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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 February 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we commence, I remind you that, once again, this week's business has been amalgamated into a single sitting. Three Ministers will respond to questions for oral answer. To avoid a long suspension during the sitting, the Business Committee has agreed to schedule a motion to suspend the Standing Order that requires Question Time to commence at 2.00 pm. Subject to that motion being agreed, Question Time will commence as soon as all other business concludes. That will probably be between 10.40 am and 11.10 am. Question Time will commence with the Minister for Communities, followed 45 minutes later by the Minister for the Economy and, 45 minutes after that, by the Minister of Education.

The Business Committee will meet at 1.00 pm or after the sitting adjourns. A lunchtime suspension has not been scheduled.

Public Petition: Adoption of Ravensbrae Waste Water Treatment Plant, Garrison

Mr Speaker: Ms Jemma Dolan has sought leave to present a public petition, in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Ms Dolan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you for the opportunity to present this public petition with regard to the adoption of the waste water treatment works in Ravensbrae, Garrison, County Fermanagh.

The waste water treatment works serving Garrison has been at capacity now for two decades. Therefore, for the Ravensbrae development to get planning permission, the developer had to build his own waste water treatment plant. Through bad planning policy, he was allowed to build a treatment plant that was not up to a standard that NI Water could adopt. This has left the Garrison community

and the natural environment around the village with a ticking health and ecological time bomb on its doorstep.

My first preference would have been to go door to door with this petition, but, as we all know, current health regulations prevent that. Therefore, I thank the 258 people who have taken the time to sign the online petition. The 258 signatures may not seem like a lot, but, bearing in mind that Garrison has a population in the region of 350 people, those signatures represent a large majority of the residents and their concerns.

We have a number of unadopted housing estates in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but Ravensbrae is of particular concern due to the potential of raw sewage leaking into the world-famous Lough Melvin, which is internationally renowned for its unique range of plants, animals and fish.

Lough Melvin is the only location in the world where the gillaroo trout can be found.

In response to a question for written answer to the Minister for Infrastructure last year, I was told that it could be at least six years before the sewerage infrastructure in Garrison would be updated. Quite frankly, the people of Garrison cannot and should not be expected to wait for six years. Every month, the electricity supplier threatens to cut the power to the waste water treatment plant because the developer who built it refuses to pay the bill. The result of that will be similar to what the residents of Galliagh Shore experienced: raw sewage running down the street and children not being able to play outside, not to mention the smell.

I know that updating the sewerage infrastructure cannot happen overnight, so I ask the Minister to instruct NI Water to upgrade the waste water treatment plant in Ravensbrae to its standards and to adopt it. If, for whatever reason, that is impossible, the least that the ratepayers of Ravensbrae and Garrison expect is that the Department for Infrastructure, through NI Water, should take over the

management of the plant until the mains sewerage system is updated and extended in Garrison.

The planners and the developer have let down the residents. This petition calls on the Minister for Infrastructure not to let down the residents. In 2021, sewage treatment should not be a luxury; it is an essential utility.

Mr Speaker: The Member will know that, normally, I would invite her to bring the petition to the Table and present it here. However, in light of social distancing, I ask her to remain in her place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office. I thank her for bringing the petition to the Assembly's attention. Once it is received, I will forward it to the Minister for Infrastructure and send a copy to the Committee for Infrastructure.

Public Petition: Sanctions for Cyberbullying

Mr Speaker: Ms Joanne Bunting has sought leave to present a petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful for the opportunity to present this petition, which calls for sanctions for cyberbullying, to the House today. I have been requested to do so by a grieving family from my constituency of East Belfast, and this is a serious subject that will have touched many families across Northern Ireland.

The Gregg family lost a precious son, a beloved brother and a father to suicide as a result of relentless targeting for six months on social media. Mobile technology is freely available and necessary in today's society, so bullying and targeting not only are distressing for their subject but can be relentless and feel as if there is no escape. No one is immune from cyberbullying; we are all potential targets. It affects people of any age and from any walk of life, but it can be overwhelming and devastating. Sometimes, the hope that it will stop simply runs out, leaving nothing but despair — and then what?

The petition was originally started for mental health week, and some 10,630 people have signalled their support online for the family's campaign. I have another 1,246 physical signatories in my possession. The signatories call for sanctions on those who, often with unremitting viciousness and for fun, drive someone to take their own life or to attempt to do so. We seem to have become a society that

is generous in our charitable giving but unkind with our words. Social media has become a place where it appears acceptable, often behind a veil of anonymity or a persona, to say anything, regardless of and with little thought for the impact that the words or the message may have on the recipient.

There are many who advocate loudly for tolerance but show none when they are behind a keyboard. There must be more stringent regulation of platforms or a stricter interpretation of the rules, or both, for those who breach and misuse them to bully, resulting in a desperate person coming to physical harm at their own hand. It is important that legislation keeps pace with an ever-changing world, and, therefore, I believe that it is right and necessary that consideration be given to legislation that deals specifically with cyberbullying that leads to suicide or a suicide attempt. Those 10,000 people in Northern Ireland call on the Justice Minister and the Assembly to say, "Enough", and to introduce a sanction. I support their call.

Mr Speaker: Again, in light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in her place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office. I thank her for bringing the petition to the Assembly's attention. Once the petition is received, I will forward it to the Minister of Justice and send a copy to the Committee for Justice.

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: This item of business will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 16 February 2021.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 16 February 2021.

Private Members' Business

ensure that the legislation will be governed, processed and managed properly.

Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Members, please take your ease for a moment.

Mr Givan: I beg to introduce the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill, which is a Bill to amend the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 to remove the ground for an abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Ms Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning's situation is unusual because the proposer of the Bill decided to provide us with information on it at 10.16 am. With reference to Standing Order 30, parts 5 and 6, and Standing Order 34, I am sure that the proposer will have no objection, given that he has stated that his Bill is fundamentally about human rights, that I ask for assurance that we will have written evidence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on its content before we proceed to scrutiny.

Mr Speaker: First, there is nothing unusual about the procedure this morning. In fact, the procedure is very much in keeping with past practice, including very recent practice. We have had motions tabled, including by Executive Ministers, at short notice and so on and so forth. It is at the discretion of the Member, as sponsor of the Bill, to have its First Stage scheduled. Of course, every other stage of the legislative process will go through the Business Committee and so on. The Bill will go through the House according to the normal procedure. I put it on the record that there is nothing unusual with the procedure by which Mr Given has introduced the Bill this morning.

Ms Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have not addressed the issue of our receipt of the Human Rights Commission's advice before we move to scrutiny.

Mr Speaker: We engage with the Human Rights Commission. The commission's response will be a matter for it. The commission will also have the opportunity to present its evidence throughout this process. The Bill's First Stage has been introduced this morning. The Bill will be printed, and, through the Business Committee, it will go through the normal, ongoing process by which legislation always proceeds. In my role as Speaker, I will

Oral Answers to Questions

Communities

Shankill Gateway Public Realm Scheme

1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Shankill gateway public realm scheme, including the current position on the allocation of funding. (AQO 1553/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I thank the Member for his question. The Shankill gateway public realm scheme received full planning permission in July 2020. However, Belfast City Council has since raised a number of considerations about the omission of a redesign of the Peter's Hill/North Street junction from the planning approval. My Department has engaged with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council through a joint junctions working group to review the Peter's Hill/North Street junction and develop designs to improve that connection to the city centre. When the final designs are agreed and a revised planning approval obtained, if necessary, my Department will consider the budget position against other priorities.

10.45 am

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can the Minister expedite those conversations with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council to ensure that the development, which has been talked about for some time, is put in place as soon as possible?

Can the Minister give an update on the development of the junction between Lanark Way and Shankill Road that includes St Matthew's church, the shops, Glenwood Primary School and West Belfast Orange Hall? It was due to start some months ago but has not. It was then due to start this week but does not appear to have.

Ms Hargey: The conversations with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council are ongoing and are moving as quickly as possible. Belfast City Council has developed its 'Bolder Vision' for Belfast, and part of that vision is overcoming severance from surrounding communities. The Member will know that Belfast city centre is surrounded by inner-city working-class communities. There is

other ongoing work on the shatter zone that runs along Peter's Hill from Carrick Hill to New Lodge to the bottom of Divis Street. Therefore, the council is taking an overarching view of the essential road work that needs to be done, and measures by the Department for Infrastructure will be a key part of that. We are trying to move at pace, and I will update Members as soon as that work has been completed. There is a commitment that there should be no undue delay with the programme. It will move forward with other key strategic sites along the shatter zone, as we try to move those sites forward for development as soon as possible.

I do not have information about the other scheme that the Member mentioned to hand. I can follow up with a written response about when the scheme is to start.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister mentioned that the Peter's Hill/North Street junction was originally included in the scheme. Can she talk or write to her colleagues in Infrastructure and Belfast City Council about where that fits in with the shatter zone that she referred to and, indeed, the strategic site assessment that Belfast City Council and her Department are involved in?

Ms Hargey: All those strands of work are important parts of Belfast City Council's 'Bolder Vision' for Belfast. In working with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council, I commit to taking a strategic, longer-term view of the entire space of the shatter zone, the undeveloped sites that sit there and the roadway and public realm works that need to be done.

I know that Belfast City Council's vision is to overcome severance from surrounding communities, which has been a long-standing issue; indeed, when those communities were consulted, one of the key issues raised was feeling locked out of the city centre. I commit to removing that severance and restitching those communities into the city centre and its streetscape. Public realm road infrastructure is a key part of that. I commit to taking that work forward once the conversations with the council and DFI are concluded. I will update Members accordingly.

Mr Allen: Minister, it is evident in the draft Budget that your Department's wider budget is under severe pressure. With that in mind, are there any proposed schemes in the forthcoming financial year that may be under threat?

Ms Hargey: The draft Budget is that at the moment — a draft. Concerns have been

highlighted through the equality impact assessment (EQIA) that are more to do with the revenue side of the Budget than the capital side. I am assessing those and taking into account the consultation on the draft Budget. I will then come forward with my budget and priorities for the time ahead. I will update Members on the particulars of the capital and revenue sides once we get to that point.

Statutory Sick Pay

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider making changes to statutory sick pay (SSP), to provide adequate support for people who have to self-isolate or shield because of COVID-19. (AQO 1554/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. Statutory sick pay is an important tool in helping people to adhere to the current advice to stay at home if they have symptoms of COVID-19 or have been advised to self-isolate. However, as, I am sure, the Member will appreciate, those guidelines are easier to comply with if you know that your income is enough to support your family.

I recognise that anyone moving from a salary to the current rate of statutory sick pay faces a substantial drop in income and financial uncertainty. Increasing the rate of statutory sick pay could go some way to encouraging people to comply fully with the requirement to remain at home and protect the health service.

Last March, I wrote to Thérèse Coffey, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, to request that urgent consideration be given to increasing the rate of statutory sick pay and to ensuring that individuals are properly financially supported during the pandemic. That would ensure that those who are self-isolating do not continue working, thereby potentially endangering their health and the health of others and further spreading the virus. Unfortunately, I have only recently received a reply from Justin Tomlinson MP, the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work. I plan to meet him in the coming weeks to request that urgent consideration be given to increasing statutory sick pay.

I should also highlight the fact that I responded quickly to provide financial support to those who have to self-isolate by including additional support through the discretionary support COVID-19 self-isolation grant. That payment is designed to assist with short-term living expenses, where a person or a member of a

person's immediate family has been infected by COVID-19 or has been advised to self-isolate in accordance with the latest guidance from the Public Health Agency (PHA).

Once I have met Justin Tomlinson, I will update Members as soon as possible.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for a comprehensive and detailed answer. What actions, if any, are you taking with the Minister for the Economy to advance statutory sick payments in Northern Ireland not only during COVID but beyond COVID, when we are coming out of the pandemic. How can we improve statutory sick pay for everybody in Northern Ireland who find themselves in such circumstances?

Ms Hargey: Discussions are ongoing, and I have a meeting due soon. I have a request in with the Minister for the Economy to look at this and other issues on which both Departments need to work together. We need to look at statutory sick pay but also at, for example, labour market interventions. I will update Members when we progress those discussions.

The issue of statutory sick pay needs to be looked at. The pandemic has really highlighted the fundamentals and the faults in the system. We need to find ways of addressing those to ensure that people are not having to choose going to work over their health because they do not have the finances to sustain themselves.

As I said, I have introduced new measures, within the existing legislative constraints, around discretionary support. I am keeping all of that under review to see how we can improve those systems. I will update the Member in due course.

Ms Mullan: Minister, since the start of the pandemic, you, along with Carál Ní Chuilín, have been determined to do whatever it takes to support those most impacted on by COVID. In addition to statutory sick pay, which you touched on, what changes have you made to ensure that support is delivered to those who need it?

Ms Hargey: Overall, the Department and its staff have really stepped up at the height of the pandemic. I take the opportunity to commend the staff of the Department for Communities. They really want to get support out the door and on to the ground as soon as possible. Over the past year, we have invested over £304 million in support right into the heart of communities and neighbourhoods. We have increased the

income threshold for discretionary support. That was one of the first measures introduced last year. We also introduced the self-isolation payment, broadening it to make it a grant, and we increased people's awareness of how to draw it down. We introduced food supports in the immediate aftermath of the onset of the COVID pandemic, when people were being instructed to stay at home. There have been other supports, such as funding support to councils to assist them with services and loss of income, and, as you will have seen, over £42 million has been invested in making additional COVID heating payments to over 220,000 individuals in groups that were seen as being at high risk.

I continue to review all the measures that we are trying to implement, including discretionary support, which is unique to the North, to see how we can make all the schemes more flexible and to ensure that they reach as many people as possible.

Mr McGlone: I am sure that the Minister will more than appreciate that, for people who are trying to get by on statutory sick pay of £95.85 per week in difficult circumstances, both health-wise and family-wise, the discretionary support mechanism is elongated, lengthy and difficult to get through. In order to obviate all that, has she given any consideration to a particular SSP top-up scheme tailored specially to needs in Northern Ireland? She will appreciate that, in the circumstances, people who are off work because they have tested positive are least able to go through an elongated computerised or telephone application mechanism for discretionary support.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. Again, as I said, in the midst of the pandemic, a lot of issues opened up with regard to how the system functioned and the changes that needed to be made. Changes were made quickly to discretionary support to make it more flexible for people. The application form was shortened. We put it online to ensure that people could also access it that way. It continues to be improved.

Obviously, I will conduct a review of discretionary support, which is bounded by legislation. That may mean legislative change in the time ahead. However, I am keen to ensure that existing mechanisms are made more flexible to ensure that people who need support can get it as quickly as possible. I am obviously keen; that is why I have written to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) about statutory sick pay overall. Changes need to be made. Any uplift to statutory sick pay will

have financial implications. I believe that it has to be forthcoming from the Department for Work and Pensions, because there will be a knock-on effect for employers' contributions. Again, we have to look at all that in the round.

The important thing for me is to get support to people who need it as quickly as possible. I will put that strongly to DWP in the meeting that is due to take place in the next couple of weeks. I am also committed to reassessing measures that I already have in place in the Department to ensure that we make it as easy as possible for people in a time of crisis to access that support as quickly as possible. Part of the review will be talking directly to people who have been through the process to see whether we can make changes to the application itself, as the Member mentioned, whether it can be more streamlined and whether there are quicker ways or extra supports that we can build in to ensure that we get all the information that we need and that people get the support that they need as soon as possible. As I work through that review and meet DWP, I will update Members on the conclusions of those.

Mr Carroll: Given the fact that only 2% of people who have received the discretionary self-isolation grant have been able to get the figure of £500 or more, will the Minister look, as part of the review, at implementing an automatic payment of at least £500, so that people, especially low-earners, can self-isolate safely?

Ms Hargey: One of the big issues is that, when we compare the payment with what is happening in England, we see that it is not a straight scheme in how it is implemented across the water, as, I am sure, the Member will appreciate, in that it can be taxed. I want to build as much flexibility into discretionary support as I can to make sure that people get the assistance that they need. Whilst it is not a one-off £500 payment, discretionary support here is a grant, not a loan. You can apply more than once. That is what is important: someone can apply multiple times if they or a member of their household is self-isolating as a result of COVID.

Part of the review of discretionary support will be to see whether I can build other flexibilities into the scheme. It is not about stopping people trying to access help. I want to make sure that I open up the help that I can give to people in as quick a manner as possible and make the process as easy as possible to go through. That is why it is important, as part of the review, that I engage with professionals who have expertise in this and that I engage with those who have

been through the system and may have had a negative experience of discretionary support. We can learn from that experience how we can improve customer service and streamline the service to ensure that it meets the need. We will look at all that. As I said, I have increased the income threshold. That was about trying to get as many low-income families into it as possible. All that will be part of the review, going forward.

11.00 am

COVID-19 Mitigation Schemes

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Communities for the total number of unsuccessful applications to the COVID mitigation schemes administered by her Department. (AQO 1555/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department acted swiftly to put in place a range of programmes and schemes to support individuals and organisations who have been impacted by the COVID pandemic. In order to support individuals, a fund of £3 million was made available through the discretionary support self-isolation grant, and, as of 31 December 2020, 19,975 claims have been processed, of which 3,883 were unsuccessful.

For sporting organisations, a fund of £27 million was made available through three schemes. For two schemes, a total of 2,808 applications were received, of which 526 were unsuccessful. The third scheme is still being processed, so we do not have those figures yet.

For charitable organisations, funding of £20.5 million was made available through the charitable grants scheme. In phase 1, 1,646 applications were received and 129 were unsuccessful. Social enterprise support was also provided through funding of £9.25 million. There were 394 applications to that scheme, and 79 were unsuccessful. Information is not yet available for the other schemes that my Department put in place, such as the community, voluntary and social enterprise sector PPE scheme and the culture resilience scheme, as they are still being processed and applications are being given out at the moment. Again, I am happy to share that information once it is available.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that detail. If you are designing a COVID mitigation scheme that is based on qualifying criteria, it is probably inevitable that individuals and groups will fall through the cracks. Will the Minister agree that it would make sense to form a subcommittee of

the Executive as a sort of appeals body that is populated by her and maybe the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy? That would represent a better safety net for those who miss out.

Ms Hargey: Over 80% of applications for the discretionary support scheme have been successful. We still need to do work on the 20%. I am keen to engage with the Executive where I can in order to look at additional support and to learn from things that have not worked in the past. That is why I have instructed that there be a review of discretionary support. I want that to be independent in some ways, and I am involving people from outside the system in that review in order to ensure that there is independence, scrutiny and accountability. Importantly, in keeping with a co-design policy, which I gave a commitment to, and in embedding a rights-based approach, I want to involve those on the ground who have been impacted by the supports in either a positive or a negative way in order to ensure that we meet their needs going forward. That is why I am doing the review.

I have not looked at your suggestion for an overarching group. I have ongoing engagements with Ministers on certain schemes across the Executive. We are looking at the pathway not just to an economic recovery but to a social recovery. We will continue having those cross-departmental discussions across the Executive in order to learn from the impact that the pandemic has had on poverty and how it has exacerbated the problems that are already there. We need to work in a more collaborative, joined-up way on the solutions, and that is something that I am committed to doing in the time ahead.

Ms P Bradley: My question comes with a caveat, which is that, in our constituency offices, we hear more about the negative than the positive, but I want to talk about the COVID-19 discretionary support grant. Minister, what would you say to those people who have been turned down and who were told to literally count the number of tins they had in their cupboards and what they had in their fridge? We know that people's needs are not black and white, so, when you look at the review, will you give your word that you will use a common-sense approach, because not everybody's situation is the same?

Ms Hargey: As I pointed out, the majority of those who applied to the scheme — there have been over 15,000 applications — have been

successful. That said, I need to look at the plight of those who have not been successful and, through no fault of their own, find themselves in such a situation.

As part of the review, it is important that we reach out to those individuals and talk not just to those who have had a good experience of the system but to those who have had a negative experience. I think that there is an issue. We have a team of dedicated staff who live in the communities and who provide that service. I have seen them really stretching themselves, particularly throughout the pandemic, to go above and beyond. We changed stuff immediately at the outbreak of the pandemic to make it more flexible: we increased the income threshold, we set up the online form and we shortened the form to try to make it as easy as possible.

With that said, there are still things that can be done. There are systems that can be improved and customer services that can always be improved. There is a commitment with regard to this review, not just from me as the Minister but from the Department and officials. They see the value in this review being conducted. They see the value in an independent review from outside sectors and, importantly, in hearing from those who have come through the system with negative experiences to work out whether there is a common thread and issue that needs to be dealt with. I am open to ensuring that this is an open and transparent review and to making things better for those people. The big thing is around instilling dignity and a rights-based approach into the system. If we are serious about that, we need to listen to people who have had a negative experience and to reshape the system to respond to their needs. I am committed to doing that, and I know that the staff in the Department are committed to doing that. Indeed, I will update Members as we start to work through the review of discretionary support.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, thank you for your answers so far. You have reiterated, today, your commitment to getting help and support to people who are in need. In the light of that, can you outline what you are doing to increase the uptake of the discretionary support?

Ms Hargey: Yes, there has been a lot of work. One of the common problems is that people do not know where to get access to help. There is a plethora of different systems for help. The first thing that we did was to work with the Public Health Agency, and we included a link on nidirect's 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Benefits' web page, detailing financial support

and practical help. I have also successfully worked, through the Department, with the Department of Health to include information on the grant as part of the StopCOVID app. The Department has a good working relationship with the advice and independent advice sectors, and information on the grant is also available through those organisations. Indeed, information is available through our jobs and benefits offices, and Members can get information and updates through the Department.

Discretionary support is going to be a fundamental part of the review around how people knew about the service, how they could access the service, and whether there were blockages in terms of getting information and whether it was clear. When I read some websites, I can get confused when trying to find stuff, so I want to make it as easy as possible for people to find the support. These are people who are in a distressed state, as they have lost income and they are wondering how they are going to have food on the table or heat their homes. We need to make support as easy to get and accessible as possible. Therefore, as part of this review, I make a commitment to look at that issue. We need to shout about these supports and try to find others to do that. We have a good network of community and voluntary organisations that has really stood up throughout the pandemic, to get critical support and food out to communities. So, we need to find new ways of reaching out and engaging with people, and my Department is open to looking at any suggestions or ways in which it can increase awareness around the supports that are there.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. She will be aware that many have fallen through the net for support from many of the schemes that were issued by the Executive, not least the sports and social clubs that have a hospitality element. They are being pointed to the sports sustainability fund, which is administered by your Department, but it closed on 20 January. Therefore, is the Minister minded to reopen that fund and to look at the eligibility criteria with the Minister of Finance?

Ms Hargey: First, those applications are being processed at the moment, and that fund closed on 19 January. Within that process, it was clear that assistance could be given to the sports organisations that have been impacted. For example, if they operate a bar facility and there is a reduction in income from that, which is impacting on their sports side, then they can apply through that fund. From the assessments, I know that a lot of clubs have applied through

the sports fund regarding lost income through their enterprises. Those costs will, in some ways, be met through that grant. So, there are ongoing discussions.

I have not had much lobbying from organisations. Up until now, a lot of the sports organisations have applied for the grant. We are, obviously, going to be making announcements on that fund shortly because assessments are concluding. If they can show that the costs for which they have applied have a direct impact on the sport that they do, that will be looked at as part of this fund. The fund has been maxed out of current money. If we see that there is an additional need or that a new need emerges, that has to be taken into consideration in new COVID support in the next financial year.

I am keen to engage with the sporting codes, individual sporting bodies, the Sports Forum and Sport NI to see whether there are any gaps in the existing fund and what we can do to provide new or additional supports. All that depends on budget. However, I am committed to seeing what I can do to close any potential existing gaps, but we have not been made aware of any. We have not had a demand, but that may come as the funding applications and notifications are released in the coming week or so.

Casement Park

4. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her Department's engagement with the GAA in relation to the development of Casement Park. (AQO 1556/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. Advancement of the plans to complete the regional stadia programme, including Casement Park, is a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I am fully committed to delivering on this priority area. I welcome the announcement from my colleague the Minister for Infrastructure in October 2020 of her intention to approve the Casement Park planning application. I recently wrote asking for an update on that.

There continues to be significant engagement with the GAA in relation to the development of the Casement Park project. The regional stadia programme board, chaired by the senior responsible officer (SRO), meets monthly. Representatives from the Ulster Council GAA (UCGAA) attend in respect of the Casement Park project. Members of the stadia team

attend the regular meetings of the GAA project board. My departmental officials meet the UCGAA weekly to ensure that the project is being delivered at pace. This is in addition to the many project-related meetings that both teams attend, with relevant project consultants and advisers in attendance. I also have regular meetings with the GAA Casement Park team and members of its project board to assess progress and discuss issues pertaining to the project.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for her update. Can she confirm that there is a funding stand-off, to a degree, between her Department and the GAA on the delivery of this project? Will those funding difficulties put the project in danger in any way?

Ms Hargey: I do not see a stand-off at the moment; I am not sure whether that is what the Member means. There have been good discussions and engagements with the GAA on the development. There is a commitment from me and from the GAA that we need to see the final regional stadium developed. Kingspan and Windsor are up and running, notwithstanding the COVID restrictions, and we have seen the benefits of those two stadia. It is right that we complete the third and final stadium for Gaelic games and young Gaels who are coming up and for the wider impact that it will have on the community.

We await the outcome of the planning process. We need the green certificate to finalise the full business case. There then has to be a discussion and a negotiation around the cost. In Committee last week — Minister Ní Chuilín, who took my place when I was off, has commented publicly — I said that an increase in cost has to be shared out. The Executive and the GAA have to make additional contributions. All that will be finalised in the full business case once the planning certificate has been given. Those negotiations will step up and be at a greater pace over the coming months once we have that certificate in place, which should be in the coming weeks.

Mr Lyttle: When will the Minister release the subregional stadia funding? I seek her assurance that this long overdue and desperately needed funding will be allocated to clubs such as Glentoran in my constituency of East Belfast before the end of this mandate.

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for the question. In Committee last week, I spoke about regional and subregional stadia. Those are both commitments in New Decade, New

Approach. I am committed to having this programme up and running before the end of this mandate and the elections next year.

I thought it prudent to have a reassessment to look at the commitments and the need for subregional stadia, because the initial plan is over 10 years old and is outdated. There was another consultation in 2016, and a lot has changed since then, including the impact of COVID. There has been a wide range of engagement with football clubs and associations, including the IFA and others. We are in the middle of concluding that engagement and having recommendations come to me, as Minister, and I will then outline my plans for how the subregional stadia will be rolled out.

11.15 am

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

HSC Staff Recognition Payment

T1. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities what steps she has taken to ensure that those healthcare workers who have received the £500 acknowledgement and those healthcare students who have received the £2,000 acknowledgement from the Health Minister will not see that money have an adverse effect on any social security or income support benefit that they may already be in receipt of. (AQT 981/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your question. It is an important one. Our healthcare workers right across the board have done a tremendous amount of work throughout the pandemic, and will do so after the pandemic, in delivering a healthcare service. I am committed to doing all that I can on the £500 payment. I think that there is a way of doing it so that it will not be impacted on by tax or a loss of benefits. I am waiting for a formal request from the Minister of Health to look at this, but my Department and officials have given a commitment that we will be ready once that request has been received. Wording may need to be written into the legislation that the Minister is bringing forward, and, indeed, my officials are engaging with officials in Health on that wording to ensure that the £500 can be paid and will have no detrimental impact on those receiving it. The discussions are ongoing. We await the formal request, but officials are on standby to do all that they can to ensure that the payment can be made as soon as possible.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for that. Minister, in the absence of some mitigation coming forward, do you agree that a number of recipients of those acknowledgements might be forced to refuse the payment and that that would be a shame?

Ms Hargey: The sooner that we can get Health and my officials engaging, the better. We have asked the Department of Health to be forthcoming with its official request to my Department. I have officials ready and waiting to deal with this, and they need to amend that piece of the legislation under the coronavirus regulations that they are bringing through to ensure that the payments can be made as quickly as possible. There is a commitment from me, and I am sure that there is a commitment from Robin as well, to do that as quickly as possible.

Empty Site: Sunningdale, Ballysillan Road

T2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities, given that she will be aware that he has written to her about a site on the Ballysillan Road at Sunningdale, which has lain empty since the maisonettes were demolished, and over which there seems to be an impasse between her Department and the Housing Executive, whether she will intervene to ensure that the site is developed for the benefit of the community and does not become an environmental blight. (AQT 982/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am aware of the correspondence from you, William. I am looking at this. Discussions are ongoing with the Housing Executive about that site and others. I will come back to you in writing with an update on where that is going as soon as possible.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for that response. Minister, may I raise the issue of Casement Park? You said that you have had significant engagement with the GAA and that your Department continues to engage. Community consultation on these issues is hugely important. What consultation have you, as Minister, had with residents, particularly the Mooreland and Owenvarragh Residents Association?

Ms Hargey: Yes, community engagement and consultation are key, and I know that the GAA is in the middle of developing and laying out the community engagement plan. I have had no direct engagement yet with residents in and around the facility. We await the outcome of the

planning decision and are still waiting for the green certificate to be issued so that we can look at the terms of that planning. That will apply to the development of the site and the management of the site going forward. In community engagement, there may be considerations that are not dissimilar to how such facilities are run, for example, in Croke Park and in Cork.

I am keen to engage. I come from a community like Andersonstown. I have a community development background, and I see the critical importance of engaging with residents — those who are concerned about the stadium but also those who see the positive impact that a stadium can bring to the community. We are looking at the community engagement plan. We want to pick up the pace on that, once the planning permission certificate has been issued, and move to the full business case. I will lay out my plans on that engagement, along with what the GAA needs to do on grassroots community engagement.

Welfare Reform Mitigations

T3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Communities how many people are benefiting from welfare reform mitigations such as the so-called bedroom tax and the benefits cap. (AQT 983/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I do not have the exact number of those who are benefiting. The mitigations are ongoing; they have been running from last year. The mitigations are still being paid, and there is a commitment that they will continue.

I have draft legislation and regulations to close the loopholes to ensure that families — just over 220 of them, I think — do not fall through them. I will soon bring those forward for Executive approval, to be introduced in the new financial year. The budget has been committed for those mitigations. I can write to the Member with the specific number of people in the bedroom tax and cap sections and how many households are being impacted. I will update Members once the legislation and regulations are due to come through. An SR1 form, detailing the regulations, will go to the Committee.

Mr Nesbitt: Given that we are about six weeks from the end of the financial year, is the Minister concerned about what will happen to those people if she does not introduce legislation on time to extend the mitigations?

Ms Hargey: I am committed to going through with the mitigations, as are the Executive, through New Decade, New Approach. The money will not be stopped at the end of the financial year. The money will continue to run; it is in the budget for the next financial year. There will be no break in payments. I am committed to making sure that they continue.

The issue that we need to fix as soon as possible is the loophole in the existing mitigations that families fall through, and I am committed to doing that in the regulations. I am confident that whilst the legislation will move through, the regulations, which will require a shorter period of engagement with the Committee, can pick up on those issues to ensure that we give protections to those families as soon as possible.

Racism: Zero Tolerance

T4. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for Communities, given the recent attack on the Belfast Multicultural Association building and the ongoing issues of exclusion, inequality and racism faced by the BAME community, whether she agrees that political leaders have a responsibility to show zero tolerance for racism in our society. (AQT 984/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Yes, 100% they do. Where racism, or sectarianism for that matter, raises its head, it needs to be challenged. There needs to be a united community approach to condemning it.

I met the Belfast Multicultural Association just after the fire. I was on the scene. I reported that at the last Question Time. On the Monday after, I met them, the North West Migrants Forum and other groups. The big issue that they had was that a tweet condemning those actions was not enough; we needed to stand side by side. I know that that is difficult, given the COVID regulations, but we need to stand beside those communities to show our support.

I gave a commitment to do that. Since then, I have written to the First Ministers and the Justice Minister on the specifics of the fire, but also looking at anti-racism working strategies more broadly. I agree that we need to face racism down where it raises its ugly head and stand with those who are victims of racist crimes.

Ms Brogan: Will the Minister join me in condemning the disgraceful and racist comments of DUP MP Gregory Campbell? All political representatives should understand that their words carry weight and can have real-life

consequences for those who face racist abuse and attacks. Unfortunately, that was not Mr Campbell's first outburst, but his party should ensure that it is his last.

Ms Hargey: I condemn any words or actions that can lead to an increase in feelings of hostility or to a hate crime. When I engaged with members of ethnic minority communities after the fire, one of the key things that they said to me was, "Words are words, but words can hurt and have consequences".

It is important for elected representatives to think about things before we tweet them or put them up on social media. People have fallen foul of tweets that they have made in the past. There is a need for education on and awareness of anti-racism and anti-sectarianism. We all need to learn continually and to engage continually with the relevant groups and organisations. I know that, after the fire, there is a genuine fear in those communities. People who put their head above the parapet to raise concerns after the fire feared that they would then become a target of hate crime. As elected Members, we have a responsibility to stand with those communities and to de-escalate tensions. If there are genuine fears, and there are, we need to overcome them and challenge racism and sectarianism wherever it appears.

Heritage Recovery Fund

T5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Communities, after thanking her for her continued work and that of her officials and her predecessor to assist the North Antrim Village Forum in his constituency, whether she can confirm that the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, based in the village of Armoy, will receive funding through the Heritage Recovery Fund, following the announcement yesterday of the 50 heritage organisations that will receive funding. (AQT 985/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. My predecessor, Carál Ní Chuilín, announced towards the end of last year that that money would be allocated. We are working with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The funding will support organisations that carry out heritage work and individuals such as tour guides to ensure that they are sustained throughout the pandemic and that our heritage is protected in the time ahead.

An arm's-length body handles the applications, so I do not have to hand the specifics of who has been successful, but, after Question Time, I can send you a breakdown of the allocated

funding, Mervyn. It is critical funding. I saw from some of the announcements yesterday on Twitter that it is a lifeline for individuals and organisations, and it will ensure that we protect our heritage and built environment. The funding is also important for local community education and for tourism, given the people who will come to visit here, in order to showcase our exceptional heritage. We have committed to working with those individuals and organisations in the time ahead, along with the culture and arts sector and the creative industries more broadly. They make a contribution, and they will be vital to the social and economic recovery piece that we will be taking forward as an Executive.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her answer. There has been public comment made about to where some of that money will be allocated. Some of it will be allocated to very large projects and to organisations such as the National Trust. It is vital, however, that smaller organisations and rural organisations that make an invaluable contribution to the sector and to our communities, such as the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, not be excluded. Will the Minister ensure that that is the case?

Ms Hargey: That is important across all the schemes that we are supporting, be they for heritage, culture, the arts or sports. It should not be just the larger organisations or representative bodies that receive funding. We should also ensure that the organisations that work at the grassroots level, often at the coalface, receive support and that there be that balance. It is also important that individuals receive support, and the scheme picked up those individuals who are involved in the broader tourism and heritage piece. I have committed to doing that.

With the programmes that my Department is doing, I want to look at doing more work in rural communities, not just on heritage but across the board, to ensure that we are rural proofing in a real way. I want to continue engagement with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on that.

11.30 am

We, along with DAERA and the Department for Infrastructure, have brought forward additional funds this year to support rural communities, and we have worked collaboratively to do that. In the last week, I have written to those two Ministers to request that we start to do that in a more structured way and to ensure that the funding is targeted properly. I recently met the

Rural Residents' Forum, and I picked up on a variety of issues around not just heritage but housing, community development and others. I want to continue to engage on those issues as part of my conversation with the other two Ministers. I can update the Member or the House as we move through that.

Mr Speaker: I call Pat Sheehan. You will not have time for a supplementary question.

Casement Park

T7. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Communities when she anticipates approval of the business case for Casement Park and to state the next steps in the process, given that, as a great advocate for the new Casement Park, she will be aware that the building of the new facility is greatly anticipated in west Belfast and among the GAA and sporting fraternity. (AQT 987/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. Casement Park is a key project that is to be delivered along with the other two regional stadia. I played in Casement as a young camóg, and I want that same experience and opportunity afforded to other young Gaels who are coming up across Belfast and, indeed, Ulster. I want to see the project developed as soon as possible, in line with the subregional stadia, and I have given a commitment on that. Everything that I can do in my Department is up to date. I am waiting on the Department for Infrastructure to issue the green certificate. I have written to the Minister to ask for a timeline of when that will be completed. I know that discussions are ongoing, and I am hopeful that it will be completed soon. After that has been received, I will be able to pick up the pace to get the full business case, and the negotiations around it, finalised. Once we have that and a timetable in place, I will update Members as soon as possible. I am keen to get that done as quickly as possible and to get the project moving over the next couple of weeks and months, as soon as I get the green certificate from planning.

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

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

Economy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that question 5 has been withdrawn.

Mobile Data Allowances

1. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how the £1.7 million for increased mobile data allowances will be distributed to support further and higher education students living in rural communities. (AQO 1567/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): My Department is working closely with further education (FE) colleges on the provision and distribution of that funding to full-time enrolled learners throughout Northern Ireland. Full-time further education students who have been marked present at least once on an e-register during January 2021 will receive a one-off cash payment of £60 into their bank account in order to offset data costs incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within that allocation, 500 iPads or similar devices have also been put on order and will be loaned to further education students who require online access.

Ms Brogan: Students in rural areas such as my constituency of West Tyrone have struggled to complete learning and remote learning due to poor broadband connection. Under the digital hardship scheme, will additional mobile data allowances be given to students who need them in order to complete their studies and their online exams?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. As I indicated in my previous answer, part of the £1.7 million allocation will be used to help young students to buy access to further data. That, alongside the additional iPads or computers that are required for young people, should help with digital poverty. In addition, throughout the pandemic an additional £4.8 million of funding was provided to colleges earlier in the financial year to buy IT equipment. Some colleges have obtained data SIM cards for students to access broadband, and, to date, 1,197 of those cards have been made available to further education students.

I hope that that alleviates the Member's concern, because I understand that this has been a very difficult time for young students, who have missed out on the college experience and have had to rely on online teaching. No matter how good that is, the loneliness and remoteness of that has been difficult for young people.

Mr Durkan: Has the Minister engaged with network providers on mobile data, and does she know how many more masts are required

and where across the North those masts must go for full mobile connectivity?

Mrs Dodds: The telecommunications part of my Department is continuously in contact with mobile providers, particularly as we move to the roll-out of 5G, which is very important for connectivity across Northern Ireland. I do not have to hand the detail on masts, but I will, of course, be happy to write to the Member.

Project Stratum

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the roll-out of Project Stratum. (AQO 1568/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Project Stratum will utilise public funding that was gained through the DUP confidence and supply agreement, together with investment from Fibrus Networks, to deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000 primarily rural premises across Northern Ireland, including 4,236 premises in the Member's constituency. It is the biggest infrastructure project ever undertaken in Northern Ireland, and, for the Member's further information, work is already under way in Killyleagh to provide that important connectivity.

Following contract award in November 2020, the deployment of infrastructure commenced immediately. Work is under way in the first five deployment areas: Coalisland; Killyleagh; Ballycastle; Kilkeel; and Castlewellan. Fibrus Networks has planted in excess of 374 poles, installed 8.2 kilometres of duct and completed 63 kilometres of fibre cable.

The fact that those build activities have already commenced, at this stage of the project, is a significant achievement, given that network providers typically use the first six to nine months for planning. Therefore, while we had anticipated that that period would be required for network design, it is now expected that the first premises will be live in the first quarter of 2021 and that over 19,000 of the 76,000 will have been passed by the end of this year.

Fibrus Networks has advised my Department that the COVID-19 restrictions have caused some delay due to additional paperwork and the challenges that it presented. This is a good news story for Northern Ireland and building the connectivity of the future for the economy.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that response. If we were to do a SWOT analysis — strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats

— what current threats could the Minister identify to Project Stratum?

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum continues to be rolled out. We will be looking at the premises, for example, that are not within the scope of Project Stratum, but, currently, there are no threats to its roll out.

Mr McAleer: I share the Minister's sentiment that this is a good news story; it is a very good news story. The Minister will be aware that, in the assessment for broadband, it was initially stated that about 100,000 premises in the North did not have access to decent broadband. However, the figure quoted for Project Stratum is 76,000. That is a gap of over 20,000. Has the Minister had any engagement with the Project Stratum team and DCMS in Westminster to look at a means to try to reach premises that are not currently in the Project Stratum intervention area?

Mrs Dodds: It is a good news story for Northern Ireland. As we have seen during the pandemic, connectivity is key for all communities, particularly rural communities. It is key to the objectives of growing the economy in Northern Ireland — the regionally balanced economy that we all seek. Currently, about 3% of premises that should have been within the targeted intervention area are out of the scope of Project Stratum. We have had discussions with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Fibrus Networks, and we are working to identify the solutions and costs to bringing those premises into the intervention area. I will update the House as soon as I have further information on that.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the connectivity that Project Stratum will give, but, as well as that, BT recently estimated that Northern Ireland is one of the most digitally connected regions in the United Kingdom. What actions is the Minister taking, along with Invest Northern Ireland and InterTradeIreland, to promote Northern Ireland as a digitally engaged community, to enhance business, particularly given our unique position in relation to the GB and EU markets?

Mrs Dodds: The Member makes a very important point — one that we use many times when we are talking to investors who are thinking about coming to Northern Ireland. It is an absolute delight to be able to say that the tech and digital companies that are already in Northern Ireland find Northern Ireland to be innovative, hard-working and solution driven, and that many of them, while completely

operating for the past year at home, have been winning contracts for their larger home markets in North America, and productivity has increased. The workforce is a credit to Northern Ireland.

This is one of the spaces where we think we can grow the economy further. For Belfast and the greater Belfast region to be recognised as one of the most exciting digital hubs in the United Kingdom is extremely important. However, I advise the Member that, even though all of these things are hugely important and are connected with the service economy, which, of course, is not subject to the rigours of the protocol, we must fix the impact of the protocol on Northern Ireland. To be disconnected from our biggest market is a huge disadvantage to Northern Ireland.

Those who continue to support the protocol blindly will be turning their eyes away from the impact on businesses, families, jobs and the potential for the economy in Northern Ireland to grow.

11.45 am

Mr T Buchanan: I come from a rural area, and I know the difficulties faced by rural communities with poor broadband connectivity. I hope that Project Stratum will address those issues when it is finally rolled out. Given that rural areas and communities are really affected, why are the areas of greatest need not prioritised in this programme? What impact will that have right across Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question; he makes a very important point. I point out to him, and for the information for the House, that, in West Tyrone alone, 9,591 premises will be impacted by Project Stratum and will have the superfast broadband that they need if we are to build the regionally balanced economy that we all seek.

When tenders and contracts were done, it was made clear that we had to roll out Project Stratum in a way that made the best use of the moneys to include as many houses as we could. Hence, the construct of the programme so far. I look forward to the first 19,000 houses being connected by the end of this year, and, in the spring, the first live connection. That will be quite a moment for the largest-ever infrastructure project for Northern Ireland.

North/South Meetings: Refusal to Engage

3. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for the Economy to list all areas within her Department's remit where she will not engage in North/South ministerial meetings until there is a satisfactory solution to the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to allow unfettered access for trade, goods and travel from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. (AQO 1569/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I have made clear that, at all times, I will act in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and our local economy, in accordance with my ministerial responsibilities, the code and the statement of 2 February by our party leader, which I know the honourable Member fully supports, as do I. We have indicated to our Government that they need to act, but we also need to send a message to the Government of the Irish Republic that North/South relationships are impacted on by the implementation of a protocol for which they are cheerleaders and which does real damage to the agreements that they purport to uphold, along with the real damage that it does to our businesses, consumers and communities in Northern Ireland.

We cannot and will not continue to act as though relationships have not been impacted on by their actions. We will consider each matter on its merits, not doing anything that negatively impacts on Northern Ireland. However, it cannot be business as usual for North/South relations because of the issues that flow from the protocol.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her very clear answer. Does she agree that the protocol is causing significant economic and societal harm in Northern Ireland and that it cannot be business as usual in respect of North/South relationships, given the horrific and unhealthy attitude of the Republic of Ireland's Government towards Northern Ireland during the EU-UK negotiations and the actions of the NIO in changing the Belfast Agreement regarding consent? Will she assure the House that she will partake in North/South activity only when there is a clear advantage for Northern Ireland, its businesses and its people?

Mrs Dodds: I assure the House that that will be my position. In no way do I want to negatively impact on Northern Ireland, the stability of its people, its political process or, importantly for me in my role, its economy. However, on many occasions, I have explained and gone through the difficulties that the protocol represents for Northern Ireland and the rupture to the UK's internal market that it has brought about. I find it

somewhat disconcerting that nationalist politicians and cheerleaders from the Republic of Ireland simply refuse to acknowledge the folly of the protocol for North/South relations, east-west trade and communities, individuals and families.

Let me tell you about some of the issues that I have been dealing with over the last number of weeks. These very real issues are impacting on families across Northern Ireland. The e-commerce market in the United Kingdom is broken, with parcels not arriving. It is easy to make snide remarks on Twitter about parcels, but the real impact is on families and businesses across Northern Ireland. My Department has been following the e-commerce issue very closely and tracking what has happened to over 100 businesses that previously sent parcels to Northern Ireland. Six weeks into the operation of the protocol, only 143 of those businesses have made any changes.

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

Mrs Dodds: We are very clear that there are significant challenges and difficulties.

Dr Archibald: It is quite clear that Brexiteers argued for Brexit on the basis of fantasies and mistruths and ignored the concerns and fears, which have now been realised, that Brexit would bring only disruption and difficulties. A report last week by Manufacturing NI —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): May we have a question, please?

Dr Archibald: — highlighted that the majority of businesses here want practical solutions to make the protocol work. Does the Minister not agree that her time would be better spent engaging with those businesses and promoting our valuable access to the European market, rather than engaging in silly political stunts?

Mrs Dodds: I remind the Member that I, in my former role as a Member of the European Parliament and as a Minister, have consistently warned of the dangers of the protocol. All parties in this House that want the rigorous implementation of the protocol want it at the expense of families and businesses in Northern Ireland.

I am not in the business of carrying out stunts. If I were, I need only look at the party opposite and its breaking of walls at an imaginary border and all the other stunts that have happened. If

there are stunts in this House, that party has the monopoly on them.

Mr O'Toole: One important way in which we could ease the east-west disruption caused by Brexit would be through the signing of an EU-UK agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) goods, specifically a veterinary standards agreement. Switzerland has one, as does Norway, and they are both outside the European Union. If the Minister is serious about wanting to ease east-west disruption, will she commit, here and now, to calling on the UK Government to sign a veterinary agreement on much closer alignment between the UK and the EU on veterinary standards? That is a practical way in which we can ease disruption. Is she willing to make that call, here and now, on the UK Government?

Mrs Dodds: The Member is well aware that the Swiss-type arrangement that he talks about requires the whole of the UK slavishly to follow EU rules in every respect. In the European Parliament, I used to hear it said that, if the Swiss wanted to turn right, they had to ask for permission from Brussels.

As someone who voted for Brexit and believes in the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, I will always want the United Kingdom to act as one. I regret that our Prime Minister imposed the protocol, cheered on by many in this House, to the detriment of Northern Ireland. It is now up to the Prime Minister to fix the problem that he created, to take up his duty to United Kingdom citizens in Northern Ireland and remove barriers to trade, particularly for SPS agreements.

The Member should also reflect, when he cheerleads for the protocol, what the SDLP wants from it. They cheerlead for the protocol, yet the SDLP leader wrote to me, in my Department, asking whether I am going to design a scheme to provide financial assistance to businesses that are experiencing additional costs as a result of the protocol.

Dr Aiken: The Minister may not be aware, but, this morning, Maroš Šefčovič said that he will meet Northern Ireland businesses and civil society on Thursday of this week. Does the Minister think it discourteous, to say the least, that he is not listening to political unionism, in our steadfast opposition to this very unequal Northern Ireland protocol?

Mrs Dodds: The European commissioner reflects a denial that many in this House have, and that our own Government have in changing the consent mechanism to the protocol. That is

the position that the European Union has long taken. It is disingenuous — that is the politest and mildest way that I can put it — to call for the full implementation of the Belfast Agreement in all its parts and then change the rules of the agreement on consent, because the European Union's pet project might not gain consent in this House.

It is time that nationalist politicians here, in Dublin, London and the European Union listened to the fact that the delicate balances created by the Belfast Agreement have been completely thrown out the window and that political unionism is united in opposing the impact of the protocol in Northern Ireland.

EU Structural Funds

4. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the actions she is taking to mitigate the impact on her Department arising from the termination of EU structural funds. (AQO 1570/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I continue to work with the Finance Minister on the replacement of EU structural funds. The Department for the Economy has a clear interest in EU replacement funding, given that the European social fund (ESF) and the European regional development fund (ERDF) have historically funded substantial activity in our policy remit, such as economic development, energy, skills and apprenticeships.

A successful bid in the January monitoring round provided my Department with domestic funding for existing ESF projects in the current financial year. That effectively enables my Department to defer spending European Commission funds of about £26 million until 2022-23, when otherwise that funding would have run out. The mechanism for extending this ESF activity is being explored, and I hope to make a formal announcement in the coming weeks.

This welcome outcome provides my Department with additional time to develop appropriate succession programmes and secure the necessary funding for these valuable interventions.

Mr Muir: Northern Ireland is in a very different place now, and we need to plan for the future. Will the Minister clarify her attitude towards the future? Will her party work with the protocol to find solutions with the rest of us, or will it turn its

back on reality, North/South cooperation and economic success?

Mrs Dodds: I assure the Member that my face is firmly turned towards the future. I am working on future interventions for the Northern Ireland economy, because I want a successful, stable, prosperous Northern Ireland, where all its citizens can live and feel valued. That is an important point of principle for me. However, I understand the pro-protocol parties making a song and dance about this. They have moved away from "rigorous implementation" to "a few teething problems" etc, and I understand the Member's point.

12.00 noon

Let me be absolutely clear: our biggest market is GB, and we sell more into the Great Britain market than we do to the Republic of Ireland, the rest of the EU and the rest of the world put together. It is absolutely imperative that we fix the fissure that has now developed in the United Kingdom's internal market so that we can help Northern Ireland to progress. This is an important point: many firms will not know what their future holds, because they may rely on supply chains that bring goods from the EU that then have to come to Northern Ireland as part of the manufacturing or retail process. Those goods, because they traverse GB, may be hit by tariffs if they are at risk of falling into the single market. We need to have clarity for our businesses, and, before we can move on, that interruption to the UK's internal market needs to be fixed.

Mr Stalford: Does my friend agree that it is bizarre to be in a situation in which political parties in the House will defend arrangements that will impose additional costs on families and firms? Does she also agree that what we are dealing with here is a group of Belfast masochists defending Brussels sadists? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dodds: That is quite the description. What we have here is an attitude of burying your head in the sand. Of course, that is common in Brussels, because that is where the political project comes above everything else. We have seen that with vaccines. When it comes to the vaccine supply, the political project trumps people's lives. It trumps everything in relation to Northern Ireland. I do not believe that Brussels really cares about Northern Ireland. It has used it shamelessly as a bargaining chip for years.

Ms Sheerin: It is clear that our departure from the EU has led to the loss of quite a lot of

structural funds. I know that your Department has apparently lost £70 million from the European regional development fund and the European social fund. Things between your party and the British Government may not be great at the moment and you are on somewhat of a break, but can you give us an assurance that you have sought clarification from the British Government that they will replace that funding? Have you received confirmation that they will?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. She takes us into the territory of the replacement programmes for European funding and how that will work in future. It is important that we address the issues around apprenticeships. No matter what the political persuasion, I do not think that anyone in the House would deny that I have absolutely championed young people and apprentices in Northern Ireland at every opportunity. It is important that we look at the young people who are in our training networks so that they can have a good start in life. I will continue to work to identify that programme.

Our Government need to give us greater clarity on the successor programmes, including the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF), and on how we can work within the parameters not just to get additional funding for training needs and apprenticeships but to obtain real investment in Northern Ireland that recognises the needs and priorities of the Northern Ireland Executive.

Mr Allister: Last weekend, former First Minister Peter Robinson perceptively said:

"you cannot try to ditch the protocol and administer it at the same time."

Which choice does our Economy Minister prefer?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is clearly not related to the question. It is up to the Minister whether she wishes to respond.

Mrs Dodds: I will of course respond to that, because it is an important point. Perhaps the tone of Mr Allister's question reflects his position all along that he does not want Stormont to succeed or to have the institutions here.

In my first answer to the question, I said clearly that I would act at all times in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and according to my ministerial responsibilities. I take those seriously and will do that, but I will continue to

oppose the protocol that has brought such damage to the economy in Northern Ireland. For the first six weeks of this year, most of our time has been focused on the issue of the movement of goods. Firms across Northern Ireland are about to put in what are called "supplementary declarations". Those supplementary declarations will deal with the issue of tariffs. I expect to see significant disruption at that level as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends the period for listed questions. We move to topical questions.

Students: COVID Disruption Payment

T1. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will address the inequalities in the allocation of the COVID disruption payment to ensure that it be made available to all students, given that although the £500 payment was welcomed by many higher education students, full-time students at further education colleges, part-time students, international students, students from the North who are studying in the Twenty-six Counties and students from the North who are studying in Britain have been excluded. (AQT 991/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. She has raised an important and, dare I say, topical question. I was delighted to announce a package of almost £38 million of support for students in Northern Ireland. As the Member rightly said, that support will deal with the £500 individual payments to all students. It will increase the hardship funds that are available to our institutions by another £8.5 million, including a focus on the mental health of young students and the issues around digital poverty that many young students face. I recognise that, and that is why I asked for and gained a support package that is probably the most generous in our United Kingdom.

About 15,000 students from Northern Ireland study in institutions throughout the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. My Department holds no database for those students, and I have no legal remit to ask universities or institutions in Great Britain to authorise payments to those students. It is not within my legal purview at this time. However, those students are not without help. Just as EU, Scottish or Welsh students can gain help through the schemes in Northern Ireland, students studying in Great Britain will gain similar help through the schemes that are there. Just recently, Scotland announced an additional

£30 million for hardship, Wales £40 million and England £50 million. I encourage students to use the schemes in the institutions that they belong to.

Ms Brogan: Minister, in November, you told the Assembly that your Department would review the level of support for postgraduate students. Those students do not receive maintenance grants or loans, and it is a major barrier for those on a low income. Will you provide a date for when the consultation on postgraduate funding will be launched?

Mrs Dodds: I cannot provide the exact date. However, this afternoon, I will discuss the issue with the senior team in my Department, and we hope to launch the consultation in the very near future.

Reopening the Economy: Plans

T2. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she is putting in place for the reopening of the economy. (AQT 992/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. All of us in the House must be rightly proud of the way that our health service has responded to the most difficult period in our history and to the vaccination roll-out. I am hopeful because we have been managing to get significant numbers of people vaccinated. That is a credit to Patricia Donnelly and her team, who are organising the programme. We should all acknowledge that fact. However, as we progress, we need to make sure that we open our economy safely and for the long term and break the cycle that we have been in of opening and shutting it, which is destroying so many businesses.

On Friday, I met my local chamber in Banbridge, and it was disturbing to hear how so many businesses are literally hanging on by their fingertips at this time. No amount of schemes or help are substitutes for an open economy that is trading freely. In the coming weeks, I will work with the TEO task force, but I will also bring forward my plans for economic recovery and, most importantly, plans that, I hope, the Executive will respond to for a skills budget for Northern Ireland that will not just open the economy but help it to trade successfully with appropriate skills.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, and, speaking as someone who has been in hospital three times in the last year, I absolutely associate myself

with your comments on the National Health Service.

I urge the Minister to be bold in pushing for the fullest possible opening-up of our economy. It is utterly soul-destroying for people who are trying to run businesses that, every time there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel, up pops some public figures demanding that we build more tunnel.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree with the Member's last comment that messaging is important and can have a significant impact on businesses. I had a meeting with some business organisations and was disturbed to hear that, because of the issues and the problems and the longevity of the pandemic, many people had had mental health problems and some had contemplated suicide. That is no way to run our society. It is difficult, and messaging is key in all that.

Yes, we want to open up our economy safely and as swiftly as the transmission of the disease allows. I will, of course, work with colleagues in order to bring that about. However, the House could support us, and there are things that our national Government could do, such as extending furlough. There are areas such as aerospace, tourism and hospitality where the tail of recovery will be long and troublesome, so the extension of furlough is key. For tourism and hospitality, extending the cut in the VAT rate is also key. I know that my party colleagues at Westminster are taking up all those issues, but it is crucial that we send a united voice on that important issue.

Protocol: Disruption

T3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she agrees that parties that enthusiastically called for the full implementation of the protocol should bear some responsibility for the disruption caused to businesses and consumers, with many of us having been contacted by constituents who are angry because they can no longer receive parcels from GB, and, if so, has she raised the issue with the UK Government. (AQT 993/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I have raised the e-commerce market in the United Kingdom on a number of occasions with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), which is my reporting Department, and, indeed, with Michael Gove, who is undertaking work on most of the protocol issues. It is vital that we have a

UK e-commerce market that thrives and that every business and individual in Northern Ireland can be part of in an equal way across the United Kingdom. That is not happening, and we have significant disruption with firms that simply will not commit to trading with Northern Ireland. That may be because they do not know the changed circumstances, it may be because the information came too late or it may be because the so-called grace period that Michael Gove announced runs out on 31 May. Those are the problems of the protocol. It is for those who sit on the opposite Benches and deny those problems to explain that to families, individuals and businesses across Northern Ireland.

12.15 pm

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. I am sure that she is aware that many hauliers are facing very difficult and challenging times. Yesterday, one haulier, with 20 trailers sitting in England, was unable to get loads back because businesses would not supply. This is a big issue for hauliers, many of whom have been making a loss over the four or five weeks since the protocol commenced.

Mrs Dodds: Yes, the issue of hauliers is hugely problematic for Northern Ireland. Indeed, I was talking to one haulage company in my constituency that admitted that it had no alternative but to raise prices. Those prices will, in turn, be passed on to consumers and businesses in Northern Ireland. The protocol inevitably brings less choice and higher prices. That is an inevitable outworking of the protocol.

I was also talking to Hospitality Ulster. It said that if we consider that export health certificates are due to run out in a few weeks, as is the grace period on chilled foods, and the fact that the food service industry is operating at around one-third of its normal level because of the shutdown, the protocol's problems will become more intense and deeper as time goes on.

North/South Ministerial Meetings: Duty

T4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy, after thanking the Member from West Tyrone for asking questions about students, whether she accepts that, on signing the Pledge of Office, it is her duty and not her choice to participate in North/South ministerial meetings, given that, in answer to question 3, she said that she would consider each matter on its merits. (AQT 994/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I think that the Member does not remember the first part of my answer to that question, in which I said that I would, at all times, act within my ministerial responsibilities and the code of office.

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Minister, for that clarification, because there is a duty on you, as there is on all Ministers, to represent all the people of Northern Ireland.

In that vein, what plans does the Minister have to ensure that equality is offered to the people of South Down, who, for a very long time, have been at the latter end of any work done through Invest NI to secure inward investment and jobs. What plans does she have to rectify that situation?

Mrs Dodds: I will write to the Member about the issue in South Down. I crave equality for the citizens of Northern Ireland: equality in the UK's internal market and equality in the UK's e-commerce market so that all citizens in Northern Ireland are treated on the same basis as citizens right across the United Kingdom. The protocol interrupts that and causes a huge fissure. Equality is high on my agenda.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Pam Cameron. The Member may not have time for a supplementary.

Click and Collect

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she agrees that introducing click and collect for all retail stores would go some way towards helping businesses that have been losing trade because they have been forced to close while larger retail outlets have been allowed to remain open. (AQT 995/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This issue is a source of great frustration to me. I have now brought two papers on click and collect to the Executive. So far, we have had one discussion and no decision.

If we want to reduce the inequality in how small independent retailers are treated vis-à-vis the big multinationals, we have to move to allow them to trade in some respect or another. Inevitably, that will include click and collect. I will again put forward my paper on the matter for discussion on Thursday. I hope that it can be resolved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period of questions to the Minister for the Economy. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments, and I ask anyone who is leaving the Chamber to respect social distancing.

Education

Education: Minor Capital Works

1. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of his Department's current minor capital works. (AQO 1582/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. The minor works capital programme remains under pressure. However, the Department has successfully bid for an additional £15 million of capital for minor works in the January 2021 monitoring round. Although investing all that additional capital before the end of March 2021 will be challenging, the additional capital is an extremely welcome boost in relieving the ongoing pressures.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his response. At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of a number of schools. Setting aside the frustrations and concerns about COVID and the lack of information, sometimes, that principals receive, the single biggest issue and complaint that is raised with me by principals and teachers is about delays with minor schemes and capital works. Almost every school in my constituency has raised concerns, having been on waiting lists for years. One school has had 20 repairs to its roof in the past two years, even though it has been on the waiting list for a new roof for 10 years.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Stewart: It sounds penny wise and pound foolish. How do we get to a position where those repairs can be carried out in a timely manner?

Mr Weir: The issue is across the sector. The level of investment that is needed is well in excess of what is directly available. At the last call that was made, around 6,000 applications for minor works were received in October 2017, which then had to be ranked. There has been an intervening period since October 2017, and various works have been put in place. Over 1,300 of those schemes have been completed

or are being progressed. In addition to that, around 625 emergency and unavoidable schemes have been progressed in the past financial year. I anticipate that a similar number will be done in this financial year. As with anything, the level of capital budget is always a mix between what we have in minor works, what is in the school enhancement programme (SEP) and what is in new school builds. It is about trying to get a mix between those. As with anything, although COVID has constrained what can be done from a practical point of view, it is always the case, notwithstanding that, if the capital budget were twice the size, I am sure that, ultimately, twice the money could be spent. It is about operating within that.

I understand entirely the frustrations of individual schools that will see issues around that. Sometimes, the answer will be minor works. Sometimes, as the Member mentioned, the danger is that simply doing minor works to a school is throwing a certain amount of good money after bad. That is why we have capital programmes for major works and SEPs. However, that will not cover every situation. If the Member has any direct concerns about individual schools in East Antrim, I will be happy to receive correspondence from him, and we can chase down the details on those cases.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister provide an update on how the additional £18.1 million that was announced in January will be spent and whether any of that funding will be carried over in the next financial year?

Mr Weir: Again, that capital funding was received through the monitoring round. Of that, £15 million has been directed towards minor works. A lot that can be used can be brought forward. An issue has been raised about some minor works schemes and fire risk assessments, quite a few of which were planned for 2021-22. The additional money that has been received means that we can front-load those, so around 35 minor works schemes that are mainly focused on those recommendations can be brought forward. Those works will be initiated immediately and as much work as possible completed in the financial year.

We will always try to bid for as much as possible in monitoring rounds. However, it is challenging when there is a restriction that, if you bid for something in a January monitoring round, any money not spent directly on that front by the end of March has to be surrendered. However, the aim is to press the Education Authority (EA) to try to make sure

that as much as possible is done between now and 31 March.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister, and congratulations on getting that extra money for minor capital investment. You said that spending it by the end of March might be a problem, but we need increased space in classrooms to allow safe social distancing. Can any of that minor capital investment now be used for those schools to ensure that we can get our children safely back to school?

Mr Weir: It would probably be very difficult to implement work on safe social distancing between now and the end of March, so we have to try to be as creative as possible. Anything that can be spent and can be diverted in that direction will be. To be honest, from a practical point of view, given that it is monitoring round money, even procurement issues mean that it will be difficult to divert much of that between now and 31 March. The delivery mechanism for minor works is through the Education Authority. We are trying to ensure that as much pressure as possible is kept on the EA to make sure that there is the highest possible level of spend.

Irish-medium Education: Resources

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education whether he has provided any additional resource to Irish-medium education to address the specific immersion needs of children, including those with no access to Irish education at home. (AQO 1583/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. At the beginning of the pandemic, I set up the continuity of learning programme with a focus on supporting pupil learning. Recognising the specific needs of the Irish-medium sector, I included a separate work stream for Irish-medium education. That brought together representatives from across a range of educational bodies and support service organisations.

Specific resources have been provided for Irish-medium schools and pupils through the work stream. Guidance and support for parents have been translated or developed. Work stream representatives have facilitated links with the BBC, with a view to increasing its Bitesize Irish-medium programming. The Education Authority has developed a website to provide a single point of access for information, especially during a time of remote or blended learning. The website includes a distinct area for Irish-medium schools to access resources, guidance and support through one portal.

My Department works closely with its arm's-length bodies on providing resources, support and solutions for our practitioners on the ground. That includes providing specific funding to the Education Authority and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to provide Irish-medium support.

Furthermore, Altram, which is funded by my Department to provide support to the Irish-medium preschool sector, has developed a range of resources, including phonetic resources for parents' language development and audiovisual language resources to assist parents with remote learning. All that work was informed by the valuable advocacy of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) as the representative body for the Irish-medium education sector. That partnership approach will continue and be built upon for the benefit of all pupils in the Irish-medium sector.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Will he clarify whether the support that he has outlined is additional resource and support, financial or otherwise, that is being provided to the schools?

Mr Weir: These are additional sources. For instance, resources have been produced by CCEA as part of the programme. I will give you an indication of the range of interactive resources that are available: an early years phonetics scheme is being developed to extend to years 3 and 4; a dictionary of mathematics terminology; an Irish language talking clock; electronic versions of translated text books; and the development of a series of talking books for post-primary children to provide auditory exposure to the language.

From a practical point of view, part of the complication that has been faced is the extent to which on-the-shelf resources are available outside of Northern Ireland. The Irish-medium sector has been disadvantaged because, largely speaking, the English-medium sector can draw down resources from the United States, Canada and various other places.

To a certain extent, a lot of the work that has been developed, for instance by CCEA, has started from a base position of what can be done internally in Northern Ireland, while looking to the Republic of Ireland to see whether any additional assistance can be provided there. However, that has had a level of constraint, which has meant that the on-the-shelf resources have been less readily available.

12.30 pm

Moreover, while we have tried to give greater flexibility to Irish-medium schools, one of the disadvantages that they face has been the number of substitute teachers that they can draw on, and that is because it requires a level of specialism. Other sectors have faced not dissimilar problems, although I do not want to draw direct comparisons. However, the pool of people who can be drawn from to provide, during the COVID response, the full range of supports has been narrow, and that, too, has created constraint.

Ms Flynn: We know that, particularly during the first wave, there were significant gaps in the Irish-medium sector and also for organisations that represent newcomer families. In his first answer, the Minister mentioned the work streams that were set up. Will he outline what direct engagement he has had throughout the process with the Irish-medium sector and the organisations that work with newcomer families?

Mr Weir: We have tried to work with all the various sectors and groups. To that extent, with regard to resources, the EA has, as much as possible, tried to provide translations. We recognise that there is a wide range of newcomer families in Northern Ireland from very diverse parts of the world, which makes it challenging to meet all their needs.

The Member highlighted particular problems in the spring of last year. To be fair, that was something that, in different ways, affected all sectors. None of us in the Chamber could have anticipated the disruption that would happen last spring. That has undoubtedly been the case through a range of sectors. Generally, feedback, particularly from parents, has been that the remote learning and assistance during this lockdown — I think that all of us accept that face-to-face teaching provides the best possible solution — has been much better than it was in the first lockdown when, to a large extent, people were caught unawares.

Part of the support has also been through information to parents and translation. One of the issues, particularly for Irish-medium education, and, indeed, for the education of newcomer children, has been that although a lot of work has been done by way of remote learning and lessons directly from schools, the intermediaries are often the parents who are on the front line. They will not have the same teaching experience, and some will also face linguistic issues. For example, the parents of

many children in the Irish-medium sector may not have had the opportunities that their children have, and their knowledge of Irish may not be as great as their children's. That is a barrier, but resources are being put into it.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer on a sector of our children who perhaps need additional resources. I am sure that the Minister will agree with me that looked-after children often require additional help, whether that is pre-COVID or through COVID. What additional measures have been put in place for those young people to ensure that they are not further disadvantaged?

Mr Weir: As part of the wider picture for vulnerable children, there have been interactions for looked-after children with the Department of Health to provide support and to work on an inter-agency basis, and that is to be welcomed. Looked-after children will also count as part of the wider pool of vulnerable children. We have seen a much greater degree of opportunity. One of the things that was made clear during this lockdown was an encouragement of vulnerable and looked-after children to be directly in schools, and uptake has been much greater this time than previously.

Of great concern in the first lockdown was the number of vulnerable children not directly interacting with schools or not in school when they had the opportunity to be. From discussions with ministerial colleagues in different jurisdictions, I know that that problem was not unique to Northern Ireland; it was common in a number of jurisdictions. There is considerably more uptake and support directly happening by way of supported and supervised learning in schools, particularly for our looked-after children. It remains ongoing work. The work on looked-after children is done not just by my Department but through working closely with the Health Department. His colleague the Minister of Health has done good work on the subject. We try to work closely on that. It is very difficult to do it for all young people, but the most vulnerable in our society need that level of support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I urge Members who are asking a supplementary question to connect it to the listed question.

Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030

3. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Education, following the recent publication of the

Executive's children and young people's strategy 2020-2030, for a timescale for the development and publication of the associated three-year children and young people's strategy delivery plan. (AQO 1584/17-22)

9. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to ensure that, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the children and young people's strategy 2020-2030 is taken forward urgently. (AQO 1590/17-22)

Mr Weir: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 9 together.

I am committed to ensuring that the Executive's children and young people's strategy is taken forward as a matter of urgency, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, if anything, it is even more vital in the current context that we work together in a coordinated way to improve the lives of children and young people and to address the issues that they face. In many cases, those issues and the problems that many children face have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The children and young people's strategy provides the vehicle for coordinated action. It has been developed with extensive input from a wide range of stakeholders, including, crucially, young people themselves. It reflects what is important to them. Its aims are ambitious and will be achieved only if we cooperate with a renewed commitment to address the many challenges identified.

My officials are developing, in partnership with other Departments, a cross-departmental delivery plan that will set out the actions to be taken over the next three years. Those actions, which are part of the plan, will focus on the 40 areas of greatest focus. Those were identified by stakeholders and are listed in the strategy. The delivery plan will identify where cooperation will be required to address specific issues and who will be involved. We are also compiling a suite of population indicators, which will be used to track progress on outcomes and help us gauge what real difference is being made to the lives of children and young people. I intend to bring the delivery plan to the Executive for approval by May, before it issues for public consultation.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Can the Minister indicate how implementation will be monitored?

Mr Weir: The delivery plan will touch on all Departments, probably on some a bit more than others. All Departments, in collaboration with their delivery partners — there are also third-sector bodies and arm's-length bodies involved — will be responsible for the implementation of the actions that they have identified in the plan. Some will be cross-cutting, while some will fall to an individual Department. My Department, on behalf of the Executive, has lead responsibility for publishing, monitoring and reporting to the Assembly on the Children's Services Co-operation Act. Monitoring of the delivery plan is the key element of that process.

To support that, the Department will be putting in place monitoring and reporting structures that will oversee the delivery of the strategy, provide accountability and aid cooperation. Importantly, a wide range of stakeholders, will have a voice in the monitoring process, not just on where we have got to now. Stakeholders will be, amongst others, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), the statutory children's authorities, children's service providers, academic and practice-based researchers, and, most importantly, children, young people and parents themselves.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for his response, I welcome the fact that his report will be brought forward in May, but surely he will agree with me that our most vulnerable children and young people, particularly those in special education, should be our priority, especially given the situation that we are in. I understand his position on vaccination, particularly for the entire staff of special schools, but may I use this opportunity to ask him to talk to his colleague in Health to ensure that all teaching staff and all other members of the school community —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This is an opportunity for questions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — are vaccinated? Will the Minister bring that issue back to his Executive colleague on Thursday, please?

Mr Weir: I will be having discussions fairly constantly. The Executive took a view that they wanted, first, to get consensus. Obviously, the Health Minister and the Health Department will be critical to that. Although I have highlighted the education sector, other Departments will take a view that specific groups within their remit should also be prioritised for vaccination. It is fairly clear that that will operate on the basis of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) position.

I share the Member's view, and I have made it clear on a number of occasions that I want to see prioritisation for the wider education sector. The strongest need is in the special schools sector, and that is because of the vulnerability of the children and the level of interaction. There has been some progress on that, but I want to see early vaccination of all education staff, because that will be of benefit to children, parents and those staff in enabling them to provide continuity. That will be part of wider Executive discussions, and I suspect that, given the desire to ensure that the roll-out is on the basis of an agreed prioritisation list, the role of the Executive will be to lobby and give a Northern Ireland voice to that larger, wider discussion.

Given the overall success of the vaccination process, through which a number of key groups of clear clinical vulnerability are being reached, a clear debate is opening up more and more across a range of jurisdictions on what the next steps are, and I think that prioritising key worker groups has to form part of the overall thinking. To some extent, that will include education staff, but it will have to go slightly beyond that as well.

Mr Lyttle: I agree with the Member for North Belfast. The key aim of the children and young people's strategy is healthy children, so I will ask the Education Minister to be clearer. In order to promote safe and healthy special schools during the pandemic, which special school staff will be vaccinated and when?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. As I indicated, my position is that there is still a good argument to say that all special schools should be included. Work has been ongoing involving the Department, the EA strategic leadership group for special schools, the Public Health Agency and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). The Department of Health has indicated that it would prioritise vaccination around a range of children with particular clinical vulnerabilities. There is a list — it is not exclusive to that — of, I think, 16 interventions around that, and staff will interact with that.

We are at the stage where it is effectively a two-stage process. There is identification of the children whom staff will be interacting with, and then, in terms of delivery on the ground, there is a role for the schools to identify those staff. I appreciate that that sometimes puts the schools in a difficult position, but Health is indicating that it can only justify, from a clinical point of view, interventions for those staff who are directly involved. I understand that that work is nearing completion and that the list of children

is more or less there. The principals indicated that they did not want to do it over the half-term period, but there will be identification and that will lead to a reasonable cohort. It will not go as far as I ideally want, but part of that is to try to reach consensus in the Executive, particularly with Health. The Department of Health can speak for itself, but it will want, above all else, to ensure that the integrity of the JCVI programme is not in any way breached, and that is an understandable position, but, again, there is benefit in ensuring that everybody in special schools is vaccinated as soon as possible.

Mr McNulty: The Minister will know that I have been like a broken record on the need for a more comprehensive programme than that being delivered under the restart programme. We need a recharged programme that helps kids to recover and to catch up physically, academically, socially, emotionally and mentally. A major focus of the children and young people's strategy is on mental health and well-being. Given that we are now facing a crisis in mental health amongst our young people, what immediate commitments can the Minister give to provide additional funding or resources to help to tackle that?

Mr Weir: Part of the emotional health and well-being strategy allies with the children and young people's strategy. In 2021, we were able to mainstream an additional £5 million directly from Education, with additional support of £1.5 million from Health, so £6.5 million of this year's Budget has been baselined.

Despite the fact that we are moving to a scenario in which there will be flatlined cash next year, we are ensuring that that will be baselined on an ongoing basis. As part of that, £5 million was made directly available for COVID recovery in 2021. One of the slight frustrations that we have seen with some COVID issues is that COVID has created the need for particular interventions and sometimes creates barriers to those interventions going as far as they can, so there is restriction on the ground.

12.45 pm

As I said to the Member, on the previous occasion when I brought a paper to the Executive, it indicated that, on balance, we needed to extend remote learning to 5 March. One of the key aspects of that paper was seeking the commitment of the Executive to a new Engage programme. The Member may call

it "Recharge"; we will call it "Engage". We will not disagree over the language.

In looking towards the recovery position — a broader paper will be brought to the Executive on that — there is an overall ask that will involve not only the educational catch-up but the mental health and well-being side of that. One of the lessons is to see whether there is greater flexibility —.

Mr McNulty: The physical as well.

Mr Weir: The physical as well. I know that the Member opposite will be putting all the children of Northern Ireland through their paces on that side of it as well.

While the lead in those responsibilities lies principally with the Department of Education, there is an important role where the Department of Health and the Department for Communities, in particular, and others can step up. There is also good work to be done in partnership with third-party organisations, particularly on mental and physical well-being.

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

Transfer Tests 2021

4. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Education what provision is being made for transfer tests in autumn 2021. (AQO 1585/17-22)

Mr Weir: The post-primary transfer tests are organised and operated by private providers. I understand that, to date, only the Association for Quality Education Ltd (AQE) has indicated its intention to initiate preparations for proceeding with tests in the next academic year. I will engage with AQE Ltd on those arrangements. However, it is vital that AQE Ltd also engages with pupils, parents and other stakeholders sooner rather than later on how the tests will be conducted, including its approach to the safety of children. When the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) outlines its proposals, similar engagement will be taken forward at that point with PPTC for the GL test as well.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest, as one of my daughters will be going through the transfer test procedure, if it goes ahead, later this year.

Minister, we have been pushing hard for transfer tests to take place in the primary school

setting. Are you having any engagement directly to see whether that can take place?

Mr Weir: The aim would be to proceed with engagement. The problem tends to be twofold. As they are privately set tests, AQE and PPTC would ultimately need to buy in to that. Having said that, I suspect that that is not the barrier.

The problem, I suppose, is that, back in 2016 — I do not how much it was a bar — a memo, at least, was sent out saying that primary schools were not to be used as hosts. I lifted that in 2016, so there is no barrier to the test being held in a primary school. The opportunity to hold the test in primary schools will require the buy-in of those schools. Largely speaking, it will require the buy-in of boards of governors. I will be happy to convene people around a table to discuss that. One of the problems is that, if we are to get buy-in, we need it across the board. If we ended up with a scenario where some pupils were able to sit a test in their own primary school and many others were not, you would create a sort of a home-and-away advantage.

I agree with the Member that the best place for pupils to sit transfer tests is in the environment of their own primary school.

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

Remote Learning: Pupil Engagement

T1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Education, after declaring an interest as a parent of two teenagers who are grappling with the new means of education, for his assessment of the level of engagement with remote learning amongst pupils in this lockdown compared with the lockdown last year. (AQT 1001/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am sure that the Member opposite will be a good example for the promotion of remote learning to them.

We are monitoring the situation with remote learning. Directly speaking, in schools, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is looking at the broader element of remote learning, and each school has a link officer; indeed, while, of course, none of us, in September, would have anticipated where we would be in February of the following year, there was an acceptance that there was likely to be levels of disruption, so all schools were told to have a remote learning plan in place at

the beginning of the school year. The sense of things that I get is that, while, to be fair, there was an element of schools being somewhat taken by surprise last spring, the level and, indeed, standard of remote learning has considerably improved.

The problems with remote learning are not simply about what happens for individuals with devices or lesson plans. One of the disadvantages of remote learning compared with face-to-face teaching is that it takes pupils out of what can be a strong learning environment, where they are in front of a teacher with their fellow pupils. While tremendous work has been done during the lockdown, particularly by parents, it can never be quite as good as direct interventions in schools.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. The disruption of face-to-face learning is compounded by many other factors, including broadband speeds, which I and my colleague Nicola Brogan raised with his colleague the Economy Minister. That disruption will have an inevitable impact on the curriculum and, indeed, on qualifications. What preparations has the Department made to ameliorate the challenges caused by the disruption to the curriculum and qualifications?

Mr Weir: The Member is right: there is a level of disruption to the curriculum. While we accept that remote learning is not and cannot be of the same quality as face-to-face teaching, we should not fall into the trap of believing that it necessarily means that there will be a loss of learning across the board. What needs to happen is a sort of catch-up programme, and that is why I will put further detailed proposals to the Executive. If Mr McNulty is nice to me, I might even call it a "Recharge" programme. That will impact not just on mental health and physical well-being but, in particular, on academic catch-up. It will have those different strands to it. It is about what will be done during the remainder of this academic year, what additional interventions can be made, particularly on a voluntary basis — some were made during the summer last year — and what additional support can be provided during 2021-22.

The Member will be aware that, certainly for 2021, a different model of assessment is being put in place that moves away from examinations because it would be unfair to subject pupils to those. Clearly, there will be a knock-on effect on how we look at qualifications in 2022. Unfortunately, as with a lot of things in society, echoes of the problems that we are having with COVID will resonate for years to

come. It is about trying to ameliorate those as much as possible, rather than being in a position to remove all the problems.

Education: Legislative Plans

T2. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to bring legislation to the House. (AQT 1002/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. During the time remaining in the mandate, my priority is to introduce legislation that addresses the flexibility of the school starting age. I have instructed officials to begin scoping out the work for a potential Bill during this mandate. I fully support the concept that parents, especially parents of premature children who are born late in the academic year, should have some flexibility on that. That is why I have instructed officials to make the Bill my Department's key legislative priority. Given the close proximity to the end of the current mandate, there will be significant pressure on the Executive's legislative programme. Any legislation that I introduce will therefore depend on the Executive agreeing to proposals from all Ministers as well as Members.

On a personal note, I have been made aware of cases such as those of Freddy and Isaak, two premature boys whose parents would love to have some flexibility around the school starting age. Let me assure the House that I will do all that I can to address those concerns on behalf of boys such as Freddy and Isaak and many more like them whose parents have campaigned on the issue.

Mr Givan: Minister, I welcome the announcement that flexibility will be given in respect of those with June birthdays and, indeed, of premature children. Many families and the charities that have campaigned on the issue will welcome that announcement. Can you assure the House that, given the time that is left in the mandate, the Bill will complete its stages and receive Royal Assent before the next election?

Mr Weir: As I said, we are just over a year away from the end of the current mandate and the legislative programme will be busy, so I have asked my officials to prioritise the policy development work and the consultation that will be needed before the Bill's introduction to the House. The school system across the board largely works well, but it does not work for everybody, which is why flexibility is needed. In taking the Bill forward, officials will need to assess its implications across a broad range of

policy areas, including preschool provision, special education, the age at which a person commences post-primary education, school leaving age, the curriculum at Key Stages and area planning. Many of those policy areas are also set out in primary legislation. I will need to assess the impact on our educational partners, including the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), CCEA, the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), and rightly conduct extensive public consultation. That will take a number of months, but it should provide a sound policy basis for taking forward future legislation that meets the needs of the young people who will benefit most from it. I know that the Education Committee, while we may clash over the odd issue, will be constructive and positive when the Bill eventually comes before it. In the meantime, it is important that parents make informed choices about what they want to do, including speaking to the school to which they are applying to discuss how their child will transition into year 1.

Academic Selection

T3. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education, in reference to Dr Aiken's question and in light of the fact that, in recent years, even pre-COVID, several grammar schools have decided to move away from academic selection, whether he is content with that trend or does he intend to put pressure on those schools to revert to his preferred system. (AQT 1003/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is a right to academic selection in law. The legal position is that it is the responsibility of boards of governors. I believe in the right of schools to use academic selection, so I will not pressurise them to abandon it. Through no fault of anybody in the system, because the situation has been overtaken by COVID, we are seeing a range of difficulties that will probably be magnified in June when pupils and their families find out the location of their post-primary school. In a system without any alternative and without a transfer test, that creates a lot of problems in itself. The issue is that, while we will recommend in guidance the criteria that we believe to be better than others, almost inevitably, any form of criteria will advantage some over others.

I will work with the sector. Those schools — I cannot speak for all of them — that felt that they were unable to use academic selection this year because of the lack of a transfer test are largely heavily and strongly committed to using academic selection. The choice remains, and

boards of governors can choose whether to use it. I know that, in the past, some schools have taken a bilateral approach and used it for particular streams, which is also legally permissible.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that these are difficult times and that perhaps this is not the best time to have this discussion. Given that a number of schools — in fact, all the grammar schools this year — have chosen their input without the benefit of academic testing, would the Minister consider studying those schools, particularly the ones that had already decided not to go with selection tests, to see what effect, if any, it has had on their performance?

Mr Weir: If we are looking at the intake in a particular year and its academic record, it would take a number of years to determine performance.

For instance, for those entering year 8 in September, it will simply shift the balance a little in where they show up in GCSE statistics. I believe that we have a system that, across the board, has high levels of success. We have seen that, at primary level and at post-primary level, when we have had comparators, in many cases with other jurisdictions across the world, we have had considerable success, including in reducing underachievement.

1.00 pm

Lost Learning: Contingencies

T4. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Education, given that he will be aware of recent commentary about how best to recover lost learning time, with the idea of whether to pause or repeat this academic year being suggested, albeit that although it may be of benefit to some children or young people, such a blanket proposal may not be a solution, what contingencies are in place for parents who feel that it is in their child's best interests to repeat the year. (AQT 1004/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am at one with the Member on her overall assessment. I appreciate that people will be looking at examples of blue-sky thinking, and that is perfectly natural. The repetition of a year across the board, leaving aside everything else, would, as mentioned earlier, create enormous practical difficulties with accommodation in schools. Would children operate on the basis of having 15 years at school or skip a year at a later stage? The

educational information suggests that, in general, the repetition of a year is not an advantage and, in some cases, it is a disadvantage. For specific individuals, there is provision for boards of governors to accept a child's repeating a year or being a year late. In the current system, that is done in a relatively small number of cases.

Of the 333,000 children in the school system, a little over 5,000 are overage for their year. Most of those, however, have particular circumstances of special educational need or, understandably, they will be newcomer children, particularly those with language difficulties, and more than 2,000 of the overage children are in that category. It will be for boards of governors to consider that and, I suppose, for parents to make a representation on their individual case. However, parents need to be careful about the implications of what they do for their child. They will be in the best position to judge the individual interests, but it is not an easy solution for people, and I do not think that people should go into that blindly.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. As part of this conversation on pausing and repeating the academic school year, the issue of applying flexibility to the school starting age has been highlighted again, and I welcome the fact that you intend to introduce legislation to provide the level of flexibility that many parents and children need. What can parents who want flexible school starting ages now, particularly in light of COVID, do?

Mr Weir: Directly speaking, it is about engaging with the school. With the best will in the world, the aim will be to introduce legislation this autumn. That will not directly impact on the 2020-21 cohort, and we can do nothing retrospectively. I mentioned rigidity, and part of the problem is that school starting age is set in primary legislation. Therefore, no clever manoeuvre by any of us can get round that. I encourage parents to engage directly with their child's school.

I want to be clear that there is a lot of work to be done on flexibility. This is not something where people simply have a broad ideological belief that it is just too early to be starting at that age. It has to be under very specific circumstances because we need something that can work for the system. Broadly speaking, the system works well in relation to school participation and academic progress. However, the lack of any flexibility means that some families are left in an impossible position, and trying to deal with those exceptions, rather than

the rule, will be critical as we move ahead on school-age flexibility.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Our time is running out. I call Pat Catney for a quick question.

Children in Care

T5. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Education, given that he will be aware of the huge increase in the number of children and young people who have had to be placed in care, with my Education Committee colleague Justin McNulty confirming the number at 178 children, what plans he will put in place to support young people and their families now and within his COVID recovery plan. (AQT 1005/17-22)

Mr Weir: The COVID recovery plan has to be comprehensive across a range of issues. As I said, it will probably look not simply at academic matters but at mental health and physical well-being. The interaction of groups involved will require cross-departmental work with Health, because the resolution of some of the issues for individuals will be tailored to the needs of the individual. That is where the focus needs to be for those children.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends our period for questions to the Minister of Education. The next item in the Order Paper is the Adjournment.

Adjourned at 1.05 pm.

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