



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 April 2021

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we begin our business today, I want to deal with a few points that are outstanding. Since the Assembly returned in January 2020, I have been very pleased that the vast majority of our debates have been constructive, even when robust, and that there have been relatively few significant issues for the Chair to deal with. In recent weeks, the tone of debate has been concerning at times, and a number of matters have been raised with me, including fair and reasonable points raised by Gordon Lyons, John O'Dowd and other Members. In my view, the fact that all those matters arose is probably a symptom of our wider political tensions, however, in the past week, there has also been very welcome recognition that what happens in the Assembly Chamber can set a positive tone for the wider community.

I have indicated to the Business Committee and, indeed, to the Principal Deputy Speaker and Deputy Speakers that I would much prefer to see the Assembly continue in that mode. In truth, it might be helpful, in that context, to draw a line under issues raised on all sides. Therefore, over the past week, I have written to a number of Members, including Linda Dillon, Pat Sheehan, Martina Anderson, Emma Sheerin and Trevor Clarke to draw points to their attention for the future, but I do not intend to dwell on those issues this morning.

It is clear that the absence of Assembly sittings for three years and the turnover of membership in the Assembly may have reduced the awareness of our standards of debate as they are expected. Therefore, I have written to all Members today, reminding them of the standards established by Speaker Willie Hay and Speaker Mitchel McLaughlin. These standards, essentially, set out an expectation that contributions to debate should be in keeping with good temper, moderation, courtesy and respect. I have also sent Members a copy of 10 principles, which I have developed with officials, to give further detail on

what courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect mean in practice.

I will not dwell on those principles now, but I want to note that there are realities that come from the fact that this is an Assembly of clearly diverse political views, as indeed all Assemblies will be expected to be. All Members have to accept that, often, things will be said that they may disagree with, sometimes in different terminology from that which they would use themselves.

However, from my own years of participating on the Floor of the Chamber, I also know that, sometimes, in the heat of politics, any of us can say things that perhaps we would rather had been said in a different way or not been said at all.

In this Chamber, Members are speaking not only to their political base but to a wider audience of people from other parties and different political perspectives as well as the wider community. Members may well want to make the same core points in the Chamber as they would elsewhere, but it is worth considering whether more can be achieved if those points are expressed in a way that is more appropriate to the public platform that the Assembly provides. When fractures and tensions undoubtedly exist in the community, Members on every side of the Assembly need to be mindful of the greater sensitivities. That is demonstrated by the fact that Members on all sides of the Chamber have raised the issue of respect.

I close on the issue with the point that heated language or a confrontational and adversarial tone in the debate is likely only to exacerbate the situation rather than help the Assembly to perform its role of finding resolutions to those very difficult issues.

Today, I have written separately to Members in relation to points of order. It is an abuse of points of order to use them to respond to the substance of what someone has said in debate rather than to seek an intervention or to speak

yourself. Trevor Clarke raised a point of order with me on 23 April. He made a valid point about Members raising complaints about other Members when those Members are not present. In other places, it is an expected courtesy that, if a Member intends to raise an accusation or allegation about another Member, they should give that Member notice. That is an entirely fair approach as it allows the Member in question the opportunity to be present and to have a right of reply.

Complaints and accusations about other Members should not be raised lightly, but I rule today that, if someone wishes to raise an issue when the Member in question is not already present, they should notify that Member in advance. Members should also indicate to the Chair that they have done so.

Finally, I much prefer that Members largely regulate their own contributions in the Chamber and that interventions from the Chair be few and far between. Therefore, I ask Members to take the time to consider both of my letters today.

Matter of the Day

NI Senior Women: UEFA Women's Euro 2022 Qualification

Mr Speaker: Mr Mike Nesbitt has been given leave to make a statement on the Northern Ireland women's football team qualifying for the European Championships that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on that or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr Nesbitt: We can still count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that a senior international football team has qualified for a major finals. We have been trying since 1948. It was Sweden '58, Spain '82, Mexico '86, France 2016 and now England 2022. That on its own is a significant measure of the success of the senior women's football team at Seaview last Tuesday night. Another such measure is where the team stands in the FIFA world rankings, which suggest that it had no business qualifying for England 2022. Of course, though, it has. A third might be the resilience of that team, which began the campaign with two very heavy defeats. Yet the heads did not go down. They stuck at it, they came through and they qualified. There are many good reasons to celebrate and to congratulate the team, the squad, the manager and the coaches.

Is that enough, or should we now focus on the sort of experience that we want those players to have in England next summer? Do we want it to be like the euphoria and success of Spain '82, or are we just going to settle for what happened in Mexico in 1986? That was more akin to saying, "Well, at least we got there. At least we qualified". I know what I would like. It is time to ask not what more we demand of that team but what we can do to help it.

Since Tuesday, I have listened to quite a few interviews with members of that squad. At the risk of being patronising, I say that they are very articulate sportspeople. What comes across is that, by and large, they are amateurs who have day jobs and train at night, getting home at 9 or 10 o'clock in the evening. Some are young mothers with families to look after. Therefore, rather than just congratulating them, shall we put our money where our mouth is? Shall we say that it is our determination to find the funds and resources to let these players train and

prepare as professionals for their trip to the Euro 2022 finals in England next summer? They have done us proud, and the House should reciprocate.

Miss McIlveen: I am delighted that the Assembly is taking time to mark an outstanding achievement for the Northern Ireland women's football team. I do not wish to repeat what was said by Mr Nesbitt but, from being established only 17 years ago to qualifying for the European Championships, the women's team has outstripped all expectations.

Anyone who has watched their development over the years, capped off by the two victories over their play-off opponents, Ukraine, will know that that qualification was no fluke. This is a team of wonderfully gifted footballers that has shown its commitment to ladies' football, as demonstrated by Julie Nelson with 116 caps and Ashley Hutton with 111. I have had the great pleasure of attending many of the team's games over the years, and it was a deep frustration to me that, due to coronavirus restrictions, I was unable to be present for the home play-off game. I was also really annoyed that their families, having supported them throughout their careers, were unable to be there to share in the excitement.

I would like to mention Sara Booth, the former international captain and Irish Football Association (IFA) official who is now the FIFA head of competitions in the women's football division. She has done so much to promote the women's game in Northern Ireland. I would also like to mention former women's coach Alfie Wylie, who helped to lay the foundations of the women's game and drive it forward in Northern Ireland. Both will be delighted at the progress of this fantastic group of players under the excellent coaching of Kenny Shiels.

What has been achieved by the current team will inspire and encourage other young women and girls to get involved in the sport. As we emerge from an incredibly difficult year, we have all been lifted by what the team has done.

I look forward to watching the team when it takes to the pitch in Euro 2022 in England. I hope that the green and white army will have the opportunity to be present and be able to support the team in the only way that it can.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank Mike Nesbitt for bringing forward this Matter of the Day. It is appropriate to do so, given that this is our first opportunity since Tuesday to discuss it.

The headlines speak for themselves. The women have made history by beating Ukraine, and a lot of the references in the media have been in that context. It is historic. Michelle is right to mention Alfie Wylie and Sara Booth, and I want to add Sue O'Neill to that list. They did the hard yards when the game was not popular. Sara has since moved on, but she will not forget where she is from: she will not forget women and she will not pull the ladder up behind her.

I had the pleasure of working with some of these women when I was in DCAL. I have to say that the conditions that they trained in and the kits that they got were nothing short of pathetic. However, their spirits, commitment and dignity shone through all that because they were determined to put themselves in the spotlight.

I also want to mention Denise Watson and Ruth Gorman, two sports journalists who have been consistent in their support of the Northern Ireland women's soccer team. You cannot mention the people who got the team to where it is today without mentioning women such as Julie Nelson, who has 116 caps. That is no mean feat.

I looked at some of the headlines over the weekend. Most of these women have full-time jobs, come home to grab a snack and go off to training. That is hard work, and it shows massive commitment.

Let us hope that the goalkeepers, the defenders, the midfielders and the forwards will all now become household names and that all the young girls who do not already know them will know them. I watched some young girls from St Dominic's looking at them as sporting icons, which speaks for itself.

12.15 pm

We have part-time players with full-time dreams. I repeat Mike's call: I want to see them playing in Windsor Park, and I want them to have ongoing support. I would like to see them supported in their journey to the championships. If the House could agree to that today, the IFA would need to listen. Those women are exceptional, not because they have given us joy or because of what they did last week but because they work in Nightingale hospitals or in schools. They are carers, providers and supporters as well. They have been nothing short of inspirational, but now we all know the mettle that they are made of.

I want to thank them. Like Michelle, I wish that their families had been there because they have been with them from day one. I will finish with something that came from the Northern Ireland women's team: see it, believe it, achieve it. They certainly did, so well done.

Mr O'Toole: I thank Mike Nesbitt for bringing the Matter of the Day to the Assembly. It is really encouraging to see the level of unanimity and pride in what the Northern Ireland women's team has done. I watched the game against Ukraine. The whole campaign was remarkable, but what was particularly exciting was the performance that was put in to get there. Marissa Callaghan and Nadene Caldwell scored in that match.

This speaks to two wider points. First, we have all had a difficult year, and this was an enormous boost for everyone who watched the glorious performance from the Northern Ireland women's team. Secondly, to go back to what Carál Ní Chuilín just said, there is a huge amount of passion and pride among the women, who are not full-time professionals and are not paid to stop their full-time jobs. They have families and lives and jobs. They are civil servants, teachers and shopworkers who, as Members have said, go to their training after doing a day's work. Often, they have childcare and other responsibilities. They do not have the luxury of being able to commit their time in full to training and to football, but they have done an amazing job and have done us all proud. It is a completely remarkable achievement in the circumstances. I agree with Mike Nesbitt that it would be wonderful for us all to see them have a full level of support in 2022, a full contingent of travelling fans and the full support of all of us as they go through that.

Over the past few years, thankfully, women's football, not just here but globally, has started to get the recognition and support that it properly deserves. For too long, it was not given the status and attention relative to the men's game, but — do you know what? — women like the Northern Ireland women's team have proven exactly why all those old arguments and prejudices should be thrown out of the window.

In a strange way, it is important that we are discussing this now because other football fans will, over the past 24 hours, have seen an example of what has gone wrong, in many ways, with the men's game. We have the fairly grotesque example of senior teams in England looking as if they are trying to break away from a league with which they have been involved for over 100 years in order to set up a rich man's cartel and deny people proper competition. The

passion, pride and dedication of the Northern Ireland women's team are the exact antithesis of that kind of grotesque greed. That is why I am delighted to pay tribute to those women today and wish them all the best next year. Hopefully, we can all support them in person.

Mr Lyttle: I declare an interest as a registered football coach with the Irish Football Association. I extend massive congratulations on behalf of the Alliance Party to all the history-makers in the Northern Ireland women's football team on their amazing qualification for the European championships in England, where they will be able to compete against the elite football nations of Europe with the full backing of the famous green and white army.

It is genuinely hard to put into words the pride and gratitude that we feel for everyone who is involved in this historic achievement. I recall that, last week, my son asked me what the score was in the PSG-Bayern Munich game in the Champions League and I told him to leave me alone because I was watching a proper football match: the Northern Ireland women against Ukraine.

I was delighted to see Marissa Callaghan and Nadene Caldwell score those goals in the second leg of the final play-off game. I am delighted for Kenny Shiels and the staffing team, former manager Alfie Wylie and all the many trailblazers whose years of perseverance made this achievement possible. Some have been mentioned already: we think of Sara Booth and of Cheryl Lamont, who recently became the first female president of a football association in Northern Ireland. There are other leaders in women's football in Northern Ireland, such as Gail Redmond. As an East Belfast MLA, I must mention the multiple members of the squad who play their club football with Glentoran, including a friend of mine, Emma McMaster.

The women's football team have inspired a generation of girls, and boys, to dream a new football dream. They have demonstrated the power of football to unite and lift the spirit of an entire community and have done what not many people have managed to do, which is that they appear to have united the Assembly as well, and that is welcome to see. As other Members have said, that will hopefully now lead to the Executive, the Assembly, the IFA and all clubs in Northern Ireland seriously upping their game by supporting girls' and women's football in Northern Ireland properly and giving their full backing to the Northern Ireland women's football team to do its very best to achieve in England in 2022.

Miss Woods: I thank Mr Nesbitt for submitting the Matter of the Day. He got it in just before mine. I am glad that it was accepted so that we could mark the efforts, skill and excellence of the Northern Ireland women's senior team that, having reformed in only 2004, made history on Tuesday night by reaching the Euro 2022 finals. I look forward to getting my tickets in the post. On Wednesday, we heard on the radio from players about the work that they have put in to get there: all the training, commitment and sacrifices that they have had to make in work and employment as well as in family life.

We cannot say it enough: congratulations and well done. What an absolutely amazing achievement. There has rightly been a positive response to the match and a positive feeling among those who play grassroots women's football about what this means not only for the Northern Ireland team but for all those who have become involved in the sport and those who may want to join. There have been much-needed strategies and investment put in place on the ground recently and work done with so many others to encourage participation in the sport at all ages.

Not long ago, I would not have dared go near a football, making all the excuses that I could think of not to. After five years, however, with Belfast Ravens, a team that was set up after a charity game at Seaview, and just over 18 months after I set up the women's team at Holywood Football Club — big-up the Tuesday squad, which also made history by coming back on Tuesday after the COVID regulations were relaxed — I would not change it for the world. I have met so many amazing people through football. A community of people trying to get fitter, even over lockdown, has been built, and the camaraderie, friendship and support is fantastic. I hope that the achievement encourages every girl, teenager, young woman and older woman to try out football.

I will finish by reading out a message that a football colleague sent me last week. She said:

"My four-year old daughter was gripped by every minute of the matches. After watching last night's match, she pointed to the screen and said, 'Mummy, that's what I want to do. I want to be like them and play for Northern Ireland when I grow up.'"

Those women are an inspiration to so many. They are game changers. They are the inspiration. So have a go. As team captain Marissa Callaghan said:

"dream of wearing the green shirt because it is the most amazing experience you will ever have."

Mr Allister: Everyone loves an underdog. The TUV can say that with feeling and some experience. I join in the Assembly-wide congratulations to the team for their remarkable success. Of course, having come in as outsiders, to make such progress adds to the pleasure that even some football philistines will feel about the achievement, so very well done. It also presents a timely challenge and message to the Executive to examine whether the support — financial and otherwise — given to women's football is sufficient and whether they, too, could not do much better in that regard. The success of last week was a cheering moment for us all and an encouragement of what dedication and commitment can deliver. They have lifted spirits right across the community, and that can only be a good thing. Congratulations and every success to them as they go forward to Euro 2022, carrying the banner of Northern Ireland with all of us behind them.

Ms Sugden: I join everyone else in wishing the team massive congratulations in qualifying for Euro 2022. I am incredibly proud, not least as two of my constituents, Lauren Wade and Chloe McCarron, made the squad. I have watched these young women grow up and travel the world improving their soccer skills. They are an example to many young women across the world, as are all the squad. This really was their greatest achievement and the win that we all needed, particularly given recent events. This is Northern Ireland; this is what we celebrate and how we move forward. They are not only inspiring this generation but future generations. They are role models — really incredible young women.

Kenny Shiels has instilled belief and confidence. We need more Kennys in the world to inspire our young people to be the best that they can be, as he has for these women. Captain Marissa Callaghan said, "They did not stand a chance because we believed in ourselves." What a message to send out to young people, young girls in particular. Someone described this as the biggest success in Northern Ireland's sporting history. That is incredible, and I agree. Someone else said that women's football in Northern Ireland can kick on from here. Absolutely, and I join Mr Nesbitt and others in saying that the Northern Ireland Executive need to look at women's football and community football across Northern Ireland. The Executive need to start investing in

stadiums so that we can build these young people and have future players like Marissa.

Let us put this into perspective: a part-time team, 49th in the world, largely made up of amateur players drawn from a domestic league, playing their hearts out to make their dreams come true. They sacrificed their personal lives and committed to achieving success, not only for themselves but for Northern Ireland. This is huge, and I appreciate the opportunity to recognise it today. They will be the only debutantes at the tournament. They are the first women bringing us a European Championship. That is remarkable. We need to get behind them because we are all part of the green and white army. Let us put our money where our mouth is and support these women to victory.

Mr Humphrey: I thank Mr Nesbitt for bringing the motion. I am getting off the substitutes' bench to speak on behalf of my colleague David Hilditch, chair of the all-party group on football, who cannot be in the Chamber. I join Members in congratulating the ladies from the Northern Ireland football team in qualifying for Euro 2022. I suggest that the Assembly Commission look at lighting up the building green and white for that tremendous achievement. I congratulate Kenny Shiels, his coaching staff and, obviously, the players and squad, led by an inspirational captain, Marissa Callaghan. It was a fantastic achievement in a most difficult week in Northern Ireland.

After Friday's game, I sent a text to the manager congratulating him and the squad. He came back to say that the job was only half done and he reiterated that in the media. The 2:0 win on Tuesday night at Seaview was a tremendous performance, with outstanding performances right across the team and, of course, goals each from Marissa Callaghan and Nadene Caldwell. They are history-makers while mostly part-time players. Seventeen years of a journey, and Julie Nelson has been with them for 116 caps across those 17 years.

Perhaps it is fitting that the team qualified at Julie's home ground of Seaview, as she is a Crusaders' player, by beating a team 25 places above them in the world rankings. I want to pay tribute to Alfie Wylie and his team for laying the foundations, as others have said, for this campaign. We qualified with eight players not being available or injured. Given that we have a part-time squad, that is a remarkable achievement. I am a proud member of the green and white army and support them at all levels. I am as proud after Tuesday night as I was when the men qualified after beating Greece 3 0 at Windsor Park.

That was a tremendous achievement.

12.30 pm

I was in France in 2016, and I hope to be in England in 2022. I have no doubt that this tremendous campaign and qualification will boost ladies' football in Northern Ireland. Resource needs to be given to the IFA to do just that. It is now time to build on this campaign in the run-up to 2022.

I was in Lyon on the night that we beat Ukraine 2-0. I will never forget that night and that week. We need to make sure that names like Furness, Nelson and Callaghan, which are now on the lips of many young people across our society, are as famous as the names Davis, Evans and Lafferty.

Where football is concerned, 2016 was a great year for our wee country, and I have no doubt that 2022 will be as well. Our girls dared to dream, and that dream is a reality. I have no doubt that the award-winning green and white army will be there to cheer them on and shout for our wee country. I praise every single player, every member of the coaching staff and all our supporters, who were, frustratingly, unable to be there. It is a great achievement for Northern Ireland and one that we should praise in the House and across our country right through to the competition. I wish them well in 2022 in England.

Ms S Bradley: I, too, thank the Member for bringing forward this Matter of the Day and support his calls for more support for the team. I want to say three things to the Northern Ireland women's team. First, congratulations. Each one of them will know their personal story behind that victory and the commitment, dedication and sacrifices that had to be made to achieve it. I also thank them, because we all shared in that victory. At a time when we were all welcoming any good news, it definitely brought a positivity to people everywhere, and it was much-needed at a difficult time.

I will be swift in my congratulations to those on the team, but thirdly, good luck to them going forward. No doubt, they are buoyed up by this success. All eyes are on them now, and we are all watching with great anticipation. While they are history-makers, I have no doubt that their star will shine brightly in the future, and I look forward to being part of that.

Mr Chambers: Football has given me a lifetime of pleasure, both playing it and watching it, but,

being a Glentoran supporter, it has broken my heart on many occasions.

I watched the last three or four games of the women's national team that were televised, and I was not watching a women's football match: I was watching a game of football that was being played to a very high standard of technical ability by highly committed players, supported by an excellent back-room staff. I listened to an interview with Julie Nelson, and she said that, in recent years, those on the team had to make do with hand-me-down gear from the IFA. They had to wash their own training gear, because they had only one set, and they had to pay their own way to go to matches, including to overseas matches. It is to their credit that they had that commitment to build women's football to where it is today.

The competition is a year away, and a lot can happen in a year, but what a boost the team's success has been for women's football. There will be lots of young girls looking at it. They will be coming into the game, and, with the competition being a year away, some of them may well break through into that squad, if they have the talent. That is a wonderful prize for all young girls who are coming into the game to aspire to. As other Members said, with the competition being a year away, we have to offer the team every help and encouragement that we can to make sure that it makes a huge impact in July 2022.

Ms Armstrong: I will not take too long. It was mentioned that those on the women's football team are stars. I could not help but notice the smiles on each of their faces, and I am sure that, as we listened to the interviews afterwards, each one of us could do nothing but join them in those smiles. This Northern Ireland team is amazing.

It is a 17-year journey. The manager, Kenny Shiels, and the captain have invested a huge amount of time and, over the years, as others have said — I am not going to mention all the team members' names — these women have come to this level. As Deputy Chair of the Committee for Communities, and also as a member of the Women's Caucus, I have written to wish the team the best of luck. We wanted to welcome them to the sisterhood of women who are achieving. I am not frightened to say that it was a women's football match: those women hugged each other and loved each other, and we love them back. Roll on, 2022.

Mr Frew: I bestow hearty congratulations on our Northern Ireland international women's team for what it has achieved. I put on record

here that I believe, and I do not think anyone will contradict me, that this is the greatest achievement that a Northern Ireland national team — a group sport team — has achieved in the history of our state.

International football is different. It is different from ordinary Association Football. It is about the pride and the passion. It is about playing for your shirt, your country and your teammates. That brings a wealth that no one can describe unless they have been out on that field of play. Those players who have achieved this probably do not realise yet how big an achievement it is, but they will next year, and they have that to look forward to. We should support them in all their endeavours to make sure that what they experience next year is the best that it can be. It will be out of this world. That experience will live with them for all of their lives, and not only their lives but their families' lives. That is an amazing achievement.

For the green and white army, to go to another tournament is beyond our wildest dreams. I remember France. I remember Mexico. I remember Spain, although I was not there — I was only a young boy — but I remember France. Not only that: my two boys were there. My daughter did not go, unfortunately. I begged with her to go, but she did not go. She did go to a Northern Ireland match later on, and she said, "I get it now, I really do", because of what the green and white army brings to the international team.

The women's team has had an amazing achievement. I wish them all the best in the coming year. They have made us so proud, and we will support them 100%, as the green and white army does. I think we are the best fans in the world, and now we have one of the best women's teams in the world, which has made it to a major tournament. When you look at the scale and depth of the challenge, it is remarkable. It is our best achievement in our state's history.

Mr Givan: I join colleagues in congratulating the Northern Ireland football team on its qualification. What an inspiration it is to young girls across Northern Ireland. Now we must build on that to enhance female participation in sport.

In a previous time, when I was Communities Minister, something that came across the desk on many occasions was the question of what we could do to drive up the number of girls getting involved in sport. I met the IFA and those who were involved. We are seeing the fruits of that investment in the results that are

coming through, so we need to build on it next year, now that this is clearly in the calendar.

What more can we do at local government level? What more can we do in our schools? I ask this with a conflict of interest: I have three daughters — no sons to carry on their father's football prowess, but my daughters are more than able — and my middle girl, in particular, proudly wears the Northern Ireland kit whenever she is playing football. We have a good girls' league in Lisburn; Hillsborough Boys Football Club runs a female game. You should go and see the talent. Some of those girls would run rings round many of the boys of the same age. We have girls' competitions in our primary schools as well, and I was able to go to cheer on my daughter last year when her school was competing in the Lisburn primary schools' league.

We need to use this and build upon it, and we need to have the right facilities. The Lisburn Ladies Football Club has just signed a partnership agreement with the Ballymacash Sports Academy, and the council is looking at a new changing facility and considering what other facilities can be put in place to make sure that it provides the right kind of environment. That is what we need to focus on, and I know that the Minister for Communities and the Committee will want to take that forward. This is a golden opportunity to drive up the number of girls who are involved in sports.

When I was the Minister, I had the privilege to be in France for a number of the games. What amazing reputational benefits there were from having the kind of support that we had and that being put in the shop window at that European and global level.

I will be rooting for the team next year. I am very much a European when it comes to football and supporting the Northern Ireland football team in that competition. I wish them every success.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that I wrote last week to the captain of the team, Marissa Callaghan, to congratulate her and the team. I also did that because I had invited her to contribute to the Speaker's Office initiative on International Women's Day, for which she made a very captivating video. I invite people to go on to the Assembly's website to re-familiarise themselves with her very strong and solid words of encouragement and inspiration to the many young women out there in our community. On that basis, I endorse all the remarks that have been made by Members across the House this morning.

That concludes the Matter of the Day. Members should take their ease for a moment or two.

Committee Business

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA 16/17-22).

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Givan: The Committee Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill began on 10 March. The Bill contains six clauses and a schedule, and its main aims are to introduce a new statutory methodology for calculating the discount rate; ensure that the rate is regularly reviewed at least every five years; and transfer responsibility for setting the rate from the Department of Justice to the Government Actuary.

To assist its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee has issued a call for evidence, through media notices in the main newspapers and the Assembly website, and has written to a targeted range of key stakeholders and organisations to seek views and comments. While the policy area that is covered by the legalisation is relatively specialised, it will be of interest to a range of organisations and experts that operate in the field, some of whom provided information and views on the Bill prior to the commencement of the Committee Stage. The Committee also intends to commission relevant research to assist its consideration of the key issues.

As I outlined during the debate at Second Stage, the Justice Committee recognises the arguments that have been put forward by the Department regarding the need to change the legal frameworks, and it fully supports the principle that any framework should ensure 100% compensation for losses suffered as a result of personal injuries that are not the fault of an individual, without ever overcompensating or undercompensating injured parties. The Committee also engaged with the Department and sought further clarification and information

to assist its understanding and consideration of the policy proposals.

However, as the Minister and Department were aware, the Committee had not reached a position on whether it supported the Department's approach of adopting an adapted Scottish model as the best way forward to achieve the principle of 100% compensation before the legislation was introduced in the Assembly.

12.45 pm

The importance of getting right any new framework to set the personal injury discount rate is clear. It will set the rate for the foreseeable future, which matters greatly to those who have been injured through no fault of their own. We also have a responsibility to the organisations, including the Department of Health, that are paying the awards made under the framework. We must ensure that claimants receive 100% compensation and are not undercompensated. However, we must also be sure, as far as possible, that the model that we adopt in Northern Ireland does not overcompensate. We also need to understand the impacts of the change in rate that will, no doubt, arise from the implementation of any new model and what, if any, actions may be possible to mitigate the impact, if necessary. It has been drawn to the attention of the Committee that the indemnity rates for GPs in Northern Ireland are higher than they are in the rest of the UK, for example.

The model brought forward by the Department of Justice is an adaption of the Scottish model, and the Committee wants to clearly understand its implications and the likely compensation that it will deliver; in particular, we want to explore a range of issues, including whether the new statutory methodology is the most appropriate to achieve, as closely as possible, the 100% compensation. Has it the potential to veer towards undercompensation or overcompensation, and, if so, how can that be rectified? Does it better reflect how a claimant would be advised to invest their award? What are the likely effects of using an investment period of 43 years rather than 30 years in the model? What are the advantages or disadvantages of transferring responsibility for setting the rate from the Department of Justice to the Government Actuary? Is there an appropriate level of accountability in the new statutory methodology?

At the meeting on 11 March, the Committee discussed potential timescales. Following

detailed consideration, all members agreed that an extension until 28 October was needed to undertake the Committee Stage of the Bill. The extension is required to provide the Committee with the time to undertake the scrutiny of the damages Bill that I have just outlined and to provide maximum flexibility to complete the Committee Stage of the other Bills that are already with the Committee or will be referred to it in the near future. The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill, the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill and the Protection from Stalking Bill are all at Committee Stage. In addition, the Department has indicated that it hopes to introduce the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in May. That will be a large Bill covering a disparate range of policy areas, to which, the Department has indicated, further provisions will be added by way of amendments during its passage in the Assembly. The Committee will therefore have four Bills to scrutinise over the coming months, and, given the limited time until the end of this Assembly mandate, careful management will be required to ensure that all are completed in time. Maximum flexibility is required to do that.

When considering the time required, the Committee also took into consideration other work priorities that have to be completed, including subordinate legislation, legislative consent motions, scrutiny of the Department's budget and the need to retain some capacity to deal with issues that can arise unexpectedly. Account was also taken of the parameters within which the Committee has to operate, such as the finite staff resources that support the work of the Committee, the availability of meeting rooms and broadcasting arrangements to facilitate additional Committee meetings and the current COVID-19 restrictions that impact on Assembly business, including the continued need to adhere to social distancing.

Members were also aware of and took account of the fact that the Minister and the Department wanted the legislation through the Assembly as quickly as possible. If that had not been the case, the Committee would likely have sought a longer extension period. Initially, the Minister indicated that she was going to ask the Assembly to agree to accelerated passage for the Bill on the basis that the Department wanted a new rate in place as soon as possible, but did not intend to do that under the current framework, despite having completed the required statutory consultation on a new rate earlier in 2020. It, therefore, wanted the Bill to have passed through the Assembly and received Royal Assent before the summer. Having decided not to pursue that approach, the Minister wrote to the Committee advising

that the Executive had agreed to the introduction of the damages Bill with a condensed Committee Stage that would need to conclude by 30 April to allow the Bill to pass all its stages before the summer recess and outlined an indicative timeline for the Bill that provided for 27 working days for the Committee Stage, on the basis of the expectation that the Bill would be introduced to the Assembly on 1 March.

While the Department and Minister may have wanted the legislation to pass through the Assembly with little or no scrutiny, members have a responsibility to ensure that the Committee has an adequate timescale within which it can properly scrutinise the Bill in the way that we are scrutinising and intend to scrutinise other pieces of justice legislation that are referred to us. While it is a technical Bill, we must ensure that the underlying policy aims and the new framework are the right approach for Northern Ireland.

Before the Bill was introduced, the Committee had already been contacted by key stakeholders highlighting a range of issues regarding the current position on the personal injury discount rate and the proposed legislative framework. We are also all aware of the heartbreaking cases of individuals who, through no fault of their own, have suffered personal injuries, some of which are life-changing, and, as a result, depend on the lump sum compensation awarded to cover future financial losses, such as loss of earnings and the cost of the care that they need. It is in everyone's interests to get this right.

Since the Committee agreed to seek an extension of the Committee Stage until 20 October, the Department has decided to change the rate under the current framework and has provided the SL1 for the necessary subordinate legislation. The Committee considered the proposal at the meeting last Thursday and agreed that it was content for the Department to bring forward the statutory rule.

While the Department has now gone ahead with the necessary subordinate legislation change and the changes to the personal injury rate under the methodology that is currently in place, I assure the House that the Committee will not take any more time than is necessary to complete Committee Stage to provide for a new methodology. The extension will, however, provide the necessary flexibility to manage the heavy legislative programme that we have to complete and enable us to carry out the scrutiny that the Bill requires. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Dillon: I agree with all that the Chair has outlined. We will try to process the Bill as quickly as possible because the interim rate is not ideal and has raised its own problems. We want this to go through Committee Stage as quickly as is humanly possible, but we need the extension for all the reasons that the Chair has outlined. That is not to mither or complain about the fact that we will be looking at four pieces of legislation. That is what we are here to do, and we want to do it. The Justice Committee has shown that by what it has done to date, and we will continue to do that. If every other Committee were progressing legislation in the way that we are, the House would be in a much better place.

Mr Speaker: I invite the Chairperson to respond and make a winding-up speech on the debate.

Mr Givan: I agree with the Deputy Chair of the Committee. The Committee will expedite the scrutiny of the legislation as efficiently and effectively as possible, and, given our track record, we will do that as quickly as we can.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA 16/17-22).

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

Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 November 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22).

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Health to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Gildernew: The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill passed Second Stage on 15 March 2021 and was referred on for Committee Stage the following working day. The objective of the Bill is to remove the ground for an abortion in cases of non-fatal disabilities. The Bill is very short, with two clauses. The first clause amends regulation 7 of the Abortion (NI) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, and the second clause is the short title.

Following the commencement of Committee Stage and to assist the Committee in its consideration of the Bill, the Committee agreed to issue a call for evidence through notices in the main newspapers, on the Assembly website and on the Committee's web page. The Committee wrote to a list of key stakeholders and organisations to highlight the consultation and to seek written submissions. The Committee agreed a seven-week consultation period, which closes on 7 May.

At its meeting on 25 March, the Committee considered a draft timetable for consideration of the Bill and agreed a motion to extend Committee Stage to 19 November 2021. The Committee made that decision on the basis of a number of factors. The Committee has an extremely heavy workload, with ongoing consideration of COVID regulations, COVID recovery in the health and social care sector and key priorities in other areas. The Committee has another Bill at Committee Stage, which will be discussed in a few minutes' time, and expects a large and complex adoption Bill in the coming weeks. In order to allow sufficient time to scrutinise this Bill in the detail required, it was agreed that an extension was needed and that it should allow for some flexibility in the Committee's consideration of the Bill. The Committee looks forward to considering the Bill in more detail following the close of the consultation period.

The proposed extension will allow sufficient time for that detailed consideration while balancing the Committee's consideration of other Bills and priorities. While an extension to 19 November has been requested, I assure the Assembly that the Committee will endeavour to complete Committee Stage earlier if possible.

I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 November 2021, in relation

to the Committee Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22).

Health and Social Care Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 1 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22).

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Health to open the debate.

Mr Gildernew: The Health and Social Care Bill passed its Second Stage on 16 March 2021 and was referred on for Committee Stage the following working day. The objective of the Bill is the dissolution of the Regional Health and Social Care Board and the transfer of its legislative functions. The Bill has seven clauses and three schedules. Overall, the clauses provide for the dissolution of the regional board and the transfer of its functions and require the Department to make transfer schemes for its assets, including its staff and liabilities. A further clause provides for necessary transitional provisions. The remaining clauses provide for interpretation, commencement and the short title.

Following commencement of Committee Stage and to assist us in our consideration of the Bill, the Committee agreed to issue a call for evidence through notices in the main newspapers, on the Assembly website and on the Committee's web page. We wrote to a list of key stakeholders and organisations to highlight the consultation and to seek written submissions. The Committee agreed a five-week consultation period, which closes on Friday 23 April.

At our meeting on 25 March, the Committee considered a draft timetable for consideration of the Bill and agreed a motion to extend Committee Stage to 1 October 2021. The Committee made that decision on the basis of a number of factors. As outlined in the previous proposal to extend, the Committee has an extremely heavy workload at this time, with ongoing consideration of COVID regulations, COVID recovery in the health and social care

sector and key priorities in other areas of which Members will be aware.

The Committee also has a private Member's Bill at Committee Stage and, as I mentioned, is expecting a large and complex adoption Bill in the coming weeks. To allow sufficient time to scrutinise the Health and Social Care Bill in the detail required, it was therefore agreed by Committee members that an extension was needed and that that extension should allow for some flexibility in the Committee's consideration of the Bill.

1.00 pm

Although the Bill itself is relatively small and technical, it does have larger and far-reaching ramifications. A number of areas that the Committee will want to consider in much greater detail have already been identified and include the process for the commissioning of services, tackling health inequalities, retaining local and regional expertise, and engagement on the commissioning of services. The proposed extension will allow sufficient time for that detailed consideration, balancing that with work on considering other Bills. Although an extension to 1 October has been requested, I again assure the Assembly that the Committee will endeavour to complete Committee Stage earlier if possible. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 1 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22).

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two, please. Thank you.

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

Private Members' Business

Brexit: EU Card Transaction Fees

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly regrets the decision of Visa and MasterCard to increase, drastically, their fees for EU card transactions; notes that these increases are possible only because of Brexit and the subsequent loss of EU consumer protections; condemns this cynical exploitation of working people and small to medium-sized enterprises by big banks and card companies during a global pandemic; further notes that this extortionate increase will disproportionately impact border communities, which have already borne the brunt of Brexit; and urges the British government to reverse these increases through legislation to regulate interchange fees on EU transactions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. I ask you to open the debate on the motion, más é do thoil é.

Dr Archibald: I rise to move the motion and also indicate that my party will happily accept the Alliance Party's amendment.

The motion highlights one of the more hidden impacts and costs of Brexit. Those who campaigned so vociferously for Brexit were often quick to point to EU regulation and bureaucracy. They argued to "Take back control". However, in reality, on this issue, it is corporate elites who are in control and big financial institutions that will be the beneficiaries. Card issuers are cynically exploiting Brexit in a move that would see more money go to big banks while ordinary people and small businesses pay the price.

In January, only a few weeks after the end of the transition period, MasterCard announced that it would hike by 500% the transaction fees on UK-issued cards making purchases from EU-based companies. In March, Visa followed suit, announcing that it, too, would increase its interchange fees by around 475%. They can do so simply because we are no longer in the EU and the EU interchange fee regulation no longer applies. The regulation has applied in the EU since 2015. When it was introduced, the

move at its core was to align fees across the internal market in order to remove barriers to the freedom to provide services. With respect to the interchange fees and different rates, it was outlined in the regulation that merchants, in turn, would incorporate card costs, like all other costs, in the general prices of goods and services, and that regulating the fees would improve the functioning of the internal market and contribute to reducing transaction costs for consumers.

In 2020, the European Commission's report on the application of the interchange fee regulation highlighted that, in 2017, there had been 70 billion card-based transactions in the EU. That is likely to have increased as COVID-19 accelerated trends towards contactless and electronic payments. As a result of the interchange fee regulation, there have been more than €2.6 billion of savings, with merchants — businesses such as retailers — having saved costs in the range of €1.2 billion per year — obviously, that also includes the domestic caps — part of which would eventually pass to consumers through lower retail prices or improved services. When the EU regulation was put into domestic law in 2015, the rationale for intervention included estimates from the British Retail Consortium that the price cap could be of benefit to UK retailers by £480 million per year, with respondents to the consultation estimating savings, a gain, to businesses more widely, in the region of £700 million per year. Again, that includes the domestic caps.

Therefore, it makes sense to believe that the converse is also true: if the interchange fee goes up, the costs will be passed back to consumers. When MasterCard's announcement was made, estimates put the costs to EU-based businesses selling goods to UK customers at over £14 million per year. However, the Visa announcement is even more significant because Visa is the biggest card issuer, with around 73% of the market. Therefore, the costs will be greater still. If this goes —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: I will, very quickly. Go ahead.

Mr Allister: The Member recites cost figures. Has she any figures for the cost of the protocol on the goods that those cards would pay for, particularly in circumstances where, under EU regulations, the costs of checking will have to be charged out to the suppliers and consumers? Does she agree with that as well? Do those costs not interest her?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, I opposed Brexit, which is the reason that we have the protocol in the first place. Those who campaigned for Brexit need to own its consequences.

The increases — sorry: I have lost my place. If that goes ahead, undoubtedly, those charges, which affect all online purchases, will eventually be passed on to customers. Obviously, as well as the impact generally on purchases from the EU, there is a particular North/South dimension to this. It could see increased costs being passed on to people in the North for purchases from the South. Orders of goods across the island are regularly made through card transactions. While the protocol protects the trade of goods across the island, it does not cover services, and that is a service charge.

The increases in interchange fees could have an impact on those in border communities, including for the purchase of everyday items such as groceries, on a cross-border basis. While the interchange fee caps apply only to consumer cards and not commercial business cards, it is not uncommon for small businesses and microbusinesses to use consumer cards for online orders, so they could face increased costs when buying parts or goods from the EU. Our small businesses and microbusinesses in particular do not need that when they are already struggling to deal with COVID.

To date, I am not aware of reports of retaliatory charges from issuers in the European Economic Area (EEA) states, but that is certainly a possibility and would impact businesses here with the reverse of the sums outlined previously. For many of the small businesses and microbusinesses across the island, cross-border North/South trade is really important. For almost all businesses in the North that export, the South is one of the markets to which they export, and for 80% of microbusinesses in the North that export, their only export market is the South. Struggling small businesses and microbusinesses across the island do not need the barrier of increased cost as a result of corporate greed.

Cross-border trade continues to grow. According to InterTradeIreland's figures for 2018, it was worth £6.5 billion, with trade and services where online purchases with cards for bookings etc would come in was worth more than £3 billion. Last week, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in the South reported that cross-border trade has grown significantly for the second month in a row when compared with the same time last year.

The all-island supply chains and growing the economy on an all-island basis are vital factors for the economic recovery of businesses across the island post-COVID and post-Brexit. Taking the tourism sector, which is a really important sector for our economy, last summer, all-island tourism flows were instrumental in mitigating some of the decline in overseas tourism due to the pandemic. The card charges announced would impact on businesses in the South with bookings from northern customers. If hoteliers and accommodation providers face increased costs for card bookings, it is very likely that those costs will be passed on to consumers. While those costs are small on an individual basis, the charges will accumulate.

At the time that the interchange fee regulations were introduced in 2015, my party colleague Matt Carthy TD was an MEP in the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs in the European Parliament. He urged that the issue of cross-border transactions be included in any cap as it is particularly important in the Irish context, where we need to break down barriers to create an effective all-island economy.

In 2019, the Interchange Fee (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 were passed in Westminster. They reduced the scope of the application of the interchange fee regulations in British legislation from the European Economic Area to the UK. That means that only transactions that take place solely within the UK would be covered by the amended regulations, and cross-border payments between the UK and the EU would not. The practical impact of that is that payments made within the UK are covered by the UK regulations and payments made in the European Economic Area are covered by EU regulations, but cross-border payments between the UK and the EEA would not be subject to the caps. However, the explanatory memorandum states that it would technically be possible, within the British regulations, to mandate interchange fee caps that UK card issuers would be permitted to charge to international transactions.

We want the British Government and financial regulators to intervene to stop the increased fee charges. As I said, to my knowledge there have been no signals of retaliatory increases from EEA issuers, but it remains a possibility, so we are very happy to accept the amendment from the Alliance Party to explore cooperation with European Commission on this issue to remove unnecessary cross-border barriers.

This motion is about stopping the Brexit credit card rip-off and standing against the corporate greed of the two biggest card providers. This is

a rip-off of ordinary people and hard-working businesses, which will line the pockets of big banks. We must not allow that to go ahead unchallenged. When the DUP and Brexiteers campaigned to take back control of their money, laws and borders, is this what they meant: people giving control of their money to corporate elites? We need to stand against these plans and stop them in their tracks. Workers, families and businesses should not pay the price for Brexit. I urge all parties to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Stewart Dickson to formally move the amendment.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

Leave out all after the second "Brexit;" and insert:

"recognises that the United Kingdom's ability to regulate charges on cross-border transactions is limited; calls on the UK Government to reinstate the previous cap on interchange fees within their regulatory authority; and further calls on the UK Government to engage with the European Union to reach an agreement on interchange fee caps on UK-EU and EU-UK card transactions as part of wider efforts to ease the trading frictions caused by Brexit."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

1.15 pm

Mr Dickson: I rise to propose the Alliance Party's amendment, and my colleague Mr Andrew Muir will make a winding-up speech on it.

The interchange fee regulation introduced in 2015 meant that, across the European Economic Area, a standardised cap existed on fees for cross-border transactions. The fees were calculated on the proportion of the total amount of the transaction and the payment method of 0.2% for debit cards and 0.3% for credit cards. Those are much lower rates than in other comparable countries and meant that a customer from Germany, for example, could buy goods in Northern Ireland without onerous interbank fees being incurred and vice versa. Of course, after the UK Government's decision to pursue the hardest possible Brexit and leave the single market, those protections have been

rolled back. The regulation itself was retained in UK law but, disappointingly, operates on a UK-wide basis, as the Government took the position that capping fees on UK-to-EEA transactions whilst EEA issuers did not face a similar cap would result in asymmetrical obligations on UK business.

It is no coincidence that, soon after the transition period ended, Visa and MasterCard announced their intention to massively increase the fees levied on online EEA purchases by UK debit cards by more than 400% and by 500% on credit cards. That announcement came during one of the most disruptive and painful years that many businesses and consumers have faced. They are looking towards reopening and recovery, and those additional costs are the last thing that they need. It has been mentioned already but is worth repeating that those living in border regions or who source goods from the EEA are particularly vulnerable to increases in such fees, which will likely be passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices and less choice.

Those painful charges are made even more acute as there are few alternatives to what is essentially a duopoly, with Visa and MasterCard essentially controlling the entire debit and credit card market in the United Kingdom. It is cynical and deeply damaging at this exceptionally difficult time, and, indeed, it benefits no one but big banks and multinational corporations that are concerned more about their shareholders than about consumers and small businesses. I note, however, that Visa and MasterCard have announced that they will delay a rise in online purchase fees planned for US customers until April 2022 to give businesses space to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is disappointing that United Kingdom businesses and consumers have not had such an approach extended to them, so I today call on Visa and MasterCard to rethink the massive increases. I have not seen any justification for them; in fact, it is pure opportunism. Nonetheless, this is a problem caused by Brexit, and we believe that the United Kingdom Government need to act to resolve it.

That brings me to the amendment. We recognise that the United Kingdom Government could have retained regulations that would have maintained the cap on charges that the UK issuers levy on EEA merchants, and we call on the United Kingdom Government to act to protect UK customers from these unfair and unwarranted price rises and, indeed, the danger of further price rises. Nonetheless, even if the United Kingdom Government took that action, it

would not offset the risk of higher fees being levied by the European card issuers on UK sellers, as the UK is no longer covered by the interchange fee regulation limits. That would make it more expensive for UK businesses to sell goods to Europe, as, although the merchant would be in the United Kingdom, the card issuer would be in the EEA and would be free to raise fees. As a third country — yes, that is what we are — this would be outside the United Kingdom's ability to regulate.

Unfortunately, this is just one instance of how a hard Brexit, with its threadbare and rushed Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), has allowed for the reintroduction of barriers to trade. The issues need to be resolved, because they hurt businesses and consumers across the United Kingdom. The Government must engage with the EU with pragmatism and in good faith to build on the inadequate TCA. That should include reinstating a reciprocal cap on card interchange fees, as proposed in our amendment. That is clearly possible, as it was done before and could form part of the financial services chapter of the TCA. Clearly, it would also be to the mutual benefit of consumers and businesses across the UK and the EEA.

As an aside, another tangible benefit of the single market harmonisation was that there was no cost on mobile phone roaming. I hope that the UK Government will provide the assurance that they failed to provide in respect of debit cards and that we will see an agreement on that as quickly as possible. I note with concern today that one of the Finnish telecoms companies has already announced the return of roaming charges for customers travelling to the United Kingdom. That could be the thin end of the wedge. If those charges were to be reinstated, people would, understandably, be upset.

In addition to the issues relating to services, we believe that, with goodwill and pragmatism, much can be achieved in finding a way to streamline the flow of goods from Europe to GB and across the Irish Sea and make the protocol as light-touch as possible. We, as a party, have been leading the calls for practical solutions since the very beginning of the process. A clear and constructive way forward, for example, would be a veterinary agreement. A UK-EU agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules on the movement of animals and food products would go a long way to reducing checks on goods travelling between Europe, GB and across the Irish Sea. Such an agreement has existed between the EU and New Zealand since the 1990s, meaning that New Zealand — a country more than 11,000

miles away — has simpler access to the EU than food products from the UK. As we move further into the year, more and more people from all sides are coming to realise that the situation is not workable. Shellfish, salmon, lamb and cheese exports, to name but a few, all across the UK are feeling the pain of delays not from the United Kingdom into Northern Ireland — this part of the United Kingdom — but from the United Kingdom into Europe. Negotiating a veterinary agreement should be a key and urgent priority for the UK Government. They should do so as quickly as possible. Further mitigations for groupage, customs declarations, parcels and property and properly communicating the changes through the UK and the EU are achievable if the UK Government and the EU are determined to reach agreement on them.

Ultimately, leaving the world's largest and most integrated trading bloc was never going to lead to anywhere but a tangle of red tape and extra cost for businesses and consumers. We had an open and free trading relationship with the EU for so long that the old barriers, physical and bureaucratic, had been forgotten. A very pro-single market United Kingdom Prime Minister — one whom I do not often quote or agree with — summarised the benefits in 1988 as follows:

"Just think for a moment what a prospect that is. A single market without barriers — visible or invisible — giving you direct and unhindered access to the purchasing power of over 300 million of the world's wealthiest and most prosperous people. Bigger than Japan. Bigger than the United States. On your doorstep."

Unfortunately, those old barriers are returning, and access to the world's biggest single market is being hindered. We see a tangible example of that before us today. Perhaps the words of Mrs Thatcher should be ringing in the ears of some of her former ardent supporters. That is why our amendment calls for card fees to be reversed where possible and for the United Kingdom to re-engage and reach reciprocal agreements with the EU to protect customers and break down the barriers to business, not raise them. I am delighted to hear that the proposer of the motion will accept our amendment, and I trust that the House will support the amendment unanimously today.

Mr Stalford: It is not my party's intention to divide the House on the amendment. It clearly improves the folderol that we were served up by the Chair of the Economy Committee, which is just the latest in a litany of political point-scoring exercises undertaken by her party in this

regard. If ever a motion was tabled on an issue where people are unable to see the wood for the trees, this is it. Members rising to their feet on this issue previously passed motions that called for the rigorous implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol. It is ironic to be lectured on the costs to businesses by any of the parties opposite that argued in favour of the protocol. Northern Ireland, with less than 0.5% of Europe's population, is being subjected to 20% of the checks that take place along the borders of the EU. That demonstrates to us all the rigorous implementation for which the parties opposite campaigned. They actively supported — *[Interruption.]* It is no good the Member for South Belfast chuntering from a sedentary position. They spent three years actively demanding the provisions. You created them. You own them.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Perhaps later.

The DUP recognises the need to ensure that consumers in Northern Ireland, who are already feeling the impact of the oppressive Northern Ireland protocol, do not face additional barriers to trade within the United Kingdom and further afield. The rise in interchange fees will apply to retailers based in the EU when they sell goods or services to someone using a credit or debit card in the UK either online or over the phone. That will not affect in-person or card-present payments, and I hope that that offers some comfort to those in border areas who physically cross the border for their work or for business.

Whether any additional cost will be passed on to the consumer, therefore affecting trade into Northern Ireland, is still uncertain, and further work will need to be undertaken to see how that can be mitigated. A June 2020 report from the European Commission examined the advantages of its interchange fee caps and found that retailers had saved €1.2 billion a year. The extent to which consumers benefited from that was much less clear. It will be important, therefore, as households and communities emerge from the lockdown under which we are living, that eventual plans, whether they are to go holiday or travel for business, are not complicated by additional costs passed on by European airlines, hotels, car rental firms and holiday firms.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I certainly will.

Mr Allister: The Member rightly indicates that it is not yet clear whether the charges that initially apply to the vendor will be passed on to consumers here. However, there is a certainty, is there not, about the charges that will result from the protocol checks in that the EU 2017 Official Controls Regulation requires it as a matter of law that the cost of those checks be charged to the supplier? Those costs will inevitably fall on the consumer, and yet today we have not heard one cheep of opposition from the rigorous implementers of the protocol to the fact that their protocol will impose those charges on all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I doubt very much that my friend will hear one cheep in the debate from Brussels' little cheerleaders across the way.

It will be important, therefore, as households and communities emerge from lockdown, that clarity is provided on the matter. There is an irony in Sinn Féin condemning the charging of interchange fees when it endorsed and spent three years trying to secure the provisions of the protocol. Those provisions, as the Member for North Antrim Mr Allister said, impose far greater charges on businesses in this country, but, evidently, Sinn Féin's higher loyalty to the European Commission and to European institutions trumps its obligation to its constituents who want to make it easier to set up a business, to trade and to prosper.

As I said, it is not our intention to divide the House on the matter, but it is rather like someone's house and shed being on fire, yet the Chair of the Economy Committee is more concerned about the shed than she is about the house. The real damage is being done by the protocol, which the parties opposite argued for: they should own that.

Mr O'Toole: Who knew that a project about leaving the world's biggest integrated trading and economic zone would lead to barriers to trade for consumers? Who could have guessed that that would happen?

Who could have possibly imagined that leaving a market of nearly half a billion people and what was then 28 member states, with integrated rules around trade, including on the usage of cards, would have created extra costs and burdens for consumers and small businesses? If only someone had told us. If only someone had said. Of course, we said repeatedly that it

is what Brexit is about. Brexit is about tearing down the integration that had benefited consumers and businesses, small and large, across the continent. This is an outworking of Brexit. There is no use, I am afraid, in Members opposite seeking to deflect responsibility for a project that they supported, funded and helped to deliver through a majority in the House of Commons. There is no use in their trying to deflect blame for it on to Members opposite them.

1.30 pm

If I may, I will go through some of the issues raised by today's motion and amendment, both of which we welcome and will support today. There are specific issues to do with card fees, and those have been touched on by Caoimhe Archibald and Stewart Dickson. It has been mentioned that there will be a fivefold increase in fees for credit card use and about the same increase for debit card use. Those fees are charged to vendors, as has been said, but, invariably, they end up being passed on to consumers, particularly as we are talking about businesses of all sizes. It is why the interchange fee regulations existed in the first place: because the European Union is about protecting consumers. Why was the single market created? I see my colleague from South Belfast laughing at this. That is what the European Union is: it is a single market designed to protect consumers and to regulate trade between economic actors on the continent, and we have left it.

Members opposite, and particularly the Member behind me, have, because of the effects of the protocol, talked repeatedly about an economic united Ireland, and they have blamed us for its effects. The point of the protocol is to protect us on this island from some of the worst effects of Brexit, but it relates only to goods. I have talked repeatedly about the potential benefits of the protocol for businesses in Northern Ireland. I think that it will lead to real benefits and real opportunities, and they are there already. Does the protocol involve disruption? Does Brexit involve disruption? Yes, of course they do. Here is the thing: I am talking about how we mitigate the situation. My party is engaged with actors in Northern Ireland, Brussels, Dublin and London to try to make the best of it, because we are taking responsibility for the mess that others have created. We believe in making the situation better.

The protocol relates only to goods. We heard Mr Allister wax lyrical today about the effects of the protocol. We have heard him talk before about the effects of an economic united Ireland.

It is some economic united Ireland. The truth is that 70% of the economy of Northern Ireland, and the economy of the whole of the UK, is services-based. We are not trading in goods as we sit here and debate in the Chamber. Most people in our economy are employed in services of one form or another, and it will become harder to trade in services across the border and from Northern Ireland into the EU. The protocol relates only to the movement of goods. That means that the economies on the island of Ireland are, much to my frustration, diverging, not moving closing together. It will be harder to buy something with a card because of what we are talking about today. It will be harder, as of later this year, to buy something with a card from a supplier in the South because of Brexit.

If we had an economic united Ireland, it would be much easier to move a member of staff from Dublin to an office in Belfast, but you cannot do so, because we have an awful, regressive immigration policy that is being forced on us, against the will, by the way, of the DUP Economy Minister, who accepts that it is bad for Northern Ireland businesses. A company operating in Belfast cannot now simply move an EU national who is working in Dublin up to an office in Belfast. That is no economic united Ireland, given that a company could do that before the end of last year. All of that reminds us of the problems of Brexit. We therefore have the protocol to protect us.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: No, I will not, because I am near the end of my time, but I appreciate the Member taking the opportunity —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr O'Toole: OK. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Card charges are one more example of why Brexit is a terrible thing. Members opposite laugh, but they should take responsibility. They are, in part, the reason that this has all happened. We should —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — all be working together, in the Assembly —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — North/South and east-west, to make the situation better.

Mr Stewart: I will try to get back onto the subject at hand. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, it is not my intention either to divide the House, and I thank the Members who tabled the motion and those who tabled the amendment.

British consumers make tens of billions of pounds of purchases every year from European merchants on credit cards alone, and the hike, both from MasterCard and Visa, will affect the majority of those transactions. Hopefully, the concerns of border communities will be alleviated by the point that my colleague for South Belfast made that face-to-face contact in those trades will not be dealt with, but, undoubtedly, the impact will be felt by online retailers. It goes without saying in the traditions that we already see that any costs borne by traders and merchants will be passed on to the consumer. 'Which?' said that just last week in raising concerns about it.

The increase will be relatively small. It seems that this is quite niche, but we only have to look at the amount of turnover and the increasing transactions that are taking place online to realise that this will affect a lot of people, particularly at a time when businesses face extra costs for checks and paperwork as a result of the protocol.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with him that this does not, at the moment, affect face-to-face or in-person card transactions, but we have just come through a year where more people in the United Kingdom have involved themselves in online or phone transactions. They have been doing that predominantly to order their groceries from supermarkets. Those payments will be included, so, as in-person activity declines, online and phone activity will increase. Therefore, I believe that the problem will increase.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stewart: Yes, and that is the fear. I agree with my colleague from East Antrim about that. Undoubtedly, as I have said, online trade is growing exponentially year on year at a rate of 20% plus, so this is only going to affect more and more people. It is right, therefore, that we are discussing today the impact that it will have.

As I said, fortunately it is getting recognition at Westminster and in the other Chambers of the devolved institutions. I know that the Westminster all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking has already addressed this at its past two or three meetings. The chair, Conservative MP Kevin Hollinrake, said that not only will the costs inevitably be passed on to consumers but that it is completely unjustifiable and akin to profiteering and opportunism in the Visa/MasterCard duopoly. I agree with him and others in calling on the Financial Conduct Authority to step in and put measures in place to prevent these increased charges.

Given the way that Visa and MasterCard are getting on here, it is no surprise that their share price has increased threefold in the past five years. They are colossal wrath-of-God financial institutions in their size and scale, and that share price increased threefold in five years with caps on their fees, yet they are looking to increase by 400% or 500%. It is completely unacceptable, and it will be passed on to consumers because of the pressures that businesses are facing. I hope that a message from this House can be sent to Westminster and that something can be done there. Deputy Speaker, I am not going to take the rest of my time.

Mr Frew: As my colleague has already outlined, the amendment improves the motion; hence, we will not oppose the motion if amended. I hear from the utterances across the way that those Members also support the amendment, so I can see that the House will not divide. That is probably a good message and a good omen on an issue that needs resolved.

Having listened to some of the debate, I am frustrated that Members use an issue such as this to fight a battle that has already been lost — Brexit. There were a million ways to leave the European Union, and implementing the protocol was probably the worst of them.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with him that there were different ways of implementing Brexit, but the DUP, when it was in a confidence-and-supply agreement with Theresa May as Prime Minister, had a golden opportunity to shape a deal that would not have resulted in motions such as today's on Brexit charges.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: Yes, we did shape the mindset, and we did add to the debate in the House of Commons, as was our right. It is the Government's decision on how they enact legislation. Whilst that is a problem that we need to raise with our Government and the EU and that we need to come to some arrangement on, there are always going to be those issues. Let no one say that leaving the EU is not a fundamental change. Of course it is. The very nature of the EU means that leaving it will always be a fundamental thing, given that it is an authoritarian state. That is one of the issues.

One issue that frustrates me is that, even though the motion is about an issue that needs to be resolved, the parties opposite, which have talked about the damage of Brexit, will not mention the protocol or the fact that they are pushing for its rigorous implementation, which is doing grave damage to our consumers and businesses.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No, I am not going to give way. Maybe I will give way to the Member in time. He knows that I usually do.

What that looks like is this: people across the way are worried about the flea on the wild bear when the wild bear is charging towards us. That means the implementation and the removal of the grace periods of the protocol, which will do us in Northern Ireland grave damage. That is nothing to do with Brexit. That damage will come from the protocol — pure and simple. There were a million ways to leave the EU. *[Laughter.]* The irony in all that is Sinn Féin's condemnation of the change in interchange fees when it has endorsed protocol arrangements that put a far more significant and costly burden on businesses and consumers in border communities. In fact, the rise in those fees may have a more adverse impact because of the protocol. Our consumers and businesses could well be forced to look to the EU rather than to the UK for their market for goods. That has had a perverse effect and that is because of the protocol.

I have not understood for a long time why, on the EU, the SDLP has been consistent over its history, but Sinn Féin and the republican movement have not. Throughout their tragic and violent history, they were always anti-EU until the point where they could see more division. I will not take any lectures from Sinn Féin, especially when it says that the EU is so good, yet we see that its Abú database of

voters breaks EU law and article 9 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask the Member to withdraw that comment about Sinn Féin being involved in any lawbreaking.

Mr Frew: The Member has the right in his contribution — I am sure that he will do this when he sums up — to explain to the House what Sinn Féin is at when it talks about its database and the information that it holds on voters, who are workers and family members, and how that complies with EU law. That is something that we will wait to hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to return to the motion.

Mr Frew: OK. I will give way to Matthew O'Toole if he wants me to.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member very much for remembering me.

He made the point about the protocol. We did not want the protocol. We did not ask for the protocol. We think that it should be implemented because it is international law and has real benefits and opportunities. The protocol needs to be made to work, so we want to work with you, if you are willing, to make it work. We recognise that there are issues. That is just to clarify that point.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his contribution. That was very helpful. We will work with anyone who assists in trying to reduce the burdens and the grave damage that the protocol does to our people, businesses and workers. I think that it was Stewart Dickson who talked about higher prices and fewer choices —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Frew: — that result from it. That is what the protocol brings. It brings higher prices and fewer choices, and we, in this party, are opposed to that.

1.45 pm

Ms Dolan: We are approaching the fourth month after the end of the transition period, and some of the implications of that that are already affecting my constituents on a day-to-day basis are the loss of the EU directive on cross-border

healthcare, the need for a green card to drive in the Twenty-six Counties and mainland Europe, and the presentation of several challenges and uphill battles for our already struggling agri-food sector. Now we have this announcement from MasterCard and Visa that they are increasing credit and debit card fees fivefold. It is all because of a Brexit that the majority of people in the North voted against. It is clear that these major companies are cynically using the loss of EU consumer protection laws to overcharge customers.

This is Brexit laid bare: an opportunity for big businesses to line their pockets, free of the EU legislation that reined them in. What is to stop the mobile network providers reintroducing roaming charges, for example? My point is: where is this going to end? As a result of this and numerous other Brexit-related threats and loopholes, border dwellers are, once again, potentially the worst affected. Where I come from, people cross the border daily to purchase everyday items such as groceries and fuel. Credit card charges on basic goods and services must be avoided, as workers and families here are typically on lower incomes than those elsewhere. According to NISRA's low pay index, 25% of workers in the North earn below the living wage of £8.21 an hour. The North has the highest rates of low pay across these islands. On these card charges, and in many other areas outside the scope of the protocol, we are facing divergence and increased costs for those who work, live and trade across the border. Workers and families simply cannot afford the additional charges and the costs of Brexit — again, a Brexit that the majority of them did not want.

Hotels, airlines, travel groups and car rentals could be the hardest hit by this announcement from MasterCard and Visa. Throughout the pandemic, the all-Ireland tourism flows have been instrumental in mitigating the decline in overseas tourism. These card charges put North/South tourism in jeopardy and endanger our tourism recovery.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dolan: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: A Member opposite raised the point that this was not relevant to in-person card fees. However, the truth is that, if someone is booking a hotel in Donegal or Mayo this summer, they might pay for it online using a card.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Dolan: Thank you. I completely agree with the Member. Obviously, as we are encouraging staycations this year, that is more than likely going to happen.

At a time when many businesses have shifted to online models merely to survive during the pandemic, these extra charges will cut even deeper. We should be helping to ease these new trends, not exacerbating them. These unnecessary charges could be the difference in job losses and business closures, and therefore they should be stopped. I support the motion and the amendment.

Ms McLaughlin: If anyone had any doubt that the impact of Brexit would be to increase the burden on commerce, the costs for the consumer and the profits of some businesses, here it is. I say to the Members opposite that no amount of gaslighting or deflection will wish away the result of Brexit. I am reminded of the fairytale where the emperor wears no clothes. The charges imposed for many of my constituents who use their cards to shop a couple of miles away across the border will rise fivefold later this year. Visa has said that its change will affect only 5% of consumer transactions. The problem for Derry, and other border areas, is that it will affect perhaps 75% of people. That is my guess as to how many people in my area go across the border at some point in a normal month.

The credit card companies say that this increase is not their fault and that they are just making up ground for what they regard as unfair controls on their fees that were imposed by the European Union. Another way of saying that is that our constituents have been helped for years by the strong consumer protection that we lost as a result of Brexit. A lot has been said on this issue today, and I support most of what has been said, so there is no need for me to repeat it. However, it is not just about card transaction charges. Consumers, or constituents, have also lost protection against high mobile phone roaming charges and data roaming. For many people who live on the border, it is not just about going on holiday. It means that they must now be ultra-careful to avoid their phone automatically switching networks and being hit by high roaming charges.

Until the end of last year, EU regulations prevented mobile phone companies in any EU country imposing high charges or charges for using a phone outside the UK. That protection

ended on 1 January. Roaming charges now vary between mobile phone companies, placing a burden on the consumer to know the situation. I stress that that particularly hits those who live in border areas — people who were ignored too often throughout the Brexit referendum debate.

Remember the phrase "Project Fear", which was used whenever any of us who opposed Brexit warned of the possible impacts, including on phone roaming charges? Well, this is what "Project Fear" really looks like. This is the reality. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Catney: The pandemic has had a profound effect on how we do business across the world. The consequence of that is that the use of cards and contactless systems has increased exponentially. It is incredibly important that, coming out of the pandemic, we do all that we can to help our businesses to recover, to facilitate improvements that lead to business being conducted more effectively and to remove barriers to recovery and allow businesses to thrive.

The decision by Visa and MasterCard to increase fees as soon as the EU cap did not apply to the UK was opportunistic, short-sighted and almost predatory. To increase card fees when contactless transactions and e-commerce are rapidly accelerating will result in stifling the economy just as we are trying to bounce back from the past year: it simply cannot be acceptable. I can understand how costs can increase, but these are big companies and experts in the field. A five-fold increase surely cannot be justified in any way. The increases will have a huge impact on border companies but also on the number of world-class artisan and small businesses that work within the EU. Those are unique and specialist companies, which are at the heart of our local economy and which we should all be encouraging.

Commerce has moved online, but so has the processing of transactions. We hear all the time about the cost-saving opportunities that occur with technological advances. Why, then, do those massive companies need to impose such over-the-top charges on consumers? Any argument that the charges are required because of Brexit does not hold water for me. I have spoken with many small retailers in Britain who have managed to work out the different regulatory systems that exist now. If they can do that with teams of one or two people, then large companies such as Visa and MasterCard can deal with those changes with the minimum of disruption.

I have heard of a number of large companies that have looked to set up EU entitlements to try to avoid the fees, but that may not be possible for smaller businesses. We must push the UK Government to introduce a cap on the fees and to work with the EU on interchangeable caps. We live in a global economy, and our businesses operate within it. There has been a lot of talk about unfair tax regimes and other impacts that we need to oppose. This is another area where unfair costs are being imposed on our businesses, and there is a need to oppose them with the same dedication and perseverance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As Question Time begins at 2:00 pm, I suggest that the House takes it ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Muir, who will make the winding-up speech on the amendment.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Teachers: Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

1. **Mr Stewart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration they have given to removing the exception of employment as a teacher in a school contained in the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. (AQO 1877/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): The provision has been part of our law since 1976. It was introduced to maintain a balance in the religious composition of the teaching workforce by allowing schools in the controlled sector to have regard to the community background of teachers when making appointments. Schools in the maintained sector may be able to rely on the occupational requirement of a religious education qualification for appointments to posts in that sector. Things have changed since 1976, and we need to review the provision. Our officials have had some preliminary engagement with the Department of Education, as any such review will be taken forward collaboratively with the education sector. Progress on that work has, of course, been impeded by the current crisis and the pressure on staff and ministerial time.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I am exasperated by just how long this is taking. The only employment in Northern Ireland that does not operate under fair employment laws is teaching. Colleagues of mine have been highlighting the issue for many years, and it has been batted back and forth between the Executive Office and Education Ministers. How can we even begin to move towards a shared and single education system when it is perfectly legal to discriminate against a teacher on the basis of their background? First Minister, where is the blockage to change? Is it coming from the Department of Education, vested interests, the Churches or teaching unions? Who is against equality?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary and, indeed, his original

question. I share his frustration. It seems like we have been talking for ever about the fair employment exemption and, indeed, the certificate for religious education in the maintained sector. Of course, we understand why the maintained sector seeks to have that for a number of teachers, but why should all teachers have to have the certificate for religious education if applying to the maintained sector? I share the Member's deep frustration. I feel that this needs to be dealt with, and I say that clearly because the Member asked where the blockage was: it is certainly not with me. I believe that there is a need to deal with the issue. He is right: if we are to have sharing across Northern Ireland, we should, of course, have it for our schoolteachers.

Ms Brogan: Will the First Minister outline what preliminary stakeholder engagement has taken place on the topic?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. A range of engagements with key stakeholders go back a number of years to before the Assembly was reconstituted in 2007. We took a number of views on the exemption in the last mandate. Officials will re-engage with the work as soon as they can, given the pandemic pressures, particularly on staffing in our office and, indeed, in the Department of Education. There is a clear need to deal with the matter, and I hope that the Member understands that that is my position.

FICT Report: Work Plan

2. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the detailed work plan, including resource and funding implications, of their Department's response to the report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) will be completed. (AQO 1878/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Lyons will answer the question.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): As agreed by the Executive on 25 March, the FICT working group has started engagement with Departments to develop a FICT work plan for Executive consideration. Subject to any emerging pressures, the work will be completed over the coming months.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for the response. I am conscious that a lot of work went into the development of the draft report, including the stakeholder engagement. Going forward, will

representatives of different sections of society be on that working group, and what input will councils have?

Mr Lyons: I thank the commission for the work in which it has been involved. It produced a comprehensive report with many recommendations.

We have decided that a whole-of-Executive approach should be taken, because we want the maximum buy-in. It is only when we all work together that we will get some of the results that we want to see and get buy-in from everybody. We want the Executive as a whole leading on it, rather than just the Executive Office. Of course, as we develop a plan and consider implementation, it may be appropriate to engage with other outside bodies and agencies, including councils. The working group is prepared to look at all that and engage where necessary.

Mr Catney: Given the recent violence on our streets, does the Minister feel that other important resources, such as the anti-poverty strategy, must be considered as part of the implementation of any outcomes from the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition?

Mr Lyons: First and foremost, it is important that we condemn the violence from wherever it comes and wherever it happens. As a House, I think, we have been united on that. There are many causes for some of the disturbances and violence that we have seen lately, and those need to be addressed in different ways. FICT will play an important part in that. It is about recognising people's identity and culture and making sure that they feel supported in that. FICT has a role to play in all that, but by no means will it be the silver bullet.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the progress that has been made on the FICT report. Increased equality, respect and parity of esteem must be the outworkings of that report.

As we all know, functioning North/South structures are critical for the successful operation of the Good Friday Agreement. The cancellation of a number of recent meetings because of the refusal of unionist Ministers to attend was a retrograde step. Does the Minister agree that playing politics with the Good Friday Agreement is disrespectful to the people who voted for it and risks undermining the agreement itself?

Mr Lyons: I congratulate the Member on being able to turn a question on the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition into a question about the North/South Ministerial Council. I think that he knows that one has nothing to do with the other. Our position has been made clear: when the meetings take place, they need to take place at an agreed time and the papers need to be agreed.

The Member raised the interesting matter of the Good Friday Agreement. A lot of Members around the House are not concerned about the outworkings of the Good Friday Agreement, the consent principle and Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom. I urge the Member to recognise those parts of the Good Friday Agreement as well and, in particular, the problems that the protocol is causing and work with others to sort them out.

Mr Stalford: Identity, culture and tradition are important, as are functioning institutions of government. Does the Minister agree that it was disrespectful to refuse to turn up for work for three years?

Mr Lyons: I think that we can all agree that three years of no government was detrimental to people across Northern Ireland. Many of the issues that we need to see addressed in our society could have been progressed had we had a functioning Government in Northern Ireland. All Members should reflect on that and recognise the problems that that caused.

Communities in Transition: Extension

3. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether consideration has been given to extending the Communities in Transition project. (AQO 1879/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Again, with your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Lyons will answer the question.

Mr Lyons: The Executive have agreed to a further phase of the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime programme, which is led by the Department of Justice, to be delivered up to March 2024. In the wider programme, the Executive Office has lead responsibility for the Communities in Transition project, which will be a significant part of the community-facing element of the programme in phase 2. Our officials have used the past number of months to engage across

the eight areas of focus to inform draft proposals for phase 2 delivery.

A contribution of £10 million has been made available from the Northern Ireland Office to support the Communities in Transition project over three years, up to March 2024. That funding is to support preventative work in communities that will build their resilience to paramilitary and criminal elements. Contrary to recent media reports, the funding is not designed to support paramilitary organisations in becoming community groups. It should also be noted that the Communities in Transition project is only one of the many interventions that are being funded as part of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme, which includes policing responses and focused youth interventions, among others. A lasting impact will be achieved only through all parts of the programme operating in partnership.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. The programme and its extension are to be welcomed. I would like to see it extended geographically to include areas that I represent, such as Strabane. Will the Minister give us an assurance that none of the Communities in Transition funding will be provided to organised crime gangs?

Mr Lyons: As somebody who has had interventions in his constituency, I see the benefits of the Communities in Transition project and can understand why people want to see it extended to other areas. Feedback from elected representatives suggests that further areas could benefit from a focus from the Communities in Transition project. If sufficient funding is available, those areas may include but are not limited to Shantallow, Tiger's Bay, Mourneview in Lurgan and north Antrim. Expansion into other areas is being considered in the context of planning for phase 2 of the project.

The Member raised something that, I think, comes from recent media coverage of the Communities in Transition project. Of course I can confirm that the funding is not for paramilitary organisations. It is for communities in transition: the clue is in the title. It is to assist the communities that are most at risk of coming under the coercive control of paramilitary organisations. It is important that we support those communities. We have to look at the projects involved. It is about helping people with their mental health and with employability and skills. It is about all sorts of things that we want to see happen, which then reduce the impact, the influence and the control that paramilitaries

can have. It is important to put on the record what the money is for, what it is intended for, what it is doing and the positive work that is going on in communities. In my constituency, I see the positive and life-changing impact that it has had.

Mr McCrossan: Before the First Minister answers my question, I ask her, when she addresses it, to address the House with facts. Last week, she addressed the House with incorrect claims against me, claims that were totally wrong. I would appreciate it if spurious remarks were not made by the First Minister.

How can the First Minister ensure equality of delivery and value for money from Communities in Transition spend? Will that be made public?

Mr Lyons: We need only look at the outcomes and impacts that there have been already. The outcomes are exactly what we wanted to achieve, and we have a clear record of them. That is why we are moving into phase 2 and why more funding has become available. The process is open and transparent. Projects are awarded through an open procurement process, so any organisation that is registered on the public-sector procurement portal, eTendersNI, can bid to be part of the delivery framework for the project. There are rules and procedures in place to make sure that the money is spent in the right way, and we are seeing the impacts of that.

2.15 pm

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the work done by their Department to facilitate the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1880/17-22)

10. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the impact that the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is having on businesses in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1886/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 4 and 10 together. Since the end of the transition period, it has been a priority for our Department and the wider Executive to identify, assess and seek to resolve issues that are having an impact on our businesses. The deputy First Minister and I met Michael Gove and the European Commission vice-president Maroš Šefčovič to outline the

challenges that we face, and I note their public commitment to find solutions and to engage with our business groups and civic society.

We continue to engage at ministerial and official level with the United Kingdom Government and others as relevant. Throughout all our engagement, we have taken every opportunity to highlight the need to resolve issues and to ensure that the additional burdens and costs for our people and our businesses are minimised.

One of the key agreed objectives of the Executive is to ensure, in so far as is possible, unfettered trade between ourselves and the rest of the United Kingdom. As an Executive, we regularly review related issues to the end of the transition period as well as preparations for the end of the grace periods, including those that the United Kingdom Government unilaterally extended in March 2021.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the First Minister for her reply. I think that all in the House can agree that Brexit and the outworking protocol were inevitably going to raise issues and a challenging transition period, but will the First Minister agree with me and the many business people who recognise that all those problems are solvable and can be worked through? Does she believe that this place has a duty to reach out and support all those businesses and not be an obstacle to finding solutions?

Mrs Foster: The solution and the way to deal with all the huge difficulties that businesses are facing is to replace the protocol. That is very clear because just when you think that you have answered one issue with the protocol, another arises. That is the difficulty with the protocol because, as the European Union continues to implement regulations, we will diverge from the internal market of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the protocol needs to be dealt with, and I support businesses in doing that.

I spent some of Friday hearing about the extra costs that businesses are having to absorb as a result of this iniquitous protocol, and it is long past the time for our Government to act to make sure that the protocol is gone.

Mr Easton: The situation is clearly extremely challenging. What recent discussions has the First Minister had with local businesses about the protocol? What differences does she envisage if the grace periods were to end?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for accommodating me and enabling me to speak

to some businesses in his constituency on Friday. I found it very useful, and I thank him for that. I was alarmed at the extra costs that those businesses have to incur. Some of them are passing those on to consumers and clients, which is very worrying, so we are seeing a reduction in choice and an increase in cost as a result of the protocol being implemented in the fashion that it has been.

We have heard already from the chief vet in Northern Ireland that the number of checks that he would be required to do if the grace periods were to come to an end would be unworkable. The checks being carried out at present are completely disproportionate to the risk to the single market. We are all very aware of that. However, the European Union continues to push ahead to try to implement the protocol. The damage that is being done to our businesses is incalculable, so we will need to continue to try to get the protocol replaced so that we can move on.

Mr O'Dowd: One of the ways that our society and this institution can face the challenges of Brexit, COVID and economic recovery is through North/South and east-west cooperation, and, over the last 24 or 48 hours, we have heard a number of reasons why your party has not been turning up at North/South ministerial meetings. Mr Lyons has just told us that it is for diary reasons. Yesterday, the deputy leader of your party told us that it was in opposition to the protocol. Will you assure this House and others that your party will not use North/South cooperation in your campaign against the protocol?

Mrs Foster: Not for the first time, you have misrepresented what the deputy leader of my party said yesterday. To answer Mr McCrossan's point earlier, I can show him the post that he put up if he would like me to show it to him because he put it up before anybody else —

Mr McCrossan: *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs Foster: — and that was the point that I was making. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McCrossan: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCrossan: — entirely wrong. Ridiculous for a First Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Excuse me, Mr McCrossan. You should come to order when you are requested to.

Mrs Foster: Just to be clear for Mr O'Dowd, who asked the question, I have made it clear at all times that I and colleagues will act in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and in accordance with all our ministerial responsibilities and, indeed, with the Pledge of Office, as we have indicated. There has been much misrepresentation, which has been quite mischievous, and I expect that from political opponents. We heard it here again today that we are "refusing" to attend meetings between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of the Republic of Ireland, and that is simply not the case. I spoke with the Taoiseach Friday week ago, actually, by telephone.

However, I just want to be clear about this: the Northern Ireland protocol is not part of the North/South Ministerial Council. As we outlined some weeks ago, North/South relationships will be affected by the fact that the protocol is in place, because it has damaged east-west relationships. We need to sort it out. We need to get rid of the protocol so that we can continue to have relationships with our nearest neighbour in the appropriate way in the future so that every community can benefit from Northern Ireland's constitutional and economic position as opposed to being in the dreadful situation that we find ourselves in.

Mr Allister: Does the First Minister have any comment on the repetition last week of the false propaganda by the vice president of the European Commission that the protocol is the only way to protect the Belfast Agreement and to preserve peace and stability? Is there a single passage in the Belfast Agreement that prevented the United Kingdom leaving as one nation, that prevented the two parts of Ireland belonging to different single markets and that required a border in the Irish Sea? If the protocol, by its very authors, is built on such flagrant falsehoods, how is such a warped and intolerable imposition meant to be experienced and endured? Does she agree that it must go?

Mrs Foster: I agree with the Member that the protocol should go. He rightly points out the misrepresentation by the European Commission vice president and the fact that he either wilfully misunderstands the Belfast Agreement or is misrepresenting it for his own ends. I know not which, but there is a need for those in Europe, London and Dublin to listen to the voices of those of us who will not have the

protocol because it is damaging the economy of Northern Ireland. More than that, it is damaging our citizenship here in Northern Ireland as equal citizens of the United Kingdom because we cannot partake of the internal market of the United Kingdom, something that, as I am sure the Member will be aware, was very much at the core of the Act of Union all those years ago.

It is fundamental that we continue to put across the point that the protocol must go.

Dr Aiken: The Chair of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union said recently that the protocol damages the Belfast Agreement. Does the First Minister believe that any political party in Northern Ireland can no longer call for its rigorous implementation because it is indeed so damaging to Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question and comments. I was made aware of those comments by his colleague at the Committee for the Executive Office last week. I was interested to hear them and that there is a realisation that the protocol is damaging the Belfast Agreement. That is something that the Member's party was very much involved in from the outset. Therefore, I take on board what he says, and there is absolutely a need to deal with the matter and to deal with it as quickly as possible.

'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions': Progress

5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress on 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions'. (AQO 1881/17-22)

11. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions'. (AQO 1887/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 5 and 11 together. As part of the four-week review process that is outlined in 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions', the Executive took a wide range of decisions last Thursday to reopen many aspects of our economy and society over the coming weeks. The deputy First Minister and I outlined those in our statement to the Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee last week. All the decisions that we have taken

on relaxations since the pathway was launched at the start of March have been informed by the data, and we are committed to keeping them under review.

We appreciate the sacrifices that have been made to reduce the spread of the virus. In that knowledge, we have reached these decisions carefully to balance the need to control transmission with the need to open up our economy and society again. However, the lifting of restrictions does not mean that we can let our guard down. It is down to all of us to continue to adhere to the measures that we are now so familiar with to protect the relaxations that we have worked so hard to achieve. By that, I mean maintaining social distancing, washing our hands, wearing a face covering and continuing to use the StopCOVID NI app.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Will she give an assurance for businesses in particular that, as COVID data continues to improve, economic recovery will be an ever-increasing focus of the Executive?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I absolutely concur that economic recovery must now be very much our number-one focus. We know that there are industries and businesses right across Northern Ireland that have been in a really dire situation over the past year. We have tried to help through mitigations and through making grants available to those companies, but we totally understand that the best way to recover is to be open and to be able to continue with business.

It is really good news that there is now an opportunity for those in the 35-39 age group to book their COVID vaccine; that was announced by the Department of Health at 1.00 pm. People who are in that age group can now avail themselves of the COVID vaccine. If there is anybody in that age group in the House — junior Minister — I encourage them to make sure that they take that up.

Mr Boylan: Minister, the pandemic has clearly highlighted the deep-rooted disadvantage and deprivation across many parts of our community. Can the First Minister assure us that addressing social inequality will be at the core of any recovery strategy?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Throughout the pandemic, we have tried to talk about the impact on the health and well-being of our people but also to look at economic well-being and societal well-being. Those are the three elements that will inform

the strategy of the Executive. Those are the three core elements of what we are trying to achieve. We do, of course, recognise — I am sure that the Member will agree — that having a job is very much part of dealing with the societal disadvantage that some have in their lives. That is why we should very much strive to make sure that there are suitable and well-paid jobs available for everyone.

Dr Archibald: As we come out of lockdown and move towards economic recovery, part of that recovery should be to build on the unique status that we have under the protocol. That is something that Invest NI has been promoting. I understand that there has been significant interest in relation to that within Invest NI, with at least 30 investors exploring opportunities here since the end of the transition period. Will the First Minister comment on that level of interest? Does she agree that we need to maximise opportunities under the protocol?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, because of the damage that the protocol has visited upon us here in Northern Ireland in respect of our largest market, we have not been able to take as much advantage of the interest from other parts of the world as we would have liked. I find that very disappointing. The fact that our largest market has been hampered in the way that it has has caused great damage. We need to see the protocol dealt with as soon as we possibly can so that we can then go out into the world and take advantage of the skills that our young people have and the fact that we have such a strong educational base here. We need to bring our young people back. Pivotal public policy forum recently did a report about the brain drain out of Northern Ireland and the fact that we need the brightest and best to stay here. Those are the things that we need to focus on in our forthcoming economic recovery.

Mr Stewart: The sectors last to open will be hospitality, including the wedding sector, and tourism. They have been most affected throughout this.

Can the Minister assure the House and those sectors that financial support will be there and will continue, even when they open in a partial way, to support them through this?

2.30 pm

Mrs Foster: Certainly, the Executive's decision last week was that financial support would continue until they are fully reopened again. Some of those hospitality venues that have outside premises can open, as the Member

knows, on 30 April, but their support will continue because they cannot open fully. We think that that is the right thing to do.

We are very conscious of the fact that many people in the wedding industry have suffered greatly. My heart goes out to those who have had to reorganise their weddings. I was speaking to a couple, at the weekend, who have had to reorganise theirs four times. That is just incredible. What a stress that is on young people — and maybe on those who are not so young as well; I will not be ageist. It is important that we continue to support the industry. The Economy Minister continues to keep in close contact with the industry to see what else we need to do to help it.

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

NSMC Meetings: Failure to Nominate Attendees

T1. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister on what basis they failed to nominate a Minister to attend last week's North/South sectoral meeting, given that section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act sets out the legal duty of Ministers to attend meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and where there is any doubt over which Minister should attend, it is up to the First Minister and deputy Minister to attend. (AQT 1191/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The transport Minister, Ms Mallon, decided that the sectoral meeting would go ahead despite the fact that she had been told that it did not suit the nominated person who would accompany her and that the agenda and papers had not been agreed by my office. North/South Ministerial Council meetings are to proceed by agreement. That is the whole point: that a unionist Minister is there when a nationalist Minister is in the lead, and vice versa. All those things have to proceed by agreement. I very much hope that agreement and consensus will be sought by those Ministers who are setting up North/South Ministerial Council meetings in the future.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Now that she is quite well aware of the distress that not appointing someone to attend that meeting has caused to the House generally, will she assure the House that Minister Dodds will attend the meeting that is due to take place later this week, or might we learn of some excuse now as to why that, too, would be impossible?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure where the distress is. My goodness, if this is what distress looks like, I would hate to see what real distress actually looks like. As I have indicated to Mr O'Dowd and will indicate to the Member as well, I am fully aware of our ministerial responsibilities with regard to the NSMC, as outlined in the Pledge of Office. I have told the Member why the meeting did not go ahead. It is up to her to decide whether she believes it or not. That is a matter for her. That is the reality. There was no agreement on the agenda despite the fact that her party's Minister decided to tweet the draft agenda on Thursday night, thereby breaching ministerial protocol by putting Executive papers out into the public realm — and not for the first time, I have to say, from the SDLP. However, that is a matter for her.

Mr Speaker: George Robinson is not in his place, and topical question No 3 has been withdrawn. I call Mark Durkan.

Mental Health Crisis

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans the Executive have to address our mental health crisis, given that they will be well aware of the scale of the challenge that we face to address mental health issues here — we were in a bad place pre-pandemic; according to the experts, we are in even worse place now — and responsibility does not lie solely with the Minister of Health. (AQT 1194/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question on a subject that he returns to frequently, and I commend him for that. The Executive subcommittee that deals with mental health, resilience, well-being and suicide prevention is, I have to say, one of the best attended of the Executive's subcommittees. It is an area that we all take very seriously. We want to interact with the health professionals who come to that subcommittee. At the last meeting, we were briefed by the interim mental health champion, when she was able to bring us up to date with ongoing interventions at that time. That subcommittee continues to have, as the Member rightly says, a whole-of-Government approach to the mental health issue. Of course, primacy for that lies with the Minister of Health, but, as an Executive, we all stand four-square behind the Minister of Health as he tries to deal with this incredible difficulty, which will, unfortunately, only get worse as we move out of the pandemic.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I hope that this issue can unite parties and

people here. Political discord and instability do nothing to help our population's mental well-being. As chair of the all-party group on mental health, I take this opportunity to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister, together with all MLAs, to unite in support of Mental Health Awareness Week next month and to renew their commitment to tackling the pandemic of poor mental health.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that. I will not speak on behalf of the deputy First Minister, but, if the Member would like us to do something collectively to mark that, I am sure that we would be more than happy to look at doing that. It unites everybody not just in the Executive but across the House. This is about how we intervene to try to deal with some of these issues in a timely fashion. That is why the subcommittee is not just about suicide prevention but about resilience and well-being and trying to deal with early intervention issues. I very much look forward to the Member writing to us if he feels that we can help with that.

Wedding Receptions

T5. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to clarify the position with wedding receptions, including music and dancing, given that there must be something in the air in Fermanagh, with her being contacted by a number of couples over the weekend in relation to the reopening of hotels. (AQT 1195/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Member is right to identify that. I had to deal with that over the weekend. Wedding receptions will be permitted on a risk-assessed basis from 24 May 2021, depending on the size of the venue. In that respect, it is like the situation with churches. We still do not have clarity on the matter of music and dancing, but we will continue to speak to our medical advisers about that. They are concerned that singing and dancing could cause some difficulties because they are aerobic activities, but we are very much aware of the issue and will be happy to come back to the House on it in due course.

Mrs Barton: The Minister will also be aware that many couples have organised and reorganised weddings and that many have lost deposits as a result of that. Where service providers have held on to those deposits, can they claim from the various COVID schemes and grants that have been made available?

Mrs Foster: The short answer, unfortunately, is that I am not over the detail of that. I am happy

to take it to the Economy Minister who should, under consumer law, be able to provide some clarity about whether they can claim from some of the grant schemes because of the loss of deposit. Let me take that away and get the Economy Minister to come back to the Member about that.

HIA Redress Board: Dissatisfaction

T6. **Mr Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether talk of dissatisfaction with the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board has reached TEO, given that although it is welcome that there has been movement on the historical institutional abuse (HIA) issues, with the redress board having met, there seems to be dissatisfaction in some areas. (AQT 1196/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Yes. The deputy First Minister and I had a meeting about historical institutional abuse with the new commissioner, Fiona Ryan, who has been put in place as an advocate for all the people who come forward with their stories. That was a very useful meeting. I know that a number of Members across the House have been contacted by people who are applying to the redress board and that they have concerns that the process is causing distress for some of those individuals. The deputy First Minister addressed that in her previous Question Time appearance. We are aware of that issue and will get a briefing about it to see whether there is anything that we can do to assist. The last thing that we want to do is to cause any retraumatisation.

Mr Clarke: In essence, the First Minister has answered my supplementary question. For many, it has been a difficult, long journey with a lot of waiting. It is inevitable that any conversation that they have will revisit the past, so I welcome the fact that she will look at that. Can the First Minister give us any idea of what could be done to soften that for the individuals involved?

Mrs Foster: We want to hear people's experience of what is causing problems in the process. You will know, Mr Clarke, that, whether because of this sort of abuse or other sorts of abuse and violence, individual victims have different reactions to what they have to go through. We will want to listen to those voices and, indeed, engage with the commissioner again to see whether she can give any clear suggestions on what can be changed in the process to try to help.

Mr Speaker: I call Seán Lynch. *[Pause.]* The Member is not in his place. We will move on. I call Pat Catney. *[Pause.]* Mr Catney is not in his place.

HIA Redress Board: Payments

T9. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a progress report on payments that have been made by the HIA Redress Board. (AQT 1199/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, I do not have information on the precise number of payments made to date, but, bearing in mind the last question — I want to take into account that answer when I reply to the Member — we are pleased to see the number of cases that has been going through the redress board. Again, we will want to take into consideration the distress that has been pointed out to us so that we can try to see whether there is a solution to that.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the First Minister for her answer. Have any resources been directed to increasing the number of panels in order to speed up payments?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that we have identified the speed of payments as a particular issue. The payments are going quite well. As the Member will know, some cases are more complicated than others and will take a little more time, but one issue that has been raised with us and has caused distress is the fact that medical reports have had to be obtained again, and that causes difficulties if people have to go through that process again. We will look at the HIA process to see whether there is anything more that we can do to try to deal with the problems that have been identified.

Mr Speaker: Andy Allen is not in his place, so I ask Members to take their ease for two or three minutes until 2.45 pm. Thank you.

2.45 pm

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

Education

Free School Meals: Eligibility

1. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of children eligible to receive free school meals in each of the last five years. (AQO 1892/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. My Department does not hold information on pupils who are eligible for free school meals. However, it holds information on pupils who are entitled to free school meals — it is a slight and subtle difference — having applied through the Education Authority's (EA) free school meal entitlement process. That is collected annually via the school census. In 2016-17, 102,996 pupils were entitled to free school meals. In 2017-18, 101,061 pupils were entitled to free school meals. In 2018-19, 99,893 pupils were entitled to free school meals. In 2019-2020, 97,350 pupils were entitled to free school meals. Finally, in 2020-21, which is the most recent complete set of data, 98,239 pupils were entitled to free school meals.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his answer. A significant number of children are entitled to free school meals across our education system. It is important for them to be provided with free school meals in a school setting. Minister, you moved quickly during the pandemic to provide payments when children were not in school. Do you have any plans to bring forward a more long-term policy to tackle holiday hunger?

Mr Weir: As the Member will be aware, I put a proposal to the Executive. We reacted fairly quickly to the issue of holiday hunger when it hit during the pandemic. One of the advantages that we have in Northern Ireland compared with other jurisdictions that operate largely through local government districts is that single payments can be made. Initially, about 95% or more of the pupils who were entitled were in the one set of information. We worked to complete that. A proposal was then put to the Executive from a holiday hunger point of view to extend that to the periods in which schools were not in place: summer, Christmas, Easter and the half-term holidays. Those payments will continue to be made until the end of the Assembly term. Northern Ireland was the first jurisdiction across

the UK to do that. I take on board what the Member said. That provides a scenario for the next year or so, but, as part of that, there will be discussions about the anti-poverty strategy. The direct lead on holiday hunger and across the board when it comes to child poverty lies with the Department for Communities. We are working on a cross-jurisdictional basis, particularly with the Department for Communities, to try to scope out the actions that could be taken beyond 2022 so that there is a permanent solution to the issue.

Mr Lyttle: I will press the Minister for further clarity: does he support the permanent introduction of free school meal direct payments during holiday periods?

Mr Weir: I am entirely open to the avenue in which that can take place. I am supportive of that being extended into the future and made permanent. As I indicated, about 100,000 children are entitled to free school meals at the moment. There is a concern that that number will expand as we move beyond the pandemic, people go back to work and furlough ends, because there may well be further redundancies. It is important that children are provided for during that period. In many ways, the issue has been forced into a stronger conclusion because of COVID; there are occasionally useful spin-offs in that regard. It has focused minds. As such, we need to provide a longer-term solution. That will probably mean a change in legislation, because, strictly speaking, a methodology is used for those payments at present. Where we find directions that can be made, they are not, strictly speaking, on the free school meal side of things. Rather, they flow from that.

As I said, we have a high level of advantage, because we have worked with the EA and others to identify the bank account of any eligible family. We have also spoken to the Home Office to make arrangements for refugee children. We therefore have a fairly watertight and complete list. Leaving aside the arguments elsewhere, in England, Scotland or Wales, because free school meals are administered there through a range of local authorities, there are not the opportunities to identify those who are eligible. We need to take advantage of the fact that names are available here through the payment system that the Education Authority established.

Ms Brogan: The Department's figures from last year show that only 80% of the children who are entitled to free school meals availed themselves of that support. Will the Minister

outline what he is doing to increase the number of children who avail themselves of free school meals?

Mr Weir: We encourage everyone to apply. It is about proportionality. I will give a headline today: we will be releasing the latest direct figures on 29 April. As the Member indicated, the proportion of school meals taken last year was around 80% or 81%. When we talk about school meals being taken, figures are recorded on a day-to-day basis, and we have to realise that, at any one time, some pupils will be off. People are therefore encouraged to take up their entitlement, but, ultimately, we cannot force them to do so. I encourage anyone who is eligible to take up that entitlement, however.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister have any plans to visit the linkage, which was created by his predecessor from Sinn Féin, between the number of free school meals in a school and the level of funding for which that school qualifies? That linkage is causing a disparity in the general funding of schools and putting schools with a low level of uptake of free school meals at a great disadvantage. Is that disparity going to continue?

Mr Weir: The broader review of the common funding formula is ongoing. We need to make sure that the funding is always distributed in the most advantageous ways possible. I have striven to ensure that schools have a higher proportion of the budget and that the aggregated schools budget is protected. We need to ensure that the funding formula, whatever it is, is as fair as possible to schools. In my experience, with any change to funding, those who will gain an advantage from it are quite happy and those who will see a reduced level of funding and are at a disadvantage are not. All factors have to be taken into account, and, from that point of view, the broader review of the common funding formula is about trying to make sure that we have as fair a distribution as is possible.

St Mary's High School, Brollagh: Closure

2. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Education how he took into account the needs of the rural community of Brollagh in relation to his decision to identify St Mary's High School for closure. (AQO 1893/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. In making my decision on development proposal (DP) 584, I was mindful of all the

duties placed on me and of the need to consider all the evidence presented. In many ways, from a ministerial and departmental viewpoint, when it comes to DPs, we are effectively the end point of the process. I can make decisions only on proposals that are brought forward by the school planning and managing authorities.

It is clear to me that, on a number of grounds, St Mary's High School in Brollagh, despite the great work of many people, is unsustainable and that its discontinuation will be in the best interests of pupils. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which is the managing authority, has confirmed that due regard was given to the Rural Needs Act 2016 and that details of that were included in the equality and human rights screening of DP 584 and in a separate rural needs impact assessment. The rural needs impact assessment states that the intention of the proposal is to advance the aspirations, aims and objectives of the sustainable schools policy and:

"It is important that children in rural communities have access to a quality education in cost effective provision."

CCMS acknowledged, in the screening of the proposal, the potential impact of closing St Mary's, Brollagh, on the local rural area. Although it is recognised that the closure of any school is upsetting for a community, difficult decisions have to be made, and they have to be made in the best interests of the children, rather than necessarily the institution. The decision allows those pupils to have access to the broad and balanced curriculum that is afforded to other post-primary pupils across Northern Ireland.

Ms Dolan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest as a past pupil of St Mary's. Coláiste Cholmcille, Ballyshannon, and Magh Éne College, Bundoran, are both closer to St Mary's, Brollagh than any post-primary school in Fermanagh. I have raised that with the Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB), and, in response to the Donegal ETB, CCMS said that it recognised that parents and children may wish to consider those schools and agreed to have the locality education adviser liaise with the school's principal and Donegal ETB. Can you also facilitate and support that?

Mr Weir: We are happy to look into how that will help any individual pupil. From that point of view, there will be pupils living in border areas

who may be seeking education in either direction: in the Republic of Ireland if they live in Northern Ireland, and vice versa. We are happy to see what can be done to facilitate that.

This is ultimately about trying to ensure that there is a choice for pupils. The number of subjects that St Mary's, Brollagh could offer was well below what the entitlement framework suggests. Last year, 60% of pupils in years 11 and 12, which are examination years, had to travel to at least one other school at some stage during the week to avail themselves of lessons. I appreciate that it is painful when any school closes, but we need to ensure that the opportunities for children in Brollagh are the same as those provided to children elsewhere. If that can be provided to some pupils by moving to a location in the Republic of Ireland, I am sure that that will be looked at, as happens on other occasions.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, this is, as you said, a very painful case. It is hitting the local community very hard, and people are annoyed by it. Can you reassure the House that every possible avenue has been explored to save the school? Is closure really the only option that is left, given the circumstances of the case?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. Let us put this in context: not only were the pupils at Brollagh not able to access, by a long way, the full range of topics — I think that it was sitting at 11 or 12 subjects — but, as indicated, 60% of pupils at that level had to move to other schools for at least part of the week. When the decision was taken on St Mary's, Brollagh, I think that there were 67 pupils at the post-primary school. The normal threshold for a post-primary school — that is regarded as a general rule of thumb for sustainability — is that there should be 500 pupils in years 8 to 12. I appreciate that some schools have a bit below that. However, catering for a little bit over 10% of what should be the minimum threshold is simply not sustainable.

A range of options for St Mary's, Brollagh has been on the agenda for, I suspect, most of the last decade. I remember that the Member's party colleague and predecessor in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Richie McPhillips, had a range of suggestions that were all explored. However, there comes a point at which, to provide education to young people, difficult decisions have to be made based on sustainability. I entirely understand that there will be concern in any school when potential closure is mooted.

Mr Buckley: Minister, can you outline the recognition that is given to the reality when considering thresholds for the sustainability of schools?

3.00 pm

Mr Weir: In post-primary education, there are, principally, two objectives for the numbers: an intake of 100 and an overall cadre of 500. There is also the impact that it has on the entitlement framework, which is about the level of choice. Specifically in the primary sector, there is much more of a clear differentiation, meaning that, for a primary school in what is counted as an urban setting, 140 is the recommended minimum threshold number; in a primary school in a rural area, it is 105. There is perhaps that more direct relationship because, particularly for primary schools, there is an expectation that having to travel for long distances is more problematic for very young children than it is for those at post-primary level.

Even if we take those figures, the numbers attending St Mary's, Brollagh — it is a scattered rural community, so there was no vast, untapped pool of children — which is a post-primary school in a rural setting had, for a number of years, been less than two thirds of the minimum for a primary school in a rural setting. I think that that really becomes unsustainable. Rural need is one of the factors that are taken into account, and I appreciate that there is probably a bit more fluidity in an urban setting. Last year, an amendment, largely speaking, was made to the definition of the terms "rural" and "urban". In education, there was an old definition of the term "urban" covering purely Belfast and Londonderry, and that has now been extended to deal with some of the anomalies, which are settings where there are large areas of population. Even with that, whatever way you count it — you should count this on a rural basis — unfortunately, St Mary's, Brollagh simply was not meeting the criteria on a range of subjects.

Cotton Primary School, Bangor: Vacant Site

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for the future of the old Cotton Primary School site. (AQO 1894/17-22)

Mr Weir: When an EA property becomes vacant, it may be put to alternative use, retained for a future educational use or disposed of in line with current guidance from Land and Property Services (LPS). It is normally where disposal takes place that there

is a sort of a pecking order where there is an option to see, first, whether there is any other educational benefit for which the site can be used. It would then be offered either to a social enterprise, community group or other Department. Finally, if there were no interest, it would be offered to a commercial setting.

Specifically, the former Cotton Primary School near Newtownards is being retained by the Education Authority for potential use by children and young people's services for special educational purposes. It is under consideration for additional special school provision. The review on its usage is ongoing.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the SEN pressures that have warranted the building being considered for use? Will he also give a guarantee that he can secure the site, as the place has been wrecked?

Mr Weir: I will take the first point first. A significant number of additional places are required in special schools for September 2021 for children and young people with statements of special educational need. We are in the virtuous situation where that is also the case with specialist provision in mainstream schools. Down the years, we have seen such an expansion because of additional statementing and because children who, going back 10, 20 or 30 years, would not have been in a position to go to a school are much more able to do so. As I said, that has arisen also from the EA clearing a substantial backlog of statutory assessments. There was a period when there were extremely long waiting lists, and those have been largely got down. Also, there is a yearly trend of increasing numbers of children and young people with more complex special educational needs. For instance, this year there has been a 5% increase on last year. My officials are working with the EA through a number of fora to undertake a full assessment of capacity and need with the special school estate and of specialist provision in mainstream education.

On any physical destruction of the building, we will have to make sure that everything is fit for purpose. I will raise that with officials to see what actions are being taken to secure the site to make sure that, as far as possible, it is not subject to any level of vandalism as we move ahead. That is always a risk with any vacant sites.

Miss Woods: On the same thread of site disposal, I ask the Minister for an update on plans for the current Priory Integrated College

site in Holywood, if and when the school moves to Redburn.

Mr Weir: I will get the specific and detailed information for the Member and write to her on that.

On the overall issue, Priory is one of the projects that have been green-lighted for Fresh Start money. Therefore, there will be a change of location that, hopefully, can allow Priory to further grow and flourish. It will require that relocation side of things. I will check the details of the timing. As indicated, the general position, which falls under the remit of the EA, is initial retention and then examination if the site is to be disposed of in any way. The consistent pecking order is that, where there is an expression of interest that is doable and has a direct educational impact, that will always come as first priority. Any sort of government institution or a situation involving a social enterprise would come next. Only when there is no real interest from those areas will there be an examination of any commercial disposal for whatever purposes.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the proposed use of those premises. Will the Minister give an anticipated timescale for the premises to come back into meaningful use?

Mr Weir: From that point of view, it will be dependent on an exercise currently going on because of some of the additional pressures that there will be on SEN in September 2021. Those cannot be met simply by putting more children in classes, in part because there will be a restriction, particularly with SEN in special schools, on how many can be accommodated in a class. There is probably less elasticity, shall we say, than there is in a mainstream setting.

There is a strategic discussion to be had, if additional physical resources and additional sites are needed, on whether that will be met in the short term by using sites that are vacant at present and to what extent, for example, additional mobile classrooms can be used in some settings. It will be part of an overall strategic decision. Therefore, particularly in relation to September 2021, decisions will be taken fairly swiftly to try to ensure that the school estate that we have is compatible with the needs and pressures. I anticipate that the decisions will be taken fairly shortly. Given the ongoing pressures and the need, looked at from the perspective of longer-term capital turnaround, if the conclusion were reached that, for example, the Cotton site was not needed for September 2021, that does not mean that it is

ruled out for that purpose for all time. It may well be that there is a pressure in 2022 that needs to be met. That will be factored in. Hopefully, there will be a bit more clarity around that fairly soon.

Irish-medium Education

4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps he has taken to develop Irish-medium education. (AQO 1895/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. In delivering the statutory duty on my Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education, a range of actions, funding support and policy adaptations are undertaken. My Department seeks to respond positively to parental demand for Irish-medium provision and works to meet the needs of the sector, for example in considering home-to-school transport requirements and schools' requests for temporary variations to their approved numbers. All policy areas across the Department consider whether any policy adaptation could support the delivery of that statutory duty.

Additionally, a range of bespoke, sector-specific investment is provided to support the development of Irish-medium education. That includes annual funding to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), which acts as a valuable advocate for the sector, specific support to Irish-medium units, funding to the Education Authority and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), and early years funding to Altram, which has developed a range of pre-school resources aimed at helping immersion learning. My Department also requires its arm's-length bodies to support the delivery of the statutory duty and to report back on actions taken during the business year. A shared education and sectoral support team has been established in the Education Authority and works with CnaG to support schools. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I set up the continuity of learning programme, with a focus on supporting pupil learning. Recognising the specific needs of the sector, I included a separate work stream for Irish-medium education. Much valuable work has come out of that work stream.

I am also aware of the loss of language learning due to the pandemic and the shortage of substitute teachers. My officials continue to work with relevant partner bodies to seek

opportunities to mitigate and resolve such concerns.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as sin. Given that comprehensive response, could the Minister outline any discussions that he has had with his ministerial colleague in the Department for the Economy regarding workforce planning for the Irish-medium sector?

Mr Weir: As regards workforce planning, we are looking at the issue of qualified teachers, and there is, obviously, a particular issue at post-primary level. I am aware of the issues about the availability of suitably qualified teachers. Last December, I asked officials to allow additional flexibility for Irish-medium schools, so that they could utilise alternative staff, for instance, under the Engage programme. As we move ahead this year, the aim is to allow that, if they are unable to secure qualified teachers.

I raised that issue with my ministerial colleague at the Department for the Economy in relation to initial teacher education (ITE). As the Member is aware, there is an interface between Education and Economy on that. My officials will engage in work to consider the current provision, particularly for post-primary schools, with ITE providers and sectoral representatives. That work will scope what longer-term ITE provision is needed — clearly, even if there is agreement today on something, it will take effect only four or five years down the line — and how those teachers receive the best training to support them in delivering immersion education in the Irish-medium sector.

My officials continue to work on accessing substitute teachers. There have been opportunities, at times, to take teachers with expertise from outside the sector and provide language training for them and to apply some flexibility.

The pandemic has exposed something important. We pride ourselves on having a large pool of substitute teachers, but we have found that, at times, it has not been quite as deep in numbers as we thought. It is important that, as we move ahead with the substitute list and General Teaching Council (GTC), there should be a much greater level of accommodation for those, for instance, from outside this jurisdiction, whether it is in the Irish-medium sector or —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid, Minister, that you are at your two-minute limit.

Mr Weir: OK.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You can resume your answer after Mr Patsy McGlone asks his question.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. I listened carefully to what you said about pupils who had lost out on immersive learning in the Irish-language sector. You said that you were looking at mitigating measures that could be taken to help those youngsters catch up on lost time and learning. It would be helpful if you could provide us with details now, or you can write to me with expansive detail on that.

Mr Weir: Part of it is about the adaptation of resources that will be provided to the sector, across all schools and the sector as a whole. This year, we had some interruptions. We moved ahead with the Engage programme. There was some disruption to Engage in the spring term, from January to April, because schools were not open physically. However, we have been able to roll the funding over for the rest of the academic year. The aim is — there has been indicative support — to roll COVID funding for 2021-22 forward into the next academic year. I have yet to get a final paper signed off by the Executive. The aim of it is to provide schools with funding to help with catch up.

I always take the view that it is not for me or the Department to dictate from on high exactly how that should be spent. The flexibility is largely given to schools to spend their allocated money according to the intervention that they want to put in place. In the Irish-medium sector, there is flexibility so that, if they want to focus that on lost language learning, that can be progressed.

3.15 pm

Similarly — we are waiting for final allocations and a paper will be put in — there have been indicative COVID allocations. Over the summer, as well as what is happening, broadly speaking, in youth work, the intention is to enable schools, on a voluntary basis, to be funded for one, two or three weeks, depending on what they want to do, for a summer school of learning. Given some of the pressures that exist, many schools will simply say that it is better for their pupils and staff to have a bit of time off over the summer, which is perfectly understandable. However, opportunities will be provided for schools to apply flexibility so that they can focus on pupils and on the level of provision that they want.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Sure Start: Resumption of Activities

T1. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education for details on the Sure Start schemes that can resume activities following the easing of restrictions. (AQT 1201/17-22)

Mr Weir: As part of that, we are trying to balance the important provisions that are made by Sure Start and by generic youth work, for instance, with making sure that they are compatible with public health requirements. As such, while the focus tends to be on the youth side, a paper was put to the Executive on the restart of those facilities, which was passed before Easter, and Sure Start has been given a green light. All child-centred activities, which are the bulk of what Sure Start does, have been given a green light to fully restart. Obviously, those Sure Start projects will operate where they can within mitigations and protections.

There is one outstanding area at present in relation to Sure Start. As part of its programmes, Sure Start will also look at the level of its engagements with adults and parents, because that is where there is a greater risk from a public health point of view, as opposed to with very young children. As such, we have not been able to give the green light to those engagements. It is about a phased restart, but the Executive have agreed a full restart of all child-centred activities. That is particularly important, given that Sure Start is largely focused on areas with higher levels of social deprivation. The damage that was done, unfortunately, was as a result of some of the provisions that had to be put in place, but, at least, we are starting to reverse those.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for his answer. That was going to be my follow-up: will this include families? You rightly point out that that provision is what has been missing. Certainly, in correspondence that I have received, I see that it is affecting our communities. Can we expect a time frame for the next phase so that families can be included, even on an outdoors basis? Can we meet in groups with families face to face outside?

Mr Weir: We will continue to push in that regard. There are public health concerns, and there is the question of getting support from the Department of Health. I will certainly not be any sort of barrier to that. Where there are very young children, whether in schools or in Sure

Start, there is very little risk of transmission. As well as that, the value of the intervention probably outweighs any level of risk. In schools or in Sure Start, the bigger danger is in adult-to-adult transmission. That will be a slightly higher hurdle to overcome. As we move towards gradually easing restrictions, that next phase will come, but I do not have a definitive date for it at this stage.

AS/A-level Grades

T2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether AS grades awarded in the 2020-2021 academic year will count towards next year's A-level grades. (AQT 1202/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. As she is aware, what was previously awarded in 2020 does not count towards 2021. I hope to be in a position in the next few weeks to make an announcement around the wider picture of the exact structure of examination grades in 2022. We are still working with CCEA, and we will work closely with stakeholders in schools. I anticipate that we will reach a final position in the next few weeks. From that point of view, I am not in a position to unpick that announcement at this stage or to give specifics about individual elements of it. I hope to make that clear within the next few weeks.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you very much for your answer. Minister, you will appreciate that the sooner the decision is made, the better for our students.

GCSE students have reported a significant increase in the number of assessments and exams that they are facing. Do you agree that that is a huge pressure on students who are already feeling the pressure of the pandemic on their mental health? Will daily support be given to those students in schools?

Mr Weir: I will disaggregate that into a couple of answers. First, provision has been made available for assessments. However, in relation to qualifications, the concept is that the assessments are to be evaluated by the school. The assessments are not compulsory, and the school can use any evidence from the period in question. The advice from not only the Department of Education but CCEA — we should appreciate that not every examination or qualification in Northern Ireland is through CCEA — is that, where assessments are being used, there should be only one assessment per subject. Some schools have gone well beyond that. Schools have autonomy and are being asked to provide their own information,

assessment and evaluation. Some schools have gone further than what was suggested; others felt there was no particular need for that. I appreciate the level of pressure that is there. As part of the overall finance structures for next year, additional money will be made available to support pupils' emotional health and well-being. Again, there will be opportunities within schools to deliver that support.

Independent Review of Integrated Education: Recommendations

T3. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Education, after apologising for not being in his place during tropical [sic] questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister — he was listed to ask question 8 but was caught out because, although he felt like Linford Christie running around the Building, the business in the House seemed to move faster than he did — to provide a justification for why 11 of the 39 recommendations from the independent review of integrated education will not be taken forward. (AQT 1203/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Member is right about the specifics. Some processes can be taken forward and brought into place. The authors prioritised certain individual recommendations. If there are discussions with the sectoral bodies, they will say, "Well, actually, that is less of a priority as it is less of an issue". A range of wider recommendations falls into the category that should be looked at as part of the wider picture of the independent review of education. The position is that the call for those who wished to put their names forward as potential panel members closed on 26 March. There was a significant response to that call, and those responses are going through a sifting process. A panel will then interview to determine who is to be appointed. Most aspects of education are interconnected. Consequently, a range of recommendations best falls within the remit of that panel. We are talking about 39 recommendations. Rather than trying to extrapolate reasons why each of the 11 individual recommendations has not gone forward, if the Member writes to me about specific recommendations that he feels are not being taken forward, I will provide the rationale.

I do not know whether the Speaker will ask the Member to remain behind and write, "I will not be late for the Assembly", 100 times as a form of sanction.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Those "tropical questions" can be difficult.

Mr Catney: One hundred lines? I will have to go far back into the annals of history to see when that happened.

Minister, thank you very much for that very comprehensive answer. I will come back to you on the concerns of some in that sector. Can you reassure the House that the Department is committed to implementing the recommendations and will assist with the growth of the integrated sector?

Mr Weir: I am committed to that sector and to every sector because it is important that every child is looked after. As such, there will be a range of decisions. Today, for example, I signed off on the transformation of a school in east Antrim to integrated status. We will try to support all pupils.

School Curriculum

T4. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to follow up on the Commissioner for Children and Young People's recommendation that relationships and sexuality education (RSE) become a mandatory part of the school curriculum. (AQT 1204/17-22)

Mr Weir: That will require a change in legislation. Leaving everything else aside, I suspect that that will not happen overnight. Internationally, when any subject is made mandatory in the curriculum, there is no real causal link of that being better taught than other subjects. There is a requirement for all schools to deliver RSE, and it is critical that we look at minimum standards. Consequently, and in light of the Gillen report, my officials and DOJ officials are working on a range of issues to see where minimum content should be. That is particularly focused on issues such as domestic abuse and consent. Those are critical. We adopt a cautious approach in making elements compulsory because that can sometimes crowd out other elements of the curriculum. Overall, Northern Ireland has benefited from flexibility on what can be delivered. That means that we can respond to changing events and changing necessities. That is an advantage of our system, as opposed to what happens in some other jurisdictions, where there is an attempt to impose from the top down.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his answer. He has touched on my follow-up question. The Assembly has already debated domestic abuse and sexual abuse on women and girls. Minister, do you agree that mandatory and standardised relationships and sexuality education will help

to educate our girls and boys and better equip them going into adulthood?

Mr Weir: As I indicated, it is beneficial to have a flexible approach to the curriculum. Minister Long and I met a month or so ago on the Gillen recommendations. We have started work for the two Departments to work closely together on those recommendations, most of which fall to DOJ but there is an overlap with Education. RSE is a requirement for all schools, but it is not simply a one-size-fits-all approach, because, depending on age and experience, there can be a differentiation. It is important to look at areas of minimum content, particularly to ensure that society reflects concerns about abuse, which lie beyond what is happening in the classroom but can transmit, unfortunately, from generation to generation in families, and a proper understanding and acceptance of consent. That is critical as we move ahead.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Dickson is not in his place.

Engage Programme

T6. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to confirm that the very successful Engage programme will continue for the rest of the term. (AQT 1206/17-22)

Mr Weir: We are waiting on final confirmation beyond that. The roll-out of the Engage programme, which equates to about £5.5 million for this term, will continue for the rest of the term. As part of that, we are looking to finalise the details for the school year 2021-22 and what will happen over the summer. As I indicated, it is important that the programme gives schools the opportunity to tailor what they are getting and to focus as much as possible on where they see the best interventions. Quite often, the best things are decided at grassroots level.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Department have the necessary budget to continue this programme into the next academic year?

Mr Weir: That is the aim, but, because it is a one-off costing, it is not directly baselined in the budget. Before the conclusion of the Budget exercise in March, Departments were asked to put in their bids for the pot of COVID money. As such, it has been agreed provisionally that money could be made available for the continuation through COVID of the Engage programme to allow it to run from September

onward. Similarly, as I indicated, the aim is also to have a level of academic and other interventions on the youth side during the summer.

3.30 pm

There may well have to be a further paper brought to the Executive very shortly so that they can confirm the exact details of the proposals, but, broadly speaking, the Department of Finance and the Executive as a whole have indicated support for the continuation of the programme through 2021-22.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. That concludes Question Time to the Minister of Education. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we return to the item of business that the House was considering before Question Time. Thank you.

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

Private Members' Business

Brexit: EU Card Transaction Fees

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly regrets the decision of Visa and Mastercard to increase, drastically, their fees for EU card transactions; notes that these increases are possible only because of Brexit and the subsequent loss of EU consumer protections; condemns this cynical exploitation of working people and small to medium-sized enterprises by big banks and card companies during a global pandemic; further notes that this extortionate increase will disproportionately impact border communities, which have already borne the brunt of Brexit; and urges the British Government to reverse these increases through legislation to regulate interchange fees on EU transactions. — [Dr Archibald.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after the second "Brexit;" and insert:

"recognises that the United Kingdom's ability to regulate charges on cross-border transactions is limited; calls on the UK Government to reinstate the previous cap on interchange fees within their regulatory authority; and further calls on the UK Government to engage with the European Union to reach an agreement on interchange fee caps on UK-EU and EU-UK card transactions as part of wider efforts to ease the trading frictions caused by Brexit." — [Mr Dickson.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members, we are not entirely quorate, but we can start anyway. We left off just before Question Time, and Andrew Muir will now be called. Andrew, this is your opportunity to wind on the amendment, and you have five minutes to do so.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I intend to summarise in the five minutes some of my views on the debate and some of the comments that were made. I will support the motion and the amendment.

For decades, Eurosceptics in the UK told us that all we ever got from Brussels was bureaucracy and bendy bananas. The reality is that we got better consumer and environmental

protection, workers' rights and more. Brexiteers promised that those protections and rights would be maintained and even strengthened after we left the EU. Remainers warned that the core proponents of the Brexit project had exactly the opposite interests at heart.

Brexit was sold as a victory for the ordinary people over the Establishment. The reality is that, by leaving the world's largest economic and regulatory bloc, we are far more exposed to the powers of supersized multinational corporations.

The post-Brexit increase in interchange fees by Visa and MasterCard will hit the pockets of ordinary people hard. I am glad to see this issue brought before the Northern Ireland Assembly today. This payment duopoly's combined revenue last year was greater than the spending power of the entire Northern Ireland Civil Service. The EU, as the world's largest economic bloc, was able to bring these giants to heel with the cap, in the interests of consumers. Brexit has allowed Visa and MasterCard to take back control and quintuple their charges for cross-border transactions to 1.5%. We are starting to see the impact on consumers of leaving the world's largest economic and regulatory bloc. Whilst I agree that the UK must use its powers to cap interchange fees on cross-border transactions, we recognise the reality that those powers are limited. As well as using its own power, the UK should engage with the EU in efforts to reach a reciprocal agreement to reflect the status quo that was in place prior to Brexit.

Since 1 January this year, the Alliance Party has been calling for practical solutions to the very real problems caused by Brexit, as my colleague Stewart Dickson outlined earlier. We have called for mutually agreed extensions to grace periods, a veterinary agreement to reduce the need for sanitary and phytosanitary checks, and practical solutions to the issue of groupage. We can add the issue of interchange fees to the long list of things that need to be dealt with. However, given the direction of travel of the UK's relationship with the EU over the past few months, I do not hold out much hope.

As I wind up on the amendment, I do have to recall, in relation to some of the comments made through the debate about the Brexit deal that we have at present, that the DUP did have an opportunity to shape that deal over many years while it was part of a confidence-and-supply agreement with Theresa May, but it failed to do that and left us with a hard Brexit. The situation that we are debating regarding credit card fees is Brexit. The protocol is Brexit.

Despite Mr Frew saying that the protocol is nothing to do with Brexit, here, in Northern Ireland, we are living with the consequences of Brexit, and to blame those who opposed Brexit and warned of its consequences is, frankly, ludicrous. Another comment was made, by Mr Stalford, in relation to the:

"house and shed being on fire"

and blaming us for tabling a motion on this. In relation to the challenges being posed and arising from Brexit, the question has to be asked: who bought the petrol, and who thought it was a good idea to pour that over our economy? It was not the Remainers.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: While I do not accept all the analogy, does the Member agree with me that it is at least progress that certain DUP Members at least acknowledge now that the shed is on fire?

Mr Muir: It is indeed, and they have to take responsibility for the outcome of Brexit.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way. We have been lectured a lot about dialling down the rhetoric. At this time, it is not appropriate to talk about sheds, fire and getting the petrol. It is foolish language.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. He was not here earlier during the debate when his colleague actually raised the issues.

As Mr O'Toole outlined, we are living with the impact of services not being included as part of the Brexit deal. John Stewart also referred to the fact that this is unjustifiable profiteering and that it is unacceptable. I entirely agree with him. Sinead McLaughlin and Stewart Dickson raised the issue of roaming charges: they are a significant issue and, as we have seen in Finland, they are already looking at bringing those in from May. We are living with the consequences of Brexit. Pat Catney made a remark about the impact of charges on border consumers and businesses. That is the real impact of Brexit. What we need to do is find solutions, going forward, in response to the hard Brexit being pursued by the United Kingdom Government.

Mr O'Dowd: I rise to wind on the motion and on the amendment, which we are accepting. A clear message needs to be sent out to all those who have power to change what is planned here. They should change it. We are particularly speaking to Governments, whether they be the Government in the UK, in Brussels, or wherever they may be. We are also particularly speaking to MasterCard and Visa, which have said that they will put their hands into the pockets of consumers and small businesses and take out their hard-earned money. Those institutions are hugely profitable. It is not as if they have hit hard times or that things are difficult for them.

In proposing the motion, Caoimhe Archibald pointed out that, since the EU acted in 2017 to protect consumers through interchange fee regulations, it is estimated that €2.6 billion of savings have been made by merchants and businesses across the EU. That is worth noting. Savings in the UK are somewhere in the region of £480 million a year.

These are all our constituents who will be asked to pay extra fees. For what exactly, nobody knows. It would appear, certainly to me as an onlooker, that those major financial institutions have taken the opportunity of the UK leaving the EU to earn more money. We have seen examples of that throughout the transition period and, indeed, throughout the Brexit debate, where there have been significant enough rumours, suggestions and facts to show that many bet on hedge funds and made tens of millions of pounds out of Brexit. Here come two more significant financial institutions that think, "We will have a bit of that".

Some of the contributions to the debate, particularly those from the DUP Members opposite, can be summed up as follows: that our side of the House does not care about the protocol. That is not true. It simply is not true. We are prepared to work with anyone in or beyond the Chamber to ensure that we have a smooth running of the protocol and that those areas that need to be challenged or changed can be. We will support others in doing that work. It is therefore unfair to suggest that there is a deafness on this side of the House to genuine concerns that are being raised in some quarters.

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will certainly.

Dr Archibald: I reiterate your point, but it also seems that there is a deafness from the other side of the House to acknowledging the impact

of Brexit. We have seen the collapse in exports from Britain to Europe and financial institutions leaving London. Apparently, that is all the fault of the protocol.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, and that brings me on to my next point. During the Brexit debate, Members opposite spent far too long speaking to English nationalists rather than Irish nationalists. If they had spoken to Irish nationalists, they would have found friend and favour. The Brexit agenda that was set elsewhere was never designed for the island of Ireland. Regardless of your beliefs — whether you are unionist, nationalist, republican, other or whatever else — it was somebody else's agenda, to which some people here foolishly hitched their wagon. We now have the result of that, and Brexit will cost consumers here more. The protocol and Brexit are the one thing. The protocol does not cover the services issues being discussed, but it is there as a result of Brexit.

Mr Muir quite rightly pulled up Mr Frew when Mr Frew said that there are many ways in which to leave the EU. There were many ways in which to leave the EU, but, unfortunately, you chose the hardest way. Your chief Brexiteer — the brigadier in charge of Brexit — Nigel Dodds, who was setting your strategy in Westminster, led you to a position in which we now have a protocol and extra credit card charges for many citizens, and in which, as Jemma Dolan pointed out, there is the potential for workers' rights to be lessened. All those things flow from one situation.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I notice that the tone and the tenor of language are beginning to change again. It does not take the House long to forget what was said in the Chamber last week about respect and the way in which we use language. The Member is using language that is not helpful. He made accusations about us not hearing, about brigadiers and all of that. There are no brigadiers in the DUP. You may have to look in other places to find them.

Does the Member accept that the one thing that he keeps forgetting is that this was a democratic decision by the United Kingdom, of which we are a part, and that that democratic mandate gave the UK the right to leave the European Union? Sinn Féin is a party that always talks about "one man, one vote", but it seems that that applies only when it suits it.

3.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: I do not want to distract too much from the issue at hand — the credit card rip-off being governed by major financial institutions — but Members have to accept that something is wrong. This is not Finchley, and it is not Finglas. We have a constitution, by way of the Good Friday Agreement, and that is how we govern ourselves. When decisions are made or strategies developed elsewhere that do not meet the needs of the people on this island, particularly in relation to Brexit, the responsibility of political leaders on this island is to represent the people of this island. I stand by my comments that there was not engagement between unionism and Irish nationalism.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I am not giving way any more. The bright lights of London and the popping of champagne corks in Westminster distracted the party opposite from the people it is in partnership with on this part of the island. That is what happened, and that is how we ended up where we are in relation to the protocol and Brexit, which are the one thing.

Imagine that there was no protocol and that we were dragged out of the EU customs union and single market etc as Britain has been. My colleague Caoimhe Archibald touched on that. Economic harm is being done to traders, businesses, workers and families in Britain as a result of Brexit, and you cannot blame the protocol for that. Economic harm is being done to workers and families in Britain as a result of the added costs that they will face due to the credit card and debit card charge increases. You cannot blame the protocol for that. There will have to be an acceptance, in certain quarters, of where the problem is. When you accept what the problem is, you can try to solve it.

I stand by what I said at the start of the debate: we are prepared to work with any party in the Chamber to ensure that the pressures that have arisen as a result of Brexit, whether the protocol, or whatever else they may be, can be resolved. However, we are also insisting that the opportunities that come about as a result of Brexit are exploited, and that, where there is an opportunity to create jobs, new businesses and prosperity for the people we serve, they have to be exploited. There can be no turning of blind eyes to them. They have to be exploited so that we can ensure that the people we represent are given good, well-paid jobs and have a future. Let us do that together.

In conclusion, the motion and the amendment are about protecting workers, families and

businesses from being ripped off by large credit card companies that see an opportunity to make tens of millions of pounds, as a result of Brexit, on the backs of hard-working families and businesses. It is only right that the Assembly stands as one and supports the motion and the amendment. I note that the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party have said that they will not divide the House. I welcome that; that is good. It sends out a strong message. It also allows us to look at other areas where we can work together to ensure that the people we represent are not being ripped off.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly regrets the decision of Visa and MasterCard to increase, drastically, their fees for EU card transactions; notes that these increases are possible only because of Brexit and the subsequent loss of EU consumer protections; condemns this cynical exploitation of working people and small to medium-sized enterprises by big banks and card companies during a global pandemic; further notes that this extortionate increase will disproportionately impact border communities, which have already borne the brunt of Brexit; recognises that the United Kingdom's ability to regulate charges on cross-border transactions is limited; calls on the UK Government to reinstate the previous cap on interchange fees within their regulatory authority; and further calls on the UK Government to engage with the European Union to reach an agreement on interchange fee caps on UK-EU and EU-UK card transactions as part of wider efforts to ease the trading frictions caused by Brexit.

Adjourned at 4.49 pm.

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