, and the avoidance of having to attend an ED was a much better outcome. I understand that immediate access to mental health professionals has been of great benefit to those service users and that they feel that appropriate decisions are being made for their personal onward care. The success of the service has been in part due to collaboration between the trusts and the three service providers and to a willingness to learn from all involved. However, it is worth reflecting that the evaluation also identifies areas that require further examination, such as remote access and the compatibility of IT systems and the fact that the staff operating the system have been doing so on an overtime

basis in addition to their substantive roles. An addition to the location of the MATT may not be the most appropriate, as it can be accessed only when a police officer is available. Those are the kinds of issues that are expected to be brought to the fore in a pilot. That is one reason why it is important, before we extend MATT, to evaluate what is good, what can be done better and what has not worked.

I am sure that Members will acknowledge — many have — that improving mental health is a cross-cutting issue that will require collaborative work across all our Departments and that the MATT service clearly provides benefits for the PSNI, the health and social care sector and, indeed, wider society. Whilst I am supportive of MATT and value the great work that is being done, it is important that the development of the crisis response service is part of an integrated element of the wider mental health system. The mental health action plan is intended to kick-start the transformation of our mental health services by building on the good work that has already been done and by preparing the ground for the new mental health strategy that is in the making.

In my Department's mental health action plan I have included an action that specifically looks at the configuration of crisis services. Specifically, action 8.2 is included to provide a "Better MH [Mental Health] crisis response" and aims to reduce the number of people who attend emergency departments in a mental health crisis. The action specifically seeks to evaluate alternatives to the emergency department for people in mental health crisis, to evaluate the roll-out of the multi-agency triage team, to consider the interactions between different crisis response services such as MATT, the home crisis teams, emergency departments, 999, the police, primary care multidisciplinary teams and similar. It also seeks to further develop the liaison between mental health services across all our trusts. Through that, I am committed to a further roll-out of the multi-agency triage teams, but it has to be done in an integrated way as part of the wider development of our mental health crisis response. The MATT cannot exist in isolation and must be supported by effective integration with emergency departments, statutory mental health services, primary care, the police and the community and voluntary sector.

My officials are working to finalise the details of the review of crisis services, and I expect that work to commence in the coming weeks. As in all mental health policy work, I am committed to co-production, and the review team will include at least one person with lived experience, at

least one crisis professional and at least one representative of the community and voluntary sector. A first report is expected in December, with a final report by the end of March 2021. That report will provide a clear map of crisis services across the health and social care system and the community and voluntary sector. It will include an evaluation of best practice and of what works, including user experience and professionals' views, and clear options for the future of crisis services. That will provide the way forward for crisis services and ensure that those in crisis will receive the help and support they need in a timely manner. It will also provide a strategic approach to the further roll-out of multi-agency triage teams.

As I have said many times, mental health is one of my top priorities. I am honoured to be in a position where I can drive strategic change and improve mental health services and crisis services in particular. However, as many have said, it will take a collaborative approach across the entirety of the Executive. At this minute in time, I am content that we have that support. I am therefore happy to support the motion and thankful to the Members who tabled it.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Pam Cameron will conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Mrs Cameron:** Last week, we marked World Suicide Prevention Day. It was, once again, a reminder of how mental health remains a major challenge for society. When we consider the prevalence of suicide in our community, we see that it is a battle that, at times, I fear we are losing. When, almost on a daily basis, my office is contacted about the latest life lost in my constituency, my heart sinks. What greater priority can we have as legislators than to protect life from the youngest to the oldest, from the womb to the grave? Better mental health must become a greater priority. We pay much lip service to that, but we need to see actions that back up the words. In Northern Ireland, one in five adults will suffer poor mental health at some point in their life. My fear— I believe that it is well grounded in reality — is that that prevalence will only increase because of the impact of COVID-19. That is why I welcome the motion. It represents a call to action, and it is action that, we know, works, that helps those who need help and, ultimately, saves lives. It is not a stand-alone solution but a piece in a jigsaw that we need the Department to set out and piece together to create an overall picture of how our mental health pandemic will be defeated.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you, like me, regard all our first responders as heroes, and that is right. It is not an easy job, but, in the multi-agency triage team, we really have examples of heroes. They are mental health practitioners and paramedics, working alongside police officers, assessing and responding to calls made either to the police or the ambulance control room using the 999 or 101 numbers. In many parts of Northern Ireland, a MATT team is leading the crisis intervention response to the human impact on our mental health pandemic in Northern Ireland. I thank every member of staff for their contribution to date in increasingly challenging times. Saying, "Thank you" does not go far enough. Staff deserve to have the confidence that they will have the right funding and resource support to promote better outcomes and, ultimately, save lives.

What do we want to see? We want the workforce consolidated, the service expanded and the funding arrangements placed on a sustainable and solid footing. We want the fair and equitable roll-out of the MATT project, in order to benefit all communities and households. There cannot be a postcode lockout to this life-saving service. I urge the Minister to look favourably on this, and I know that his commitment to tackling mental health issues in Northern Ireland is clear. Let us build up a suite of measures to tackle this that includes MATT lifeline services, de-escalation pilots in Belfast and Londonderry and resilience and well-being programmes across our schools and educational establishments, using our community and voluntary sectors to dovetail with such programmes to continue to help those who engage with MATT, to keep that intervention going beyond that first point of crisis. Enough homes have been destroyed by poor mental health, enough lives broken and, sadly, too many lost. Let us all take the steps necessary to stop that. The motion highlights just one worthy example. I am pleased that all Members from across the Chamber today have supported the motion on mental health crisis support tabled by my colleagues Alex Easton and Paula Bradley. It is clear that the subject is very much recognised, and it is good to keep speaking up to ensure that the issue never becomes taboo again.

I now turn to Members' comments. Alex Easton, who proposed the motion, spoke in detail about the COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions research laboratory at Queen's University and the statistics uncovered about the impact on mental health in Northern Ireland during this trying time, the most notable of which was that one

third of people met the criteria for depression. He mentioned that it was interesting that media reporting had a role in impacting on mental health and referred to the recommendations, including those on drafting clear media guidelines and a public health campaign. Alex also touched on the negativity and commentary around the discussion of a potential vaccine and on the amount of misinformation that is out there. He spoke about MATT and about the success and value of the pilot, which has not been fully rolled out to date. He spoke about the benefit of reducing the impact on the resource of the agencies involved, namely the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, which have been providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis. He also spoke about the future of MATT being unclear and about the vital and critical intervention provided by the multi-agency service. He ultimately asked the Minister to commit urgently to funding for that project and to expanding it to all trust areas.

Órlaithí Flynn spoke next. She said that mental health was universally accepted as an area of concern. She talked about the need for more than just positive mental health slogans. She said that there is a need for parity of esteem with physical health and for agencies to work together. Órlaithí is the chairperson of the APG on suicide prevention, which is supportive and encouraging of the MATT model. She spoke about the lived experience of individuals and recognised that many mental health groups offer help in the community. She stated that there was a need for more funding and progress on the suicide strategy.

Colin McGrath was next. He spoke about the debate as an incredibly important discussion of an issue that we are all affected by, and he said that we should give consideration to our mental health. He referred to the most recent survey that showed that deprived areas are more at risk. He welcomed the appointment of Siobhán O'Neill to the post of Mental Health Champion and spoke of the need for staffing resource to support her work. We welcome the clarification from the Minister on that subject. He spoke favourably of local mental health groups and talked about his experience as a youth worker in the past. He also referred to his questioning of the reduction in the money being spent by the education system on counselling over the last number of years.

Alan Chambers said that one in four would suffer poor mental health and said that it affects all walks of life — how true is that? He spoke of the mental health impact on physical health and vice versa. Of course, he spoke of his party's

commitment to make mental health a key priority. He mentioned the appointment of the Interim Mental Health Champion and the production of the mental health action plan. He said that, despite the progress that has been made, nothing could have prepared us for COVID-19 and that there was never a more important time to avoid ED attendances. He said that it was good to talk and that no one should feel shame in talking about their mental health or see that as a sign of weakness.

Kellie Armstrong thanked Alex Easton for his personal contribution to the debate by talking about his own mental health. She also mentioned loneliness and being detached from social contact and how damaging that is. She spoke of how one fifth of those surveyed showed symptoms of PTSD and reiterated that COVID restrictions should not remain for a day longer than is necessary, and I certainly agree with that. She said that MATT seems to have been a clear success and had no hesitation in recommending the roll-out of MATT across the trusts.

Joanne Bunting, as a member of the Policing Board, spoke about the impact of mental health on policing. She said that many shifts were spent in the corridors of hospitals supporting those in crisis or in search operations for those who had gone missing. She said that the partnership approach addressed numerous problems, and she commended voluntary workers for their efforts in the same area in the community. Joanne highlighted that last Thursday was World Suicide Prevention Day and welcomed the appointment of Siobhán O'Neill. She said that she was nervous about seeing the results of the scoping exercise that is being undertaken. She called for a short-term intervention in Belfast to face the current level of crisis.

### 5.00 pm

Colm Gildernew thanked those who tabled the motion. He was impressed by the genuine empathy shown by Members across the Chamber. He spoke from his knowledge, and from his role in the Health Committee, about the long record of underfunding for mental health. He also spoke about the work of the Committee and, in the light of the demands that the pandemic had made on the Committee's time, the desire to return to the subject urgently. Colm also raised the issue of broadband availability, especially given the reliance on remote technology at present.

Cara Hunter spoke about the distress when dealing with constituents who require services,

and we can all relate to that. She spoke about her time in council and about the good work of local voluntary groups, such as Extern. She also said that long-term funding is vital for those groups to continue. Cara is also heading up, as chair, a new all-party group on addiction and dual diagnosis, another vital area of concern that has the full support of all parties in the Building. She asked the Minister to keep mental health at the top of his agenda, and I am sure that he will do that.

I will not get through all Members' contributions, so I will not try. Mike Nesbitt, Karen Mullan, Gerry Carroll and Claire Sugden also spoke, and there was some very good commentary from across the Chamber. We welcome the support that has been given to the motion and thank the Minister for his response to it and for his understanding of the issues. Hopefully, we will see, in the very near future, a full roll-out of the MATT project, which has been so successful.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis across Northern Ireland; notes with concern a COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University Belfast, which found that one third of people locally met the criteria for depression; highlights the success of the multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis; and calls on the Minister of Health to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of this project to all health and social care trusts.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments. The next item on the agenda is the Adjournment debate.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]*

## Adjournment

### Funding for the Crisis Intervention Service in Londonderry

**Mr Speaker:** In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Gary Middleton to raise the matter of funding for the crisis intervention service in his constituency. The proposer will have 15 minutes.

**Mr Middleton:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Members will be glad to know that I do not intend to take the full 15 minutes.

It is timely that we discuss this Adjournment topic, following on as it does from the issue that we just debated; it ties in very nicely. Five years ago, I made my maiden speech in the Chamber on the issue of suicide prevention in my constituency. We are back this evening debating the community crisis intervention service (CCIS) and the need for long-term funding. A lot has changed in the past five years. Unfortunately, in many cases, that changes have not been for the better.

My constituency of Foyle continues to see some of the highest rates of self-harm, with elevated numbers of individuals engaging in suicidal behaviour at the bridges and the river. Statistics point to an increase in incidents. In 2016, there were 309 incidents and, in 2018, there were 898. These incidents involve real people — human beings — within our constituency; they are not just statistics. Recent figures point to a similar shocking trend. Whilst there are many great organisations and charities out there providing vital services, these devastating figures make the case for the need to do things differently. Far too many lives have been lost and families devastated. One life lost is one too many.

In 2019, the crisis intervention service was developed. It was developed to complement the Western Trust's 24-hour crisis response service at Altnagelvin and to help address the high rates of suicidal behaviour in the Western Trust area, which are amongst the highest in Northern Ireland. The service was initially run as a pilot scheme. However, it has been extended on several occasions for a few months at a time. I welcome the latest extension of the service until March 2021, and I

thank the Minister for listening to the concerns of us all in the north-west. However, it is unacceptable that a fight has to be put up, time and time again, to have this service funded at a basic level.

The crisis intervention service in Londonderry, its employees, volunteers and, most significantly, the service users deserve better. Last-minute funding decisions add further to the stress and concern of those involved. The service was due to end in two weeks' time, with the funding extension announced just last week. That uncertainty causes serious issues for the job retention of the skilled professionals involved and also places undue pressure on those who have to work on the front line to help our most vulnerable. Again, the extension is very welcome. However, we must look at a long-term sustainable funding model going forward.

The benefits of the crisis intervention service are well evidenced in the evaluation report conducted by Ulster University. One service user said:

*"I do not know what would have happened if the crisis intervention service had not been there for me because all I say is that I just wanted to jump in the river. You never know an impulse. I have been dealt a bad hand in so many ways, and it is time to cash in my chips. That is the way I look at it, and that is how I justify it to myself."*

This service is a vital lifeline to so many people in our city. The evaluation report recommended that the service should be maintained, and that is in no doubt. The opening hours and the publicity and procedures need to be reviewed. The service operates from Thursday at 8.00 pm until Sunday at 8.00 am, and we know that that is not sufficient. The issues that many of those people face do not stop or start at those times. They exist all the time, and there should be a service to reflect that.

The evaluation report also referenced that progress was needed on partnership between referral agencies. I pay tribute to many organisations in my constituency — Foyle Search and Rescue, the PSNI and many others — that do an incredible job in helping those in need. There are many other recommendations in the evaluation report that are relevant but they all point to the fact that there needs to be a crisis intervention service in the area.

There is also an economic response, conducted by Professor Siobhan O'Neill and Dr Edel Ennis, that clearly makes the economic case for

the service. For example, the savings that the service makes to other agencies, emergency departments and the emergency services. However, this argument should not be an economic one. As I have said before, one life lost is one too many. The value of life is precious.

When announcing the three-month extension in June, the Minister stated:

*"The service has shown positive benefits for those clients who are in crisis and I sincerely hope that funding is secured to enable the service to continue."*

*"It is incumbent on the Council who commission the service to secure a sustainable funding solution going forward. I encourage all stakeholders to use this additional period as an opportunity to have those conversations and engage extensively with Extern to identify lasting funding options."*

I, and those who represent the Foyle constituency at all levels, believe that the Department of Health should fund this vital service. We all agree on the significance of the Protect Life 2 strategy, yet, time and time again, this service is on life support. We do not need further reports and strategies. We need funding and we need support. The Minister had said that he encouraged all stakeholders to use the additional period as an opportunity to have those conversations and engage to identify lasting funding options. It has been disappointing that the Western Trust and Public Health Agency (PHA) have not been engaging with the crisis intervention steering group. I would be grateful if the Minister would ensure that there is representation at these steering group meetings. The Department of Health should give a view on the evaluation report and its findings.

As we go forward, the challenges in our society are becoming greater. Experts have warned that the COVID-19 pandemic and any economic consequences or job losses may lead to an increase in suicidal behaviour and death by suicide. Initial data based on police records of incidents at the River Foyle show an increase in suicide behaviour. This may be seen as the tip of the iceberg since the majority of suicides occur in the person's home. People are avoiding presenting themselves to emergency departments, which means that, at the current time, people in suicidal despair would particularly benefit from having an additional, alternative place of support to go to. As we continue to live with the virus and face the

possibility of a second wave, the service should be maintained as an essential component of the efforts to reduce the mental health impact.

I appreciate that the Minister has championed mental health services, so this is not a criticism of the Minister. I know that the Minister has so much on his plate. We support him in that role and wish him well. We will support him in the efforts that need to be made, whether it is a bid to the Executive as a whole or whatever. However, I plead that we are not standing here again in March 2021 making the same arguments for the same service, which we should not have to make the case for. I urge the Minister to take these comments on board, and I thank him for attending the debate. I urge everyone to, please, make their views known.

**Ms Anderson:** I thank Gary Middleton for bringing this Adjournment debate. From 1998 to 2018, 5,087 people took their own lives in the North; the Member knows that and the Minister knows that. That means that more people died in those years than died during the 40 years of conflict. Like the rest of the North, Derry has endured a mental health and suicide epidemic. This scourge has ravaged the people of Derry. It shakes our communities to the core and tears families apart. Yet, a key life-saving service like the community crisis intervention service limps on month after month, receiving breadcrumbs from the Department of Health's table. Whilst the funding is welcome, the service got just enough money in June to last until the end of this month. It is now getting just enough money to survive until March. No service can function properly with such financial uncertainty.

I cannot recount the number of stories that I have read or heard over the years of a passing jogger, motorist or local taxi driver stopping on the Foyle Bridge to bring a vulnerable person, who is standing physically and mentally on the brink, back to safety. Unfortunately, I also know stories of those who have jumped; of those whose lives have become so dark, who can see no glimmer of hope, and who want nothing more than to end their suffering by jumping into the inky abyss below. Bodies missing for days. Foyle Search and Rescue, a fantastic organisation in Derry, scouring the river in search of a body, while desperate families organise search parties along the riverbank to bring their mummy, daddy, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin or friend home. The people who have taken their life are not numbers or statistics.

They were voices crying out for help and it is our duty, and especially your duty now,

Minister, to ensure that their cries do not fall on deaf ears.

### 5.15 pm

That is why Derry needs a community crisis intervention service. Many young people, and particularly young men, have not experienced the peace dividend of a bright and new beginning and have encountered the same lack of educational attainment, the same lack of employment prospects and the same substance abuse that has plagued our community and society for over 20 years. It is they who are on the brink and who the community crisis intervention service helps. It literally saves lives by intervening and supporting those who suffer alone, by providing timely, non-clinical and community responses to those in crisis, and by giving advice to those trying to cope with stress, anxiety and depression.

The suicide rates that Derry experiences are undoubtedly compounded by poverty, social deprivation and a lack of opportunity. Suicide rates are higher in areas that are the most deprived, and whilst Derry has come a long way over the last 20 years, we know that we have much further to travel. We need to ensure that financial resources are allocated to Derry city and district, based on objective need. Part of that is ensuring the continued and long-term funding of the community crisis intervention service way beyond March 2021 because we have never needed it more.

Minister, I appeal to you this evening to not allow a key service to be stripped away from Derry. Commit to the long-term investment in the community crisis intervention service, and please do the decent thing, the thing that I believe and know that you want to do, and ensure that your Department commits to it, and send that signal out to the people of Derry this evening.

**Mr Durkan:** I think Gary Middleton for tabling the motion. As the Minister will hear this afternoon, and as he already knows, there is unanimous and strong political support for Derry's community crisis intervention service, and with very good reason. Often in this Chamber, and more so than outside in the real world, we see or hear division over the daftest of issues, and sometimes over fundamental political ideology, but suicide prevention and saving lives should and does unite us all.

This critical, life-saving service is something that our city — Derry, Londonderry, whatever you want to call it, though I just call it home —

was crying out for. It was and is very badly needed.

The council led the way. They had to drag the Western Trust and the Department of Health to the table. We even had to get a significant contribution from Foyle Search and Rescue, a tremendous local charity, to make ends meet.

It was only after my intervention, I have to say, in identifying underspend in the Belfast de-escalation service, and getting it redirected to Derry, that Foyle Search and Rescue could be reimbursed their £20,000, which they have now used doing what they do best: saving lives and helping families in their darkest hours.

The service has been a success. Do not just take my word for it — the Minister will have read the evaluation. It has saved lives, and like Gary, I have heard directly from people who say that they would not be here today had it not been for the community crisis intervention service. It has been a success despite uncertainty over its future, its staff being uncertain about their futures, and lurching from one funding crisis to another. That is not the way to run any service but it is definitely not the way to run a service of this nature. The dark cloud or spectre of closure hanging over it is not just bad for the morale and retention of the diligent, dedicated staff, it is bad for the collective mental well-being of our city. I take this opportunity to place on record my appreciation and respect for those Extern staff.

Derry City and Strabane District Council did not embark on this project for the craic. The evaluation makes for stark, sore reading. The rates of suicide and self-harm in the north-west are shocking; they are scandalous. It is so sad. My thoughts are with all of those families who have been devastated by suicide, and with the individuals who battle with demons every day. I commend the council on its efforts to get this up and running. It had to do it, because no one else was going to, but, now, I cannot help but feel that the project is suffering because it was council-led and that someone somewhere in the Department of Health is saying, "That wasn't my idea, so I don't like it". If that is the case, tell us what you do not like. Help to support and shape the service; do not starve it. We need to protect life, not egos.

I thank all of those involved in the gruelling work of suicide prevention in the statutory and community sectors. I know many of the individuals in the trust and the Department who work flat out round the clock, under huge constraints and stress, to tackle ever-increasing and evermore complex cases, but there is

clearly a systemic issue. It is still evident in the mental health budget, and in how difficult individuals find it to access the support that they need, when they need it. Other community-based initiatives should be embraced, not feared and rejected. It is about complementarity, not competition.

My recent proposal for a north-west suicide prevention task force has been dismissed as it would undermine work currently being done. I do not want to undermine it, but underline it, because the sad reality is that too many people believe that nothing is being done.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

**Mr Durkan:** The project clearly falls under the remit of the Department of Health, which will, obviously, support, and has called for, funding from other sources. Although it is clearly Minister Swann's responsibility to lead on it, the Executive also have a responsibility. We have had Ministers tripping over themselves to give their commitment, or talk about their commitment, to mental health. Talk is cheap. Life is precious, and saving lives is precious. The retention of the long-term funding of the project is good value for money. It needs to be done, Minister; please, do it.

**Mr Speaker:** It was remiss of me not to advise Members that they have five minutes in which to speak.

**Ms Mullan:** I also thank Gary Middleton for tabling today's Adjournment debate on Derry's community crisis intervention service, particularly following this afternoon's motion. I also thank the Minister for being here for both debates.

This is one issue that unites the three parties here that represent the people of Foyle. The Minister and his Department have received many pieces of correspondence and questions from us and others across our city. Minister, we are all aware of the massive pressures on your Department in relation to the COVID pandemic — in fact, the pressures were there before COVID — but it is very disappointing when I, and others, write to you to ask to meet and discuss crisis intervention in Derry, but those requests are not accommodated. It is also disappointing to have questions not answered by their deadline, and to read in the newspapers of additional funding, without the provision of any detail to any MLA who is here tonight.

I welcome the extension of the funding, as did my colleague across the Chamber, but, as was said, that is not a way to provide vital services. Our job in the Assembly and Committees is to scrutinise while working with Ministers and Departments to deliver first-class services for all of our constituents, but, in the case of crisis intervention in Derry, that has been lacking. There is a big enough crisis in my city with mental health without a crisis every six months over finding funding for this vital service.

Minister, I know how much you care, and I heard your commitment here today. That has been further demonstrated by the very welcome appointment of Professor Siobhán O'Neill as the interim mental health champion. It is good to hear from you today about the resources that are attached to that office.

The people of Derry have been expecting announcements and action on the future of crisis intervention and wider mental health services, given that mental health is a priority of New Decade, New Approach and across the Executive. When someone reaches out for help and support, they must have access to it. My party supports the appropriate funding of access to crisis services.

The Protect Life 2 strategy identifies the need for an out-of-hours crisis de-escalation service. The Derry model has been providing that for nearly two years as a pilot, yet there was no budget allocation in the strategy for 2020-21.

Earlier today, the Assembly debated a motion on the expansion of the MATT partnership across all trusts. Minister, I ask again that, when reviewing the existing model, the Derry crisis intervention pilot be part of that review and form part of the recommendations for going forward. I further ask, Minister, that you and your officials work with us and all our stakeholders as to what those services will look like for Derry.

Before I conclude, I pay tribute, as other Members have done this evening, to those involved in delivering this service: Extern, Foyle Search and Rescue, the council, the PSNI, the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the members of the steering group, because, without them, we would not have had a local service for the past two years, a service that has saved and is saving lives.

Finally, a Cheann Comhairle, the current cost of Derry's community crisis intervention service is £130,000 a year. That is small change in comparison with the overall health budget, so it is more than value for money for the service

and support that it provides. Like other Members here this evening, Minister, I urge you to provide the required long-term funding to ensure that this life-saving service continues.

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the opportunity to return to the important issue of the cross-cutting support needed for crisis intervention services that we discussed earlier and wish to update Members on the Committee's consideration of the matter. I thank the Member for securing the debate.

At the Committee for Health's meeting on 18 June 2020, it considered correspondence from Extern and the Derry and Strabane Policing and Community Safety Partnership regarding the prospective closure of the crisis intervention service. The Committee welcomed the Minister's statement of 16 June announcing an extension of funding for the service. However, the Committee noted that the extension was short-term only and wrote to the Department to ask whether any consideration had been given to longer-term funding for the service. The Minister advised of the further three-month funding package granted and made the case for a multi-agency funding approach, given the benefits to the PSNI from the service.

The Committee also requested details on the planned reconfiguration of mental health crisis services as described in action 8.2 of the mental health action plan, including information on the time frame and any scoring system to be used in the review.

We were informed that the Chief Medical Officer was leading on the issue and that the proposed time frame was between September and December of this year, with the caveat that, because of the pandemic, it may require an extension. The Minister also advised that the review would look at the wider context of crisis support in mental health and consider all available evidence, in addition to evaluating existing services. The issue is closely connected to ongoing challenges at EDs and the review of urgent and emergency care, and the Committee understands that the review will also aim to identify improvements that will reduce the number of people attending emergency departments as a result of a mental health crisis.

As I said earlier, the Committee will no doubt keep the matter under review as part of our wider scrutiny of transformation and rebuilding services.

During this debate and the earlier one, something struck me. If you have a broken leg,

people will come across the street to talk to you, to comfort you and to offer support and advice, whereas if you have a mental health problem, people will often avoid raising the issue or discussing it.

The other thing about the broken leg is that you can go and get something done about it when it happens and when you are in pain. That same access to mental health services when you really need them does not exist. Until we create a network of services across the North, we will not be treating mental health issues in parity with physical health.

### 5.30 pm

**Mr Chambers:** The Ulster Unionist Party has long recognised the need to develop and support innovative approaches to help people in times of emotional crisis. The community crisis intervention service has, undoubtedly, saved lives. It is not just its emphasis on a community response but that it works from 8.00 pm on Thursday to 8.00 am on Sunday, when some support organisations may not be there for people.

The service is a safety net, providing a short-term solution to an immediate crisis. That is why I was pleased that Robin Swann personally intervened not once but twice to secure the service. The first intervention was in June this year when he provided £32,000 as a breathing space for the council to reach a longer-term funding solution. At the time, it was made clear that it would have been useful for funding discussions to involve other Departments and the policing and community safety partnership, given the benefit of the service to the PSNI. Regrettably, nothing came to fruition, so, once again, the Minister intervened. This time, it was not for just three months but for six. Whilst other Departments and statutory bodies often talk a good talk, it is regrettable that no one other than Minister Swann was able to offer even a partial contribution to the service.

If other statutory bodies are serious about that service continuing on a sustainable basis, they need to step up to the plate. They need to dig deep into their pockets and help to create a long-term funding package and a model that is available for even longer operating hours.

I wish this invaluable service well.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you to the Member for bringing this debate. It is not my constituency, although, as a former resident of Eglinton, it was once, so I speak as not just my party's

health spokesperson but as someone who has a natural sympathy for the area.

The case for the retention of the service and placing it on long-term funding has been made. Indeed, the clear case exists for not just retention but extension. Funding sources may need to be wider than the Department of Health but, as we heard in the earlier debate, it is essential that we do not see money allocated to these services as just money spent but money saved. Such services are classic examples of the type of early intervention that the entire process of transforming our health and social care system is all about. By allocating funding to such services in the longer term, we should recognise that by intervening early — and, therefore, effectively — we can turn lives around. There is, surely, nothing more important.

I have spoken to my party's councillors in the area, and I emphasise the point raised in the earlier debate that crisis intervention should be much more an innate part of the overall mental health service, and, indeed, the health and social care system generally. Crisis intervention can be a fundamental part of primary care, providing a direct link for the police, ambulance and fire services rather than having to direct people to an already busy emergency department at Altnagelvin or elsewhere. That type of early intervention would see the most appropriate care provided immediately, with adequate follow-ups within a few days. That is the most effective channel to help people in need without the need for referrals, other than in the most extreme cases.

To re-emphasise two key points, the service cannot survive by having to chase after a pot of funding every few months. It needs a longer-term footing. Secondly, if we could provide longer-term funding, it could become a true anchor for the service and for improving mental health across the area, and that is potentially a model for elsewhere in this country.

I express my thanks to everyone who has been involved in the service to date and wish them well for the future.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank Gary for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. Although I am not an elected representative for Foyle, my constituents avail themselves of Extern services, so I am delighted to be here today to speak on the issue. In my time serving as a councillor on Derry City and Strabane District Council, I was greatly impressed by the work of CCIS and its commitment to those struggling with mental ill health. It is providing vital

services to the local community, serving people from the outskirts of Strabane right through to Derry city and constituents from Claudy.

In the midst of a global health pandemic and as discussed in the mental health crisis debate earlier, the need for on-the-spot mental health support is painfully apparent. We fear and have extreme concern regarding what the north-west would look like without access to a service like this, a community-based programme with a listening ear that is available out of hours and is on the doorstep. If we cannot afford to fund this life-saving service, what kind of message are we sending to the wider public?

I have spoken at length with staff at CCIS. You can tell the impact that this service has had on reducing suicidal behaviour in the wider council area. I urge the Minister and other Executive colleagues to please consider a long-term, ring-fenced funding strategy for this critical suicide prevention service.

**Mr Carroll:** Mr Speaker, as you know, I am not a Member from the constituency or a Derry man, but it is important to be here and speak in support of this service and other services like it across the North. Too often, services like this spend too much time chasing funding when they should be doing what they are best at, which is supporting people with mental health issues. People have expressed to me that the crisis intervention service in Derry is a vital amenity for the city and for the north-west. I believe them and will take their word for it. It has saved lives, as Members have emphasised tonight.

On World Suicide Prevention Day, the Minister announced another £60,000 of funding to keep the service going until March. That funding has been broadly welcomed because it is a service that nobody in Derry wants to lose. However, the treatment of the service is not good enough. People who depend on the service cannot be sure that it will be there next year or the year after, workers cannot be sure whether they will have a job and no one can make long-term plans to tackle mental ill health on that basis.

Like my constituency, Derry and the north-west suffer disproportionately from the legacy of deprivation and disinvestment, and the implementation of Tory welfare reforms has had a vicious negative impact on the most vulnerable and on low-paid workers in all communities here. Absolute poverty has increased, and these factors drive a tremendous mental health challenge for people in Derry and beyond. For those reasons, by not sourcing core funding for the crisis intervention

service, I believe that the Executive are sending the wrong message to Derry and the north-west. A service that I am more familiar with, Compass Counselling, which is based on the Shankill, also required council intervention to save that fundamental and important mental health service. That pattern happens too often.

As we have heard already, New Decade, New Approach makes a series of commitments to develop Derry and the north-west. What message does it send to people in Derry and the north-west when they are forced to organise an all-out effort every couple of months to keep the doors of this vital service open? Hundreds of millions of pounds have been wasted on the likes of the renewable heat incentive scheme, and funding of £30,000 or £60,000 for the crisis intervention service requires a big effort, investment and action by Derry and Strabane council and others to demand it. For me, that sends out the wrong message. The people of Derry will tell you that. They told me that prior to this debate. They will tell you that nothing has changed and that the new Stormont is the old Stormont when it comes to Derry and the north-west; promises but little delivery.

People in Derry are fed up with the half a loaf treatment, and the mental health crisis is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. The health pandemic, as we heard earlier, and its social and economic aftershocks will make it even more challenging. For this reason, the Minister and the Executive need to use this opportunity to identify core, long-term funding for Derry's crisis intervention service and make it part of the mental health action plan. The job of the Executive is to help people not to abandon them and generate cynicism and hopelessness.

Derry needs a new deal. Let us send a message that we are serious about delivering this by making it a priority to establish core funding for this essential service.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I thank Mr Middleton for proposing this Adjournment topic. I think that it works well and ties in well with the earlier debate on mental health crisis support. It is a testimony to the dedication of the Members who have stayed for the Adjournment debate because I know that, during other sessions, it was an achievement to get the constituency MLAs to stay. Therefore, I thank all the Members from across all the parties and other constituencies who have stayed tonight to join in and support the representatives from Foyle in the Adjournment debate.

The debate provides us, again, with a welcome opportunity to discuss the funding for the community crisis intervention service in Londonderry. I will repeat some of the commentary from the earlier debate because, since taking up the post of Minister of Health, I have made it very clear that mental health is a priority for me and my Department. I noted Mr Durkan's comments earlier about ego. I hope that that was not directed at me or anywhere near me. Therefore, I want to clarify that approach because it is not how I work, and it is definitely not how I work with regard to mental health.

For far too long people have struggled to access the appropriate mental health services when they need them. For far too long suicide has cast a shadow over our communities and it has robbed us of too many lives. So, it is important to note that suicide prevention is not a single issue; in particular, it links with drugs, alcohol and, as Mr Carroll said, deprivation. Those links are widely acknowledged through experience, research and best practice.

Protect Life 2 focuses on suicide prevention as a societal issue. It seeks to ensure collaborative cross-departmental engagement — I think that that was referenced by Ms Flynn in the previous debate — to address the risk factors for suicide and self-harm, as well as engagement across wider society. Suicide prevention requires work across a range of settings and services because the combined knowledge, expertise and resources of all our Departments and the differing sectors is essential to reduce the suicide rate.

Londonderry's crisis intervention service was commissioned, as many Members have said, by Derry City and Strabane District Council and it is delivered solely by Extern. The service began in January 2019 and it provides a timely and non-clinical community response to individuals who are experiencing an emotional or a situational crisis, and that has been indicated today. The service was initially piloted for one year and was due to end in December 2019, and that was extended until June 2020. The service was allocated £27,000 of transformational slippage funding in March 2020. I agreed to provide a one-off injection of just over £32,000 of funding to Derry City and Strabane District Council to allow for a breathing space for the council to extend the service for a further three months, which is to the end of this month, to try and reach a funding solution with stakeholders. That work is ongoing and it is going in a positive direction. I agreed last week, as has been referenced, to allocate a further £60,000 to enable the service to

continue until the end of March 2021, while that work is ongoing. I know that the service wrote to a number of Departments, but Health was the only one that responded financially to allow that piece of work to continue.

A separate funding arrangement is being explored for the service thereafter by the council and Extern.

I felt it important to maintain the service to allow them to do that piece of work, and that is why I provided the funding until the end of March 2020 until the crisis service review work is completed, because this piece of work is included in that review and also in the context of COVID-19 and the impact that it undoubtedly has on mental health.

#### 5.45 pm

The Health Committee Chair referred to action 8.2 in the mental health action plan. In the debate earlier, I referred to the specific steps that that involves. One of those is to consider the interaction between different crisis response services, such as MATs, the home crisis teams, emergency departments, 999, the police, primary care and the multidisciplinary teams. All of that work is part of how we do this to make sure we serve the people across Northern Ireland in the best way possible.

I have not just read the evaluations. I visited the service earlier this year and talked to the people who deliver it, and I was impressed by the work undertaken by the service to help those most in need. I was particularly impressed by the dedication and commitment of those individuals, because this service is person-centred, and we must all recognise that anyone can find themselves in need of such a service.

Extern have advised me that over 475 people have received time-critical and immediate intervention since the initiative commenced, and I have no doubt that this has saved lives. Some of those people have been brought to the service by Foyle Search and Rescue, some have been brought by the PSNI and others have availed themselves of accessibility and been brought by family and friends. Service users have consistently benefited from the non-clinical approach that is taken because often a busy hospital or emergency department environment is not helpful for someone in crisis. The therapeutic environment of the crisis intervention service is much more appropriate. The majority of clients have not required any further services directly after attending the crisis

intervention service, and I think that that point in particular underlines its effective working.

Whilst the benefits of this service have been, above all, for the clients themselves, there are also significant benefits for PSNI colleagues, who have a place of safety where they can take someone in crisis. The service evaluations, as referred to on a number of occasions, clearly show that police officers feel that the service allows them to treat clients more effectively and allows them to carry on with other duties as they are confident the person is safe.

The demands that mental health crises place on police forces have been very clear for some time, and I therefore think that there is a strong argument for the justice sector to consider contributing to funding such initiatives going forward because reducing the devastating impact of suicide and self-harm in Northern Ireland requires, as many Members have said, collaboration across all sectors of society and can only be achieved by working together across all government Departments and with stakeholders from all sections of society. That includes local councils, and I commend Derry and Strabane District Council for the proactive work that it has undertaken to commission this service.

Members will be aware that on 19 May I published my Department's mental health action plan. Policy work on developing proposals for crisis intervention services is now being taken forward through the mental health action plan. There is a specific action in that plan to develop proposals for crisis intervention services. It is expected that the review into mental health intervention services will be completed by March 2021. It will take into account the evaluation of the Derry crisis intervention services as well as similar pilots that operate in Belfast and the multi-agency triage team.

The review is expected to make recommendations for the future delivery of crisis intervention services and also enhance coordination of a range of associated programmes, including mental health crisis services, the Towards Zero Suicide programme, Lifeline and the multi-agency triage team, because decisions on future delivery of crisis services will be taken by the Department once that work is completed.

I am also committed to delivering a new mental health strategy by July next year. That strategy was already needed before the pandemic, but the need for a new comprehensive strategic

direction and funding plan has now never been greater.

As I have said many times, mental health is one of my top priorities. I am honoured to be in this position, where I can drive strategic change and improvement to mental health services and improve the psychological well-being and mental resilience of the population. I trust that the allocation of £60,000 will allow Extern and Derry City and Strabane District Council to ensure continuity for the service and to contribute to suicide prevention, which is vital in these challenging times for those who are most vulnerable. I thank the Member for bringing this Adjournment debate topic.

*Adjourned at 5.50 pm.*

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