



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 October 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The first item of business in the Order Paper is a motion on Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Dr Steve Aiken replace Mr John Stewart as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr Butler.]

Executive Committee Business

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion to suspend Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4). I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 19 October 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses

Mr Speaker: The next two motions are to approve the Supply Resolution for the Main Estimates 2020-21 and the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion and then call on the Minister of Finance to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record. I will call the Minister to move it, and the Question will be put on that motion. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £4,757,631,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying

the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £4,791,050,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £112,618,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 and that resources, not exceeding £183,290,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four and a half hours for this debate. The Minister will have 30 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and making his winding-up speech. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes. I call on the Minister to open the debate on the motion. Gabh ar aghaidh.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As you set out, the debate covers the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2020-21, which is the current financial year, and the Statement of Excesses for the 2016-2017 financial year. The Main Estimates and the

Statement of Excesses were laid in the Assembly on Tuesday 13 October 2020.

I will take a few moments to remind the Assembly about the unusual steps that we took in May and June that have resulted in the Main Estimates being brought forward. The fast-evolving response to COVID-19 in the first months of this financial year meant that it was not possible to prepare and present the Main Estimates reflecting the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans. The allocations that were made in response to the COVID-19 emergency vastly increased the planned expenditure of a number of Departments. Any Estimates document that was produced at that stage would have been obsolete before it could be brought to the Assembly. In addition, it could not have passed and received Royal Assent in time. Instead, I sought the Assembly's approval for a further Vote on Account in order to provide authority for Departments to continue to operate through the initial COVID-19 response period. That was passed by the Assembly as the Budget (No. 2) Act (NI) 2020, and it gave Departments the authority to access the cash that they would require to continue to deliver services and to respond to the developing COVID situation until the autumn.

Following the Executive's decision and allocations for economic recovery, which I announced on 24 September, the financial position has now stabilised sufficiently to allow my Department to produce the Main Estimates for the Assembly to consider together with the corresponding legislation in the form of the Budget (No. 3) Bill, which I will introduce following the debate. These Main Estimates represent the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans and include all the allocations that I announced in response to the ongoing COVID situation. Since the COVID emergency began, the Executive have allocated over £1.7 billion in additional resources in capital. Those are unprecedented levels of allocations. The detail of those allocations are a matter of public record and are published on my Department's website.

As well as considering the Main Estimates for 2020-21, I am also able to bring the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses to the Assembly. Members may remember that it was not possible for the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) to be passed by the Assembly in February and March 2017 following the collapse of the Assembly. One of the consequences of that was that those Departments that received in-year allocations during the 2016-2017 financial year were not

able to receive legislative authority for that expenditure.

While the Department of Finance was able to use its contingency powers to ensure that the Departments were able to get access to the cash necessary for them to continue to deliver services, those powers do not remove the need for the expenditure to be regularised through a Budget Bill. With one exception, those Excesses would not have occurred had it been possible for the spring Supplementary Estimates to be passed that year. The one exception to that is an element of £2.22 million related to the health and social care pension scheme. That Excess came about due to an underestimation of current service costs because updated figures were not available at that time.

Normally, a Statement of Excesses would be brought to the Assembly the year after the expenditure was incurred, but, to do so, the matter first needs to be considered by the Assembly Public Accounts Committee, and that has been possible only this year. I am pleased to say that the Public Accounts Committee has now carried out its consideration of the 2016-2017 Excesses and has recommended that they should now be regularised through the Statement of Excesses and their inclusion in the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

This has been an unprecedented year, and we have had to adopt novel approaches to respond in an agile manner to the impact that COVID has had on our public finances. We are now in a position to bring the Budget legislation back to its normal footing. I request the support of Members for the resolution for the Main Estimates 2020-2021, which together with the Budget (No. 3) Bill — we will debate that tomorrow — will enable services to continue to be funded for the remainder of this financial year together with the resolution on the Statement of Excesses for 2016-17 in order to regularise these outstanding sums.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his statement so far. As the Minister highlighted, the Main Estimates and Budget Bill are traditionally brought forward much earlier in the financial year. However, given the unprecedented events arising from the pandemic and its impact on our associated spending, that was delayed to ensure that departmental positions are accurately reflected in the Estimates, with the most up-to-date position.

Senior departmental officials briefed the Committee for Finance at its meeting last Wednesday on the Main Estimates and the associated Budget (No. 3) Bill. In advance of the meeting, the Department of Finance provided the Committee with a briefing paper, together with advance copies of the Estimates and the Bill. In examining the Main Estimate position, the Committee questioned officials to establish whether specific business areas might be at increased risk of underspend, particularly as a result of the pandemic, including the scale of any underspend and how that may affect the overall agreed limits under the Budget exchange scheme. In response, officials clarified that the Department closely monitors the overall Budget position on a monthly basis to ensure that overall spending is within permitted limits and that Departments declare any reduced requirements as early as possible to enable those to be considered and, where necessary, reallocated in-year by the Executive. In addition, following the Minister's oral statement on 6 October that called for greater flexibility from Her Majesty's Treasury, the Committee sought an assurance from officials that any areas of underspend will be surrendered early in this financial year to safeguard against it being lost to Her Majesty's Treasury in the event that any additional flexibility is not provided.

Officials also highlighted the fact that additional flexibility could provide an option to see a more dynamic response to any last-minute changes late in the financial year and to respond to any emerging pressures. Given that the Budget exchange scheme has been operating for 10 years now, it would be helpful to hear the Minister's assessment of whether the scheme remains fit for purpose and whether there are any plans or proposals to review it.

As Members will also be aware, financial transactions capital (FTC) is an area of borrowing that, in the past, has been challenging, to say the least, for the Executive to utilise fully. The Committee noted that some £70 million of the 2020-21 FTC provision has not yet been allocated. It therefore questioned officials to ascertain how FTC could be best utilised in order to provide loans or equity to private-sector entities as a means of driving the economy forward. In response, officials acknowledged that the Department for the Economy is aware of the available provision of FTC. However, it is not clear what plans may be in development to identify how that may be made available to private entities as an alternative source of finance.

Furthermore, members explored whether consideration may be given to utilising reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing to supplement any transfer capital in the event of Her Majesty's Treasury allowing flexibility to transfer capital DEL to resource. In response, officials outlined the position for the 2020-21 financial year, where there has been no RRI borrowing. Officials conceded that that could be an area for consideration but that borrowing would need to be balanced to take account of the repayment element of resource spending. Again, it would be helpful if the Minister outlined what the current repayment element is on RRI borrowing and whether the cost is met centrally or by the responsible Department.

The Committee also explored in detail the provisions under sole authority where spending may be allocated. The Committee was previously informed that that black-box spending occurs when it is for relatively small levels of expenditure below £1.5 million, for a relatively short period of not more than two years or to allow an urgent service to be delivered pending the development of new legislation. The Committee noted that the Main Estimates contain black-box provisions on six areas of spend that total over £58 million and sought to ensure that the criteria are being adhered to. The Committee noted that, in some instances, that expenditure either exceeds the small levels of expenditure, as in the case of welfare reform mitigation, and/or exceeds the two-year short period, as seen for supporting the operations of HMS Caroline. In response to questions from members, officials acknowledged that that was due to the inability to bring forward legislation as the Assembly was not sitting. However, in the case of Northern Ireland Screen, members questioned officials on the continued use of that provision as contained in the Main Estimates in view of the Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020, which provides for the Department for the Economy to make grants. In response, officials confirmed that, going forward, that funding would not use the black-box provisions.

However, for this financial year, a proportion will be contained under sole authority to take account of the period prior to the order coming into effect.

12.15 pm

To gain a clearer understanding of how that process works and to satisfy itself that there are sufficient controls in place to ensure that

spending under sole authority is used appropriately, the Committee requested further information from the Department on the conditions attached to each area of spend. I had hoped to have the information in time to inform today's debate. I ask the Minister to provide that information to the Committee's office as soon as possible, so that I can update the House tomorrow during debate on the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

Turning to the Statement of Excesses, at its meeting on 16 September, the Committee considered the recent report from the Public Accounts Committee and noted its recommendation that the necessary amounts are provided by the Assembly.

The Committee also noted that the Northern Ireland Audit Office is undertaking an examination of the budgetary process. We look forward to seeing the conclusion of that work, including any conclusions or recommendations from the Comptroller and Auditor General. I also look forward to hearing from the Minister how the report will be used to inform his Department's ongoing review of the financial process.

As the House is aware, the Committee for Finance has a specific function to play when considering whether a Budget Bill should proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. I place on record my appreciation, on behalf of the Committee, for the timely receipt of information to help us to determine whether the Committee would be content to grant accelerated passage to the Budget (No. 3) Bill that is due to be introduced later in today's business. I cannot overstate how important it is that relevant, complete and timely information is provided by government to the Assembly and its Committees to help to provide for a more comprehensive dialogue and a greater understanding of what is quite a convoluted process. In that regard, the Committee and the Department are on the same page. I urge all Departments and scrutiny Committees to actively engage throughout the year. It was on that basis and on the regular and timely engagement that the Committee agreed, at its meeting last week, that it is content to grant accelerated passage, as provided for in Standing Order 42(2).

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee for Infrastructure's consideration of and views on the motions before us today, specifically on how this impacts the Department for Infrastructure and its ability to carry out its responsibilities.

Scrutiny of the budget for the Department for Infrastructure — one of the Executive's largest spenders — is taken seriously by the Committee. However, the Committee regrets that there are still so many unknowns, including the ongoing pressures caused by the pandemic.

The 2020-21 Main Estimates provides £1·027 billion net resource for the Department for Infrastructure and £1·139 billion net cash requirement. Those figures are up substantially, by 23%, from the previous year. As I have mentioned on similar occasions, the financial situation faced by the Department is stark and has been exacerbated by the pandemic's impact. That position was reiterated during the Committee's scrutiny of the departmental budget on 30 September and in ministerial briefings when budget pressures were also discussed.

The Department outlined that its 2020-21 resource budget allocation was £417·9 million, up by £33 million from the previous year, and capital was £558 million, up £89 million from 2019-2020. Officials have provided the Committee with a rationale for October monitoring bids. That excludes the Department's bids for the mitigation of the impact of COVID-19, which is through a separate process.

The October monitoring bids include £3 million to fund a winter service programme in this financial year. The £3 million includes salt, fuel, overtime and shift allowances and maintenance of the gritting fleet. The other £1·6 million is for staff carrying over more holidays than usual this year due to the pandemic. Departmental officials explained that, while that is an issue across government, the significant pressures that remain in the Department mean that it cannot meet the cost from its existing budget.

With respect to capital funding, the Department has outlined its bid for an additional £9·1 million across a range of capital projects. The Department for Infrastructure has advised the Committee that COVID has created a number of accounting challenges. For many of its capital projects, the projected spend for 2020-21 was estimated down as lockdown took hold and work on many projects stalled. However, work has recommenced and, to a large extent, caught up on initial expectations. That has led to the Department having to ask for money back that it had been quick to surrender going into lockdown.

The Belfast transport hub is one such project. At the budget briefing on 30 September,

officials explained that, in early April, the estimated expenditure for the Belfast transport hub project was reported as being £19·8 million to £21·4 million on the basis of projected delays of four to six months respectively due to the impact of COVID-19. The project was delayed to a lesser extent than was predicted, however, and, as a result, the estimated spend has increased to £22 million. Translink has requested additional funding of £1·6 million to meet that requirement.

Also in the Department's £9·1 million capital bid is a request for £5·5 million for structural road maintenance and safety measures. As I have said in the House previously, the cost of annual maintenance of our road network in order to maintain its structural integrity has been estimated at £143 million. For this financial year, £75 million has been allocated, which is a reduced amount, given restrictions placed on carrying out work during the pandemic. Once more, however, the impact on work has not been as significant as was thought, and the Department has made a bid for £4·5 million for remedial works following Storm Francis. The remaining £1 million bid for road maintenance is for the Department to take forward some limited minor works; local transport and safety measures, including traffic-signal upgrades; some localised road-widening works and crash barriers; and bridge-strengthening schemes.

The Department also provided the Committee with details of its scheme to replace old street lighting, outlining how it is responsible for almost 300,000 street lights, 13% of which have passed their working life of 40 years. To address the backlog, the Department has calculated that it will require £74 million. Some £14 million has been allocated this year, which will maintain the current position but not address the backlog. The Department has a bid in for £1 million to allow it to replace some 500 street lights that are past their working life.

The Department has also outlined its COVID recovery bids, which were submitted separately under the COVID and economic recovery exercise. The Department has asked for £36·6 million to mitigate a range of lost revenue as a consequence of the pandemic, including Translink passenger revenue and parking charges.

During the Committee's budget briefing, members queried why bids had not been submitted for Northern Ireland Water, given the continuing financial challenges that it faces. Officials noted that the £27 million that Northern Ireland Water received for COVID mitigation in

September monitoring covered its resource pressures at that time.

Mr Speaker, I ask your indulgence to raise the issue of a financial package that is being considered for the taxi, coach and haulage sectors. The Department has said that it is still working through the possible costs of such a scheme. There is severe hardship and concern amongst those sectors, and some clarity would help assuage fears, particularly as we move through a period of tighter restrictions. I raise that only to request that arrangements for the scheme be expedited in order to be implemented as soon as possible.

The Committee for Infrastructure will continue its scrutiny of the Department for Infrastructure budget.

Dr Archibald: This is an unusual budgetary year. Tomorrow, we will debate our third Budget Bill, and today, in October, we are discussing the Main Estimates for the year. COVID-19 has had a huge impact on our society. First and foremost, it is a human tragedy with grave implications for public health. It has also created an evolving economic crisis that is likely to be greater than any experienced in recent times. The COVID crisis has meant, in budgetary terms, that we have had to react, react and react again, and that is unlikely to change soon. The economic impact and recession that we face will now be deeper and longer than what was hoped for back in March or April.

The second wave that was predicted by clinicians and scientists is now being felt across the world and here at home. The substantial interventions that came from the British Government early in the pandemic are beginning to be switched off at a time when cases of COVID-19 are rising at an alarming rate and restrictions are being reimposed. While some will ask, "How will we pay for it?", I ask how we do anything other than try to protect businesses and jobs and workers' and families' incomes and livelihoods here and now. The ending of the furlough scheme is premature, and I know that the Minister agrees with me on that. Its replacement — the job support scheme — will not protect jobs, and, going on the numbers of people in the North who are still furloughed or partially furloughed, there will be thousands of redundancies.

The extended job support scheme announced for businesses ordered to close was a welcome intervention, but guaranteeing only 67% of the income of someone who is on minimum wage is not enough to ensure that families can put food

on the table and pay their bills. The assertion from the British Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, that it can be topped up by universal credit may be technically correct but is absurd. That will put additional pressure on our social security system, which is already under pressure. It would be much better to ensure an adequate wage rather than additional administrative costs and burdens to the system.

I urge the Minister to keep the pressure on the British Treasury. I know that he has done so and will keep doing so because many businesses and families face very difficult circumstances, and, as we all know, our economy and the health of our people are interlinked. There is no trade-off: we need to do both.

The Main Estimates put DFE's budget at more than £462 million greater than last year. That is due, in part, to the huge amount that has been allocated by the Executive to date to business support and other COVID allocations. Those have been vital interventions to support business, protect jobs and support further and higher education institutes, students and research. Despite many having received support, many others have remained excluded. The Minister has previously outlined that he is open to considering any bids from Ministers to support those excluded groups, and he has urged Ministers to bring those forward. I hope that they will listen and respond to the need out there.

I want to ask the Minister about the flexibility available to Departments and Ministers in the distribution of the allocations. For example, if funding is allocated for business support for recovery and there is a need to respond to the situation that we are in now, is there flexibility to utilise that funding in a slightly different way to support businesses in meeting the immediate need that people face? When officials briefed the Committee for the Economy on Wednesday, they indicated that they had been engaging with Department of Finance officials around that and that that would be the case. I would like the Minister to address that point.

According to the Main Estimates, Invest NI, which usually has an annual budget of around £100 million, has been allocated £430 million this year. That is a huge allocation, and it is vital that we see real, effective results. Frankly, Minister, I have some concerns in that regard. Economic development needs to be about the whole economy and not just cater for a select few. I put it to Invest NI in Committee, a couple of weeks ago, that there is a lack of information forthcoming about what shapes the business

supports that we have seen. There are numerous support schemes, but why do they target the ones that they do? Why have other groups been missed out? The sole traders, for example, had their hopes raised that they would be able to access the Invest NI-administered hardship fund, only to have those hopes dashed. To date, there has been no support forthcoming for that group.

Social enterprise is another category that did not pique the interest of Invest; instead, the Minister for Communities had to pick up that group, despite it not being her remit. Similarly, taxi drivers and coach operators are of no interest to Invest. One of the latest schemes, which was announced about a fortnight ago, will see consultants pick up about £8,000 to help businesses make financial plans. I can tell you, Minister, that I hear from businesses that they do not want support for consultants; they want cash support.

There needs to be a real conversation about the role and remit of Invest NI as our economic development agency. If we look at the measure of effectiveness of Invest over the past decade, the fact that we have the lowest economic growth and productivity across these islands speaks for itself. If we want to shape a truly transformative economic recovery that will address the structural issues in our local economy, it needs to be about the whole economy, supporting our SMEs during these difficult times, developing local supply chains and supporting indigenous businesses to develop new and innovative ways to create a greener, fairer and more equal economy. It needs to do more than pay lip service to addressing regional imbalances and inequalities.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on Brexit. Most people across the North were utterly dismayed by the comments of the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, on Friday, when he suggested that we were heading for a no-deal outcome to the future arrangements negotiations. You will agree — I am sure that most here will — that having no trade deal will be disastrous for individuals, businesses and communities across the North. The prospect that, in 73 days, businesses will be expected to operate in an as yet unknown trading environment, with assistance for VAT, labelling requirements, checks and tariffs having not yet been worked out, is deeply concerning.

12.30 pm

Business representatives have consistently called for certainty and highlighted the need for

a trade deal to minimise trade friction. The Minister has been in discussions with, and made representations on Brexit funding to, the British Government. However, if we are heading towards a no-deal outcome, it is important that additional support will be forthcoming from the Treasury to help our businesses and communities to prepare and respond to the immediate impact that will hit in January. People here did not choose Brexit and should not have to foot the bill for the Tories' disastrous, short-sighted folly.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): In April, the Committee heard evidence from departmental officials on the pressures that the Executive Office had identified and the budget allocation made by the Executive. It also heard evidence from officials on the June and October monitoring rounds.

Budget scrutiny is one of the statutory responsibilities of a Committee, and we take it seriously. Throughout the budgetary process, we need to look in detail at the spend, the pressures and the easements. However, to do that, the Committee needs to be provided with the right information at the right time. The Committee experienced some issues in getting budgetary information on time. This matter was raised by the Finance Committee, and we welcome the commitment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to endeavour to adhere to the Department of Finance's guidelines on providing timely financial responses in future.

The Committee appreciates that the budget process can throw up issues that require political engagement and take time to resolve. However, for the Committee's part, budget scrutiny must be robust and timely. We do not need a rerun of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) debacle. The Executive Office received an uplift in its 2020-21 budget of over 72% on the previous year, primarily due to the inclusion of ring-fenced funding of £37.5 million for historical institutional abuse payments. We now know that, due to a delay in getting the redress panels into full operation, an easement of £10 million has been identified in the October monitoring round. The Committee hopes that £1.5 million of that easement can be used to meet the non-ring-fenced COVID-19 pressures being faced by the Department.

Funding for the redress of victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse continues to be a priority for the Committee. The redress board has made excellent progress, and, by the end of September, determinations totalling £4.1

million had been made. We need to see similar progress being made to secure a commitment from the institutions and religious orders to contribute to the cost of compensation. Estimates of the cost of the scheme range from £149 million at the lower end to £668 million at the upper end. There simply is not scope to fund the scheme entirely from the block grant. Apart from that, these institutions and religious orders have a moral duty to help to compensate the victims and survivors, who have waited all this time to get redress for the dreadful abuse that they experienced and for their continued suffering. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister are to meet with the institutions and others, and I hope that we will see financial commitments being made very soon.

That leads me to another area where we do not have the means to meet the costs. In the June monitoring round, the Executive Office received £2.5 million for the administrative costs of victims' payments. That was welcomed, and it allowed work on the administration structures to commence. As we all know, the Department of Justice will administer the scheme. We cannot get away from the costs that might or might not lie ahead of us. The truth of the matter is that we do not know how much the victims' payment scheme will cost, and, even more worryingly, we do not know how the costs will be met.

The story of the victims' payment scheme is similar to that of the historical institutional abuse payments, in that there are wide-ranging cost estimates. The estimated cost in year 1 ranges from £25 million at the lower end to £60 million at the upper end, and the scheme is estimated to cost £109 million in its initial three-year period. The figures are staggering, but, no doubt, they will become even more staggering once the further financial modelling has been completed. Officials are working hard to try to estimate the likely costs, and the Committee appreciates that it is a tough job because of the many variables. Members are absolutely clear that Westminster should foot the bill. That is not a departure from normal practice; it is in line with the Treasury's policy that the Department that makes the policy should bear its cost. The Committee welcomes the dialogue between Ministers here and in Westminster to try to get the funding needed for the scheme. I sincerely hope that it is resolved sooner rather than later for the sake of the victims, who have already waited far too long.

Despite identifying pressures, the Executive Office did not receive an allocation for COVID in the budget. However, it received £0.5 million in the June monitoring round to cover the cost of work with the press. Following the June

monitoring round, the residual COVID pressure stood at £2.2 million, but, in October, that had increased to £3.4 million because of consultancy costs for data analytics. Whilst we appreciate that data analytics are crucial in the fight against the pandemic, there is a concern that consultants are being paid huge amounts of money because there is not the capacity in the Civil Service to deliver that work, and that is something that should be addressed going forward.

I will now make a few remarks in my capacity as an SDLP MLA. I wish to highlight that lots of the spending in Northern Ireland in the past period has been focused on coronavirus, and rightly so, but much of the spending through COVID has been bits and pieces and could be characterised as reactionary, haphazard and devoid of a strategy. That needs to be addressed, especially with the Minister's Executive colleague the Economy Minister. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that there are many other priorities that need to be addressed as well. We have the impending doom of Brexit and the almighty harm that it will unleash on businesses here in the North. That will be a double-edged sword if there is no deal, and, from the soundings over the weekend, that looks altogether more likely. However, I note that we really are the experts on elongated negotiations and pushing matters to the wire.

Many of the budget lines and commentaries in these Estimates reference pressures due to Brexit and income loss as a result. Many communities and organisations across the North urgently require clarification and guidance. There is a real task ahead of us rebuilding our economy after COVID and Brexit and shaping it into the type of economy that delivers for local businesses in the context of the global neighbourhood and utilises our excellent natural resources as well as our skills base.

The Department for the Economy needs to be strategic and planned in its interventions, not just reactionary. To set that in context, we now have, at long last, the commitment to the Magee school of medicine in Derry. I hope that it will be delivered soon, with fewer young people leaving our shores for their degree pathway and more medics staying here and having greater opportunities for advancement in their careers here at home. That work must begin with the Executive Office delivering a strategy. It is the Department that is supposed to drive the institutions of government here and ensure genuine cohesion of purpose. I look forward to hearing the contributions from other Members, but let us not lose sight of

putting the people of the North at the heart of our discussions. A firm resolve to work in unity for all our people is our primary objective and, ultimately, our role in this Chamber.

Mr Muir: I speak today in my position as finance spokesperson for the Alliance Party. I am conscious that we have the Budget (No. 3) Bill tomorrow, so I will try not to be repetitive about issues that will be raised tomorrow. I thank the Minister for bringing the motions before the Assembly today. I also thank and pay tribute to the officials across all the Departments who have worked to produce the Main Estimates. I appreciate the amount of work that has gone into the process this year more than ever.

I recognise the context behind the 2016-17 excesses, and the Chair of the Finance Committee mentioned some key issues pertaining to those. The reasons why these institutions collapsed have often been debated, and I do not intend to add to that debate today.

In respect of the 2020-21 Main Estimates, it is vital that Northern Ireland Departments have the legal authority to spend. They must spend to support our health service, the economy and wider public services that continue to be battered by COVID-19. The Main Estimates cover the period to the end of March next year. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions are likely to be with us throughout that time, pending the successful roll-out of an approved vaccine. The majority of the £2.4 billion that Northern Ireland has thus far received from Westminster in response to COVID-19 has already been spent. Much of what the Executive have distributed thus far has been a lifeline to businesses and individuals across Northern Ireland, as well as maintaining vital public services. Spending by Departments must be targeted so that support gets to where it needs to go.

I welcome the assistance announced for businesses that are experiencing loss of trade due to the latest set of restrictions, funded from additional Barnett consequentials. I am, however, deeply concerned that the same group that was excluded from support in the spring could be excluded once again. The Minister for the Economy must urgently bring forward measures to assist those who are excluded from the Land and Property Services (LPS) scheme announced last week. That includes sole traders and businesses that pay domestic rates or do not operate out of rateable premises. Those firms have been failed once already; it would be utterly unacceptable if they were failed again. We heard this morning from

private coach operators about the support that they require. They belong to one of many different sectors that need that assistance. I agree with the Chair of the Economy Committee that businesses need assistance — not consultants to tell them how bad it is.

Secondly, Ministers must pick up the pace when it comes to rolling out support schemes. We appreciate the speed with which the LPS scheme was brought forward last week. However, I am deeply concerned that Northern Ireland still does not have a Kickstart scheme to support young people, given that such schemes were announced over three months ago in England, with the resultant Barnett consequentials. Talking of Barnett consequentials, my party and I are increasingly concerned that we could end up surrendering some of the additional Barnett consequentials at the end of the financial year, as a result of Departments' inability to bring forward bids and to spend the money allocated.

Finally, £2.4 billion is a colossal sum of money, but it is a drop in the ocean in comparison with the damage being wreaked by COVID-19. I continue to support the Minister of Finance in calling on the UK Government to give the Northern Ireland Executive the additional financial firepower required to enable us to fund further COVID-19 interventions. Allowing the Executive to borrow would enable additional financial flexibilities to provide the much-needed support to our NHS, the economy and vital public services. The devolved Administrations must be given the tools to respond to what has already been a tough autumn and what is likely to be an even more difficult winter.

I ask the Minister of Finance to provide an update on his conversations with Her Majesty's Treasury regarding borrowing powers for the Northern Ireland Executive. Furthermore, can he confirm whether, in addition to working with the Finance Ministers of the devolved Administrations, he has been in contact with regional leaders in England, who are also calling for further support from Westminster?

In conclusion, my party supports the motions today. Future spending by the Executive needs to be quick, targeted and sufficient to meet the scale of the challenges that we are presented with. The public in Northern Ireland need to feel confident that their Government have the tools and the willingness to do everything in their power to see us through these unprecedented times.

Mr Irwin: Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this matter today.

Indeed, I had hoped that, since the last discussions about expenditure, the economic outlook for the Departments, not least DAERA, would be discussed in a new era where restrictions around the COVID-19 virus were a little less stringent. However, that is not the case, and we in the Chamber and in the wider community must redouble our efforts to suppress the virus and allow a degree of normality to return within the shortest possible time frame, while, of course, having every regard to the health of people, in particular the health of our most vulnerable.

These are difficult times; we all recognise that. Once again, we find ourselves in the middle of a four-week restricted period. With that, come further significant financial pressures on our economy and, indeed, on Stormont budgets. These are unprecedented times, and they call for unprecedented measures. There certainly have been unprecedented measures delivered over the past few months through the furlough scheme, the various well-received COVID-19 grant schemes, be those the rating grants or sports grants, and the various measures for the provision of welfare benefits. That assistance has been absolutely crucial, and many, many hundreds of businesses are operating today because of it. I thank the Westminster Treasury and our Departments for that support.

The unknown factor is the length of time for which any such measures will be required, and that makes the issue of looking to the future and budgeting very difficult at this time. That having been said, it is vital that our government services continue and that we ensure that the process of governing continues across all Departments.

With regard to DAERA, I want to say that I am very proud of the agri-food industry and how it has operated under immense pressure throughout the pandemic. The resilience and energy shown by everyone involved in agriculture, both on the ground and in the industry and the Department, have meant that the Province's food requirements have been met and more.

12.45 pm

I thank and pay tribute to the AERA Minister, Edwin Poots MLA, who has shown an acute understanding of the industry and its needs throughout his tenure and, more importantly, throughout the current pandemic. There was significant pressure on him and his officials to come up with support schemes for agriculture, and those have been delivered and well received across the sectors. It is welcome that

the ornamental horticulture grant scheme is up and running, and I know that that will be of further assistance to the industry.

As I highlighted in a contribution earlier in the year, the House is clear that our agri-food industry has shown tremendous resilience throughout the pandemic. I salute all those in the industry who have kept the wheels of food production turning in difficult circumstances. That has been noted and appreciated.

DAERA staff also continue to work hard and have done so throughout the pandemic. The processing of basic farm payments has been another important and significant job of work. Something that is worthy of note is that the basic farm payments will, for the first time, be made in full this month. That is a significant achievement, especially in these days. Also important is that over 94% of payments, totalling £265.7 million, had been made by Friday past. I know that administration costs have always been a focus for DAERA, and I believe that important progress has been made in streamlining processing payments and the use of online systems, which have had tremendous uptake in the farming community. It certainly has assisted with this drive.

As I said, the future remains unclear, especially in the shorter term. On Brexit, the ongoing discussions regarding our Department and the European Union provide an element of uncertainty; however, I believe that brighter days are ahead and that farming outside the EU will bring opportunity. I have made my views well known at the Committee about the need for the legislation that will help to maintain and operate agriculture post Brexit to be dealt with in a timely and positive manner. I hope that Members who still harbour a dislike for the democratic result of the referendum will work for the good of the industry rather than against it. I support the motion.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Committee has been considering the DAERA budget on and off for the past eight or nine months. When we started our consideration, we could never have imagined something like COVID-19 and the impact that it would have on all parts of our society. That includes the impact on our agri-food industry and how DAERA has used its budget to respond to and deal with it.

I will start by referring to the additional agri-food COVID-19 funding that DAERA bid for and was successful in obtaining. We have every reason to be proud of our agri-food industry. It has kept

operating and kept the food supply chain running seamlessly during the worst of the lockdown and into this new phase, and we have every confidence that it will continue to do so in the coming months. For some, however, particularly the farmers, it has not been easy. We have an industry here that produces high-quality food that is exported all over the world. It has also been supplying the hospitality and catering industries, and it is that aspect that has taken a direct hit. Be it seafood, our grass-fed cattle and hill sheep or our local potatoes, the farmers have taken a body blow as the markets for their produce — the export and the home markets — have just disappeared. The AERA Minister made a bid for and received an additional £25 million for the agri-food sector. As I indicated, that was with the full support of the Committee. We, as a Committee, also took a specific interest in that funding and have helped to shape how it is distributed. We made a quick call for evidence and heard in writing from a large number of farmers and stakeholder groups about what was happening on the ground and what support was needed.

There are two schemes for the distribution of the £25 million support. The first, with the bulk of the money, is for the dairy, beef, sheep and potato farmers and accounts for £21.4 million. The dairy sector gets up to £11 million, while the beef sector gets £7 million. That scheme is now closed. The Committee was clear with the Department that the funding should be targeted at those who were most in need and had suffered most loss and that it should be equitable in its distribution. Some members still have concerns about the funding for beef cattle and whether enough was given to sheep farmers. However, we are all aware that we are not out of the woods when it comes to the financial impact on farmers. Further support may yet be needed in this financial year.

The second scheme is aimed at the ornamental horticulture sector and accounts for £1.6 million. That is the sector from which many of our vegetables, soft fruits and garden plants come. When the secondary legislation to provide authority to the Department to spend that money came to the Agriculture Committee, it had concerns with the requirement for those businesses to be VAT-registered. The ornamental horticulture sector has lots of small businesses, many of which are not VAT-registered and would not, therefore, be eligible to apply. I am glad to say that we, as a Committee, made strong representation to DAERA on that aspect and that the requirement for VAT registration has now been removed. That funding scheme opened recently, and applications are now being received by DAERA.

An additional £1.5 million is being made available to the fisheries sector. Recently, the Committee wrote to the Department to get an update on that funding.

The Main Estimates and Supply resolution will also show that some £3.8 million of COVID-19 funding has been allocated towards waste. Most of that was to help local authorities to cope with the closure of public amenity sites during lockdown and the resultant increase in fly-tipping.

The Committee was aware that the aquaculture sector was also suffering, so it was pleased to hear that £368,000 had been secured for it, with 80% of that coming from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

I will move on to the next major area of financial concern for the Committee and one to which we have recently turned our attention: the financial impact on DAERA of preparing for and delivering EU exit at the end of the transition period. In written briefings to the Committee, DAERA noted that it needed an additional 456 staff to support the wider delivery of Brexit and was actively working to fill those posts. However, there is no baseline funding for those staff. The Department, therefore, has flagged up to the Department of Finance a requirement of £25.6 million resource DEL to cover the full-year costs of those staff in 2021-22. Additional staffing may be required depending on the need for contingency arrangements.

Under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and the protocol, DAERA is required to implement the EU Official Controls Regulation. That includes sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks on regulated goods arriving at points of entry into the jurisdiction. The preparedness work includes physical facilities as well as IT systems and trained staff. It also requires reprioritising DAERA work programmes and the staff resource required to deliver post-transition official controls. DAERA had submitted a business case to the Treasury. In August, its business case to procure facilities for physical checks, with the aim of reducing the need for documentary and ID checks of goods to be carried out at points of entry, was successful. The costs for its preferred option are approximately £45 million, with £38 million required for upfront capital expenditure. Around £6 million of revenue will be required for recruiting, employing and training additional personnel and programme implementation costs.

Yet another major issue with EU exit is the future funding to replace current EU funding. As

Members are aware, the bulk of EU funding that comes to DAERA is paid out as direct payments to farmers. While the Committee welcomes the fact that funding of £293 million has been secured for 2020-21, it still has concerns about what will happen beyond that date. Recently, payments began to be issued to farmers, and DAERA was able to get some 94% of payments, totalling £265.7million, out on the first day. The payments will include a 4.3% linear increase on basic payment entitlements.

I also note that Penny Mordaunt MP, the Paymaster General, wrote to the devolved Administrations on 13 July 2020 confirming the British Government's manifesto commitment to maintain the current annual budgets for farming and fishing for the duration of the Parliament. That confirmation is welcomed as a starting point. However, the Committee recently received a letter, which it will consider this week, from the Minister of Finance to the Chair of the Finance Committee on EU funding. In that letter, the Finance Minister notes with regard to replacements for agriculture funding that, while the guarantee has been received from the British Government, there are concerns about how elements of the funding for that guarantee have been calculated and that that could result in a cut in support for rural communities. As I said, that is new information, and the Committee will have to decide how it wishes to take that forward.

The Committee has also expressed concerns about replacement funding for rural development —

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

Mr McAleer: Thank you for the opportunity to make this speech. In the Budget debate, I will speak in my capacity as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs.

Mr Humphrey (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): As Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, I will address the Supply resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses.

On 2 July and 8 July of this year, the Public Accounts Committee considered the reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General on the resource accounts of Departments that had exceeded the limits of expenditure authorised by the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is part of the Northern Ireland Assembly's control framework over government spending. It is the

role of the Public Accounts Committee to scrutinise the reasons behind each Department's excess of allocated resources and to report to the Assembly on whether it has any objections to making good the reported excesses.

The Committee reported to the Assembly on the Excess Votes (Northern Ireland) 2016-17 on 8 July 2020. I will outline the Committee's consideration of those Excess Votes. First, it is important to note that, due to the dissolution of the Assembly in January 2017, the process of considering the approval of the 2016-17 spring Supplementary Estimates by way of a Budget Bill could not take place. As a direct consequence, a number of Departments incurred resource and cash excesses. Specifically, in 2016-17, nine Departments incurred Excess Votes. Seven Departments incurred resource excesses totalling £183.12 million and six Departments incurred cash excesses totalling £112.62 million. There were no Excess Votes in 2015-16. The Committee noted that eight of those excesses were technical in nature, as the mechanism to regularise revised resource and cash requirements was not available to Departments. The Public Accounts Committee notes that, in the majority of cases, if the Assembly had been sitting, those Excesses could have been regularised in-year through the Supplementary Estimates process. The remaining case involved other budgetary issues that would have resulted in an Excess Vote even if the Assembly had approved the spring Supplementary Estimate.

The specific case was the Department of Health's Health and Social Care (HSC) pension scheme, which incurred a resource excess of £2.22 million because the current service cost figure used in the budgetary process had been underestimated as a result of the actual payroll details not being available at the time. We understand that the Department has advised the Comptroller and Auditor General that it will continue to liaise with the Government Actuary's Department to determine what further reviews can be carried out when the spring Supplementary Estimate forecast is being prepared. They will continue to work closely together to scrutinise forecasts to ensure that they are as robust as possible.

Having considered the reasons for the Excess Votes, the Committee recommends that the Assembly provides additional resources, as summarised for each Department or other public body in part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October

2020. However, it is important to stress that the scale of some of the excesses suggest to the Public Accounts Committee that there is room for greater precision in budget setting. We, therefore, welcome the fact that the Comptroller and Auditor General is conducting a separate investigation of the operation of the budgetary process in Northern Ireland. We look forward to the outcome of that work.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I welcome the opportunity to reflect on the Committee's considerations. Further to briefings that we received in April and June, the Health Committee was updated last week by departmental officials on this year's financial situation in Health and Social Care. Once again, our briefing was couched in terms of the ongoing uncertainty of the situation given the rising and ongoing COVID-19 pressures.

By way of overview, while the budget for 2020-21 saw a rise of 4.7% and the Department has benefited from subsequent in-year allocations, Members will be aware that significant pressures remain. Our lengthy waiting lists are well documented, most New Decade, New Approach transformation commitments remain unfunded, and the pressures on the system continue to rise.

1.00 pm

I will speak first about the resource budget. The 1%, or £50 million, savings target for trusts, previously flagged as risky, remains a significant challenge, not least in the context of coronavirus but also because of assumptions that previous savings would be recurrent, despite the Department's acknowledgement that there was little evidence to back that up. The Committee has now been advised that the Department is bidding for £15 million of additional resource to address around half of the projected unmet financial pressures in trusts. Officials did state, however, that there can at times be reduced demand towards the end of the financial year, and that may alleviate remaining pressures somewhat.

Upon the return of the Assembly, we were advised that £30 million was required to address red-flag and urgent cases of elective care, plus a further £50 million to clear the backlog of long-waiters, yet the Department sought and received only £10.3 million in June for that purpose, because of COVID pressure on capacity. It is now seeking a relatively small additional amount of £1.5 million.

The Committee has sought an updated projection of waiting times and hopes that the dedicated day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley Hospital will help ease some of the pressures. Pressures from staff costs have resulted in a further £6.7 million bid for resource for an inflationary pay increase being implemented across here, England, Scotland and Wales.

The Committee has been advised that, owing to a failure to secure end-year flexibility on funding for the Encompass project, the resulting requirement to absorb the £48 million cost from this year's capital budget has created unmet pressures for estate maintenance, equipment and fleet. The Department is therefore bidding for additional resource in that area. Officials acknowledged that current uncertainties create major risks to projects at or near building stage, where the Department may not be able to spend as planned.

The Department now expects to spend around £94 million on transformation projects. Although that is a tiny fraction of the £6 billion budget, it is significantly more than the Department expected to have available at the start of the year. It exceeds, although not by much, the £81 million projected requirement to stand still, but officials also stated that transformation has become an element of all services, not just the dedicated transformation projects. Transformation remains key to safeguarding the future of our health and social care system. That level of funding is simply incapable of delivering the scale of change required. Nevertheless, some comfort can be drawn from the undoubted innovation and determination seen in continuing efforts to transform services even while we are in the midst of a pandemic.

It is clear that the entire budgetary discussion is dominated by COVID-19 pressures. Those pressures impact on capacity, irrespective of how much money could be allocated in the coming months. Pre-existing workforce shortages have been exacerbated, and that is an issue that takes years to solve, given the long lead-in times, despite a touchingly positive response to the workforce appeal, which has brought hundreds of workers out of retirement at a time of need and at a time when we deeply appreciate that effort.

The current estimated cost of the crisis is around £900 million. In addition to previous allocations, the Department hopes to draw down a further tranche of £526 million of funding from a centrally held pot now that it has completed a required needs assessment. The Department has identified unmet capital

pressures of £33 million to deal with COVID pressures and has submitted a bid for further resource in that area. The resources are required to cover PPE, the Nightingale hospital, surge planning, testing, staff costs, rebuilding services and the digital rebuild, which is a range of IT solutions to enable HSC to resume services in a way that is safe for patients and staff.

Needless to say, there remains much uncertainty about the further costs of the pandemic in the months to come. The Department has therefore advised us that its capacity to rebuild services will depend on the nature and severity of the pandemic over those coming months.

I conclude my remarks as Health Committee Chair there and will contribute as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson in tomorrow's debate.

Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): I will speak first as Chairperson of the Audit Committee. The main role of the Audit Committee is to scrutinise and agree the budgets and Estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), and to lay the Estimates before the Assembly. The Committee also undertakes a budget scrutiny role for the Assembly Commission, although my contribution today will relate solely to the Estimates for the Audit Office and ombudsman, given that the functions in respect of the Commission are yet to be codified. The Committee recently agreed to take advice to progress this matter.

The Audit Committee fulfils its Estimates role in place of the Department of Finance in recognition of the independence of these non-ministerial bodies, although the Committee has regard to the advice of DOF — and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in respect of the Audit Office — in carrying out this role.

The Audit Committee's 'Report on the Estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman 2020-21' was laid in the Business Office on 10 September 2020. The contents of that report reflect the factual position on the Committee's scrutiny and deliberations relating to the evidence from both the Audit Office and the ombudsman on their draft budgets for 2020-21. That position was reflected in a Committee report published on 5 March 2020.

It was anticipated that the Main Estimates giving legal effect to those budgets would follow in June. However, given the impact of the public

health pandemic, that process was postponed. Instead, what followed was a Budget (No. 2) Bill and further Vote on Account, allowing the Main Estimates to be taken forward at this time.

When considering the Estimates for both bodies, the Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance, which indicated that the figures included in the Main Estimates for 2020-21 would be those figures included in the Committee's report on the draft budgets, published on 5 March 2020. The Committee was also informed that the cash, resources and accruing resources, for which the Assembly's approval will be sought in the corresponding Budget (No. 3) Bill, will also be written to that position. On that basis, the Committee was content to agree its position by way of Standing Order 115(9).

In its report published on 10 September, the Committee noted that the Estimates were consistent with the figures set out in the Executive's draft Budget document, as explained in correspondence from the Department of Finance and accompanying reconciliation information, which is provided as part of the Committee's report. We also noted that PAC agreed that its view, reached on 20 February 2020, remained unchanged and that it had no further comment to make in that regard.

The consideration of the draft Estimates and associated correspondence formed the basis of the Committee report, which gave legal effect to the Audit Committee's statutory function of laying the Estimates for the NIAO and NIPSO before the Assembly. Those were submitted to the Department of Finance for inclusion in the Main Estimates.

Given the connection between the figures in the Estimates and draft budget reports, I would like to highlight some of the Committee's deliberations concerning the budgets for the NIAO and NIPSO. Members questioned officials on the Audit Office's new business model and transformation work undertaken in recent times. The Committee also sought clarification on the capital budget to refurbish the NIAO's accommodation, and members recently received an update on the increased costs for that project.

Despite its relatively small budget, Committee members were struck by the wide remit of the NIPSO, as well as the growing numbers of complaints considered since the office's inception in 2016. Members have taken an interest in the NIPSO's role in relation to the Complaints Standards Authority in respect of potential savings by reducing the number of

complaints finding their way to the NIPSO in the first place. Now that a permanent ombudsman appointment has been made, we look forward to productive engagement in the coming months.

As I have said before, the Committee would be supportive of a multi-year budgetary framework, enabling an improved strategic budgetary focus. The Committee has noted that any changes to the budget allocations for the Northern Ireland Audit Office or the NIPSO during the 2020-21 financial year will be handled through the spring Supplementary Estimates. We will examine those with appropriate diligence in due course. That concludes my comments as Chair of the Audit Committee.

I will now make a few comments as an MLA for West Tyrone and my party's education spokesperson. The times that we are in are, obviously, unprecedented, and we are all learning as the days arise. It is also very clear that, throughout our respective constituencies and in absolutely every facet of life, our people are being impacted upon as a result of the virus.

When schools reopened, after months of closure, we saw the huge and crippling consequences of the pandemic on our teaching and non-teaching staff. It is vital that, as far as possible, our schools are fully and absolutely resourced to ensure that our teachers and school leaders can cope with the incredible pressures that have arisen as a result of the pandemic.

It is also important that the allocations made are relative to the crisis that we face in our economy. Many businesses out there have fallen between stools of late and will undoubtedly do so again on this occasion. It is important that the Assembly works collectively to ensure that no person is left behind and that whatever financial interventions are available are sought and delivered to them.

We are in very difficult times. We face a tsunami of challenges in the Assembly and in society. People are finding it extremely tough. They have to make decisions about how to protect the health of their family and, at the same time, how to feed them. It is a very complicated and difficult situation for us all, but it is very important that the Minister consider making as many interventions as possible, with the help of the British Government in Westminster, to ensure that we support businesses as much as possible. We should also ensure that we match the support that is

available elsewhere, even the £500 isolation fund that is available in England. That should be available here to support our people and ensure that they can make informed and correct decisions to protect them and their families at this time.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the A5. I have mentioned it at every possible hurdle when we have been speaking about finances in Northern Ireland, and I would like to see it fully delivered. The SDLP has the Ministry, and I have every confidence in our Minister, but I hope that the Finance Minister will allocate the funds necessary to deliver that project. It will transform the lives of the people in my constituency and throughout the north-west.

Mr Nesbitt: I want to make two general points and one specific point. I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. It is clear that the Chief Constable is on a mission to transform the Police Service: its numbers, its estate and through the use of the IT and digital technology that are available to him. It is also clear that he wishes to change the uniform. We learned today that he has initiated a pilot scheme in which 150 officers are road-testing what we might call a more relaxed and modern uniform, certainly one without a shirt and tie, which is creating much feedback on social media.

If we look back 21 years, we see that Chris Patten and his Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland made two key recommendations. Number 44 was:

"Policing with the community should be the core function of the police service and the core function of every police station"

Recommendation 45 was:

"Every neighbourhood (or rural area) should have a dedicated policing team with lead responsibility for policing its area".

To achieve those recommendations, we must honour the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to increase the complement of police officers to 7,500. That is a key challenge for the Minister of Finance, because, this day last week, the Minister of Justice stood in the Chamber and told us that her priority was dealing with "inescapable pressures", which she defined as dealing with:

"just standing still" — [Official Report (Hansard), 12 October 2020, p55, col 2].

not to deliver on any commitments under New Decade, New Approach.

The specific point that I want to mention is one that has been raised by the Police Service: funding for EU exit. The police believe that they are just over £4 million short — I believe that it is £4.1 million — of the money that should be delivered to them for that purpose. I am not aware whether that money rests with the Department of Finance or is still with the Treasury in London. However, if the Minister has the power to sign off on that, I urge him to do so. If not, I urge him to use whatever influence he has to ensure that the money is released as soon as possible from London and made available to Simon Byrne and his senior team of officers.

The other general point that I would like to make is about multi-year Budgets. I know that the Minister favours those, and I am sure that he is frustrated that, to a certain extent, we have to follow the lead from London, which has broken down somewhat and is not following the expected route. I want to approach it from the point of view of users on the ground and put on record the experience that I had in the two years during which I helped to set up the Commission for Victims and Survivors of the conflict.

That put us in direct contact with up to 100 voluntary and community groups, all of which existed to help provide services for those who had been injured and hurt during the course of our long conflict.

1.15 pm

There were two things that I discovered with regard to annual budgeting. The first was that a group might identify a new service that it could offer and which might be of benefit to many of its members. After securing funding, it might employ a key worker to deliver that service, but that key worker might be on a one-year annual contract, and after six, seven or eight months that worker would be thinking about the fact that they had a mortgage to pay, a car to run and a family to look after, so they would become concerned about whether that contract would be renewed. However, when they asked the organisation, the organisation was not able to give them a solid answer, because it was waiting to see what the Executive were going to do with regard to next year's Budget. What would often happen is that that key worker would then see a job advertised in the statutory sector, and off they would go. The net effect on the people who that worker was providing the

service for was that they had been taken up a nice ladder to a better place, but were now down the long snake and in a worse place because they knew that there was better to be had.

The second problem with annual funding is that the voluntary and community sectors are therefore disinclined to share best practice. Sharing best practice is surely exactly what we want them to do, to ensure that we get the best return for our investment. However, if you are competing on an annual basis for a budget, then you are not going to share best practice for fear that the person who you are sharing with is going to put in the better bid for next year's budget, which means that may end up losing out.

I hope that the Minister retains his drive and desire to see multi-year Budgets, and that this is the last time that we will have this debate in these terms in the House. It is not just about the quantum of money that we allocate but the manner and conditions with which we allocate it.

Mr Frew: I will say at the outset that these are unique times. It is a strange year, not least for the officials in the Department of Finance. I have a certain sympathy for officials — it may sometimes not seem like it in the Committee — who have had to work extremely hard on the budgetary process this year, and of course for the next year, with all of the unknowns that that brings. However, this difficult year has brought with it an influx of money and whilst I am certainly not blaming the officials on this, it is clear that we seem to be struggling to spend the additional Barnett consequential money. It is very clear, not least in the last week, that we need more strategic thought injected into the Executive's decisions, and the Finance Minister is at the heart of that. It has been stated here, even by the last Member to speak, that we should have multi-year Budgets. I think that all of us recognise the advantage of having multi-year Budgets. That is how we deliver our budgets at home — of course it is — so why would that not be the case in a Government and in a devolved Assembly like this?

However, you can have all the multi-year Budgets that you like, but unless you bring strategic thought to those Budgets then one year will roll into the next, one error will roll into the next error, and instead of having errors on a yearly basis, we will have them on a three-yearly basis and nothing will change. So again, yes, the cry should be heard loudly about multi-year Budgets, but unless you have strategic

thought injected into that by the Executive, it will count for absolutely nothing.

One query I ask of the Minister for when he is preparing his statement — I know that his officials will be listening — is about table 1.3, which is a summary of total amounts. With regard to the Vote on Account, the resources do not match up, bar two, with the Vote on Account which we passed months ago in the Assembly. I am asking this genuinely because again, I do not know: why are they different? Is it due to injections of money that they have had over the months? If so, why are they based in table 1.3? Why not start off with the Vote on Account sums and then build up the balance and total provision? I am seeking clarification on that from the Minister and the officials.

Here we are, having to go through what will be called the Budget (No. 3) Bill and the uniqueness that that brings with it; it is really, really strange. Yet out on the ground, after all the months that we have had to cope with this crisis, there are sectors that have still received no support. Haulage companies, travel agents, taxi services, the newly self-employed, social enterprises and the supply chains of business that no longer need their supplies have not been supported as they should have. Of course, there were the big-ticket issues that came down from on high. There was the furlough scheme and the rates holidays, which were gratefully accepted because they were, without doubt, game changers; they were the big-ticket issues. However, we seem to have struggled to spend all the other money that has come down, and there is a central pot yet to be allocated. The Minister says that he is waiting for bids and Ministers say that the bids have gone in, yet here we go along.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. I commend the Member's effort on the Committee and what we try to do on it. However, when we speak about big-ticket ideas to help the Finance Department, we, as a Committee, should be bringing forward ideas. That is our role as well. I hope that the Member agrees with me that our job is not just to scrutinise figures. Collectively, we should be trying to bring forward ideas that will help the Finance Department to get us out of this.

Mr Speaker: The Member does not have an extra minute.

Mr Frew: That is fine, Mr Speaker. Thank you for your judgement. I agree with the Member entirely. That will have to be a vital cog, especially when we move to

multi-year Budgets, and, of course, this year's Budget, with all the uncertainty that it brings.

You can have all the big-ticket issues and ideas in your head that you like, but the best way to support businesses at this time is to allow them to trade safely. The Health Minister talked in biblical terms at the start of this crisis, so let me talk in biblical terms: it is a God-given right for a person to endeavour to earn a living to provide for his or her family. It is a God-given right, yet the Executive removed that right without having any idea about the support mechanisms that will be in place.

I met businesses last week, and none of them is in a good place. This week, some of them will be making the decision to close shop forever. I know of a hairdresser's that employs 18 people — six at any given time in the shop — that has been cutting hair safely, with all the measures that it invested in. Yet none of the staff knows where their next pay cheque is coming from or whether they have a job. That is a sad state of affairs that should not be. The Executive will say, "We are doing this for your own protection. It is for your own good. We are here to protect you". Who is here to protect the people from the very Executive making those decisions? I see no rhyme nor reason for closing businesses that have put in place measures to safeguard staff and customers. I have yet to see any evidence to suggest that those businesses were the places where the virus was contracted.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: It is an absolute shame and disgrace that an Executive can make a decision like that.

Ms Mullan: I speak as my party's education spokesperson. At the beginning of this financial year, the Department of Education received an 11% increase on last year's resource budget. That was the first significant increase in the Education budget for 10 years. That increase in funding to the Department of Education made it possible to make long-awaited pay awards to our teachers and to invest further resources in areas like improving special educational needs provision. The onset of COVID-19 has brought with it much tragedy and uncertainty. I pay tribute to our teaching and non-teaching staff, our youth sector, childcare services, unions and the wider education sector for the way that they have adapted in order to continue to deliver.

Like every Department, Education has had to make changes to its initial budget plans and bid for extra resources in order to deal with the

emergency that we find ourselves in. I commend the leadership and initiative shown by the Finance Minister throughout the crisis, particularly in the context of education and, more recently, in my constituency. The Minister also ensured that our most disadvantaged children and young people were supported over the summer months with free school meals direct payments. In a very short period and in what were very difficult circumstances, the Finance Minister not only delivered a much-needed increase to the Education budget but made real-term increases to all Executive budgets.

We now need to see the financial commitments that were made in New Decade, New Approach by the British and Irish Governments delivered. Pre-COVID, Education pressures still existed, and, with those in mind, it is important that we deliver on the basis of objective need. I am extremely concerned by the disruption that the pandemic is causing for our young people's education. We must strive to create the environment in our education system where every child, regardless of their background, gets the best start in life and is given the ability to reach their maximum potential.

We must seek to enshrine a culture of collaboration and joined-up thinking across the Executive. Departments should be able and should be encouraged to share costs in achieving common outcomes. We are now entering an economic crisis that is like none that we have seen before. Those are the circumstances in which the Finance Minister and our Executive are operating. Our budgetary processes have operated in an unusual way this year, but we are in extraordinary and unprecedented times. I encourage all Members to acknowledge that and to support the motions.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I welcome the opportunity to speak as the Chairperson of the Education Committee. I will also take this opportunity to pay tribute to and thank teaching and non-teaching staff across Northern Ireland for the innovative and courageous way in which they have responded to the pandemic.

As the Minister indicated, the debate would, ordinarily, happen in June and the balancing amounts would be expected to be a lot higher. Instead, due to the COVID crisis, the Executive sought and secured an additional and larger Vote on Account in May. Those changes were necessary, but they make it difficult for Committees to track the financial progress of their respective Departments.

The extra-large Vote on Account for Education was deemed necessary to cover a significant number of additional pressures, including the provision of free school meals payments and support schemes for childcare provision. The first of those was, regrettably, poorly delivered, but the second, thankfully, was more successful. There was also a scheme to support substitute teachers.

The Department of Education has advised that the cost of restarting education in schools will be just over £100 million in the current financial year and that it sought £57 million and received £42 million for the autumn term. The additional funding will include £12 million for PPE, £6 million for school cleaning, £12 million for substitute teacher cover and £3.3 million for blended learning in schools. That spending, as well as known pressures and obligations relating to New Decade, New Approach, including teachers' pay, which we welcome, appears to have driven the Department of Education's budget from around £2.1 billion in 2014-15 to £2.67 billion in the 2020-21 Main Estimates.

The Main Estimates also include references to capital spending. The COVID lockdown may well have had an adverse impact on the Education Department's capital spending programme for this year, so perhaps the Minister will indicate in his response whether he believes that capital spending on new school builds and on other works will resume in this financial year.

Perhaps the Minister will also clarify the position on Fresh Start capital.

The Department of Education has advised that there is uncertainty around spending on the Strule project. Will he confirm whether the Treasury has agreed to allow the Executive to access all of the significant unspent Fresh Start money and to profile it over the next few years?

1.30 pm

In my position as an Alliance MLA, I draw to the Finance Minister's attention reports that funding from the Department of Education Engage programme has been used to procure access to private transfer test tutoring or tutoring applications for some pupils in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister and his Executive colleagues ensure that there is an assessment of the appropriateness of the use of that Executive-provided public fund?

It is unacceptably clear that the structure and financing of our education system is in crisis. I ask the Finance Minister that, in addition to financial support for education, he supports the urgent establishment of the independent review of education to inform the transformation that we need to deliver equal educational opportunity for all children and young people.

Ms Dillon: As has been outlined by, I think, all the Members who have spoken, we are in a difficult year and in difficult times. That is not simply down to COVID. The House must recognise that we already had challenges not only Tory austerity and their approach to how they would finance any Department or any public body but the Brexit debacle. In my role as justice spokesperson, I say that there are challenges in the justice family, particularly for the PSNI and how it will police what could come our way as a result of Brexit and how it will police the current regulations and all that they bring with them.

There are many competing justice priorities, and we would love to see the delivery of all the things that are important to us. We particularly need to see the implementation of all the Gillen recommendations. We have just completed the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which has the potential to be transformative. I say "potential" because, if it is not properly resourced and proper training is not put in place, the legislation will not be worth the paper that it is written on. It is important that the Minister looks at her priorities and works with the Committee in moving forward. We have many challenges.

One of the main concerns will be the victims' pension payment and how that will be resourced. I was happy that the Executive approached the British Government in a united way to ensure that they are held to account. This is their legislation; they brought it forward. I have many difficulties with the scheme, and I intend to challenge them. People will be excluded, and that should not happen. Victims are victims: end of story. Victims deserve to be supported, but the fight is not theirs. They deserve to be paid; they do not need to wait any longer for the payments. People are dying as they wait for the payments, and we need to ensure that they get them. The British Government need to accept their responsibility and put proper resources in place. Bringing forward legislation without resources is an atrocity in itself.

As I said, there are many challenges in the justice sector. I want to raise some issues from my constituency. Over the past weekend, many

businesses and self-employed people have raised issues with me. Mr Frew referred to businesses and sectors that were not supported during the previous restrictions. I hope that he will use whatever influence he has with the Economy Minister to address that, because I have raised it numerous times in the House. Sectors that were not helped in the last lockdown have no assurances about what will happen this time.

I thank the Finance Minister for his speedy response in putting in place the grants for rateable businesses, but we have no assurances for the self-employed or for those who do not have rateable businesses. I want to see those assurances from the Economy Minister and Ministers with responsibility for other sectors. I met a number of sectors last week, including the coach industry, which has had no financial assistance either. We want to see that coming forward. That is not only for the Economy Minister, but it is the main responsibility of the Economy Minister. We have to acknowledge that. She needs to take responsibility. I urge you to use whatever influence you have to ensure that those sectors' needs are met.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. There are issues with the new scheme that the Finance Minister produced last week. First, it is nowhere near enough money. Secondly, it is based on the rates base, which is a very blunt instrument. Thirdly, given that it is not enough, the people who obtain that money are worried that they will disqualify themselves from further support in the future.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Minister can deal only with rate-based businesses; it is the Economy Minister's responsibility to deal with the rest. If we knew what was coming forward from the Economy Department, they would know whether they will be excluding themselves. It is important that we get the information from the Economy Department on how those issues are dealt with.

I could go into the detail of many spheres that will be affected, particularly in the justice family, but we would be here all day. Everybody knows that we face serious challenges. I want to see all our Ministers working together to ensure that we face those challenges realistically. The biggest concern of the businesses that I met on Friday was about Brexit. They said that they believed that they would get some financial help for COVID and that, eventually, we would come out of it but that Brexit would be a long and painful process.

Mr O'Toole: Here we are again. Today and tomorrow, we debate the Main Estimates on departmental spending for the financial year 2020-21. That is a few months after we were due to do so, given the extreme extenuating circumstances. It has been, to put it mildly, an unusual year in budgeting terms. We have had lots of opportunity to debate spending plans, but, unfortunately, we have had little by way of spending strategy. We have had retrospective approvals of spending that happened while the Assembly was not sitting, including the excesses that we are voting on today. We have had hurried Votes on Account to authorise spending brought forward by the pandemic. We have also had a Budget document that was, by the Executive's own account, mostly obsolete by the time that it was published.

It is worth saying that most of that is not the fault of the Department or the Executive. When the Assembly and Executive re-formed in January of this year, no one expected the first year back to be dominated by managing a pandemic and the subsequent economic turmoil. Given that the UK Government helped to coordinate New Decade, New Approach, it was to be assumed that they would take seriously the promises in it around multi-year budgeting. They have not, and we know that there will be nothing approaching a comprehensive spending review this year. Nevertheless, there are real questions about how the Executive have approached budgeting over the past number of months and what their approach will be in the months to come; in particular, it is important to understand exactly what is being done to produce a joined-up economic recovery package for the sectors most directly affected by the ongoing pandemic. That relates not just to the Finance Minister but, as others have said, to the Economy Minister. Publicans, cafe owners, hairdressers, taxi drivers and countless others are struggling for existence; they are struggling to see a way through the next few weeks, let alone the next few months. Given the severity of the crisis that we face, they will want to know that we are doing absolutely everything in our toolbox to help them. It is not clear at the moment that we are. I will elaborate on a few points on that, but, first, I have a couple of specific points on the Main Estimates document and the broader picture around budgeting.

A couple of weeks ago, the Minister told us about his intervention with other devolved Finance Ministers. It would be helpful to understand precisely what flexibility he has asked for. There was a degree of strategic vagueness in the statement; I understand that

there may be reasons for that. He specifically talked about the Budget exchange scheme, which allows devolved Administrations to carry forward underspend of 0.6% of resource and 1.5% of capital. It would be helpful to know precisely what he is asking for. Is it just that those shares should increase, or is it something more complex? Moreover, in the same statement to the Assembly, the Minister said that his requests were limited and logical. I am sure that I will agree with him that they are necessary, but what are they? Given the gravity of the situation that our workforce and small businesses, in particular, face, it would be helpful to understand exactly how those flexibilities will be used.

On those flexibilities specifically, can the Minister explain to us what is being done to convert underspent capital into in-year resource funding that we can get out the door to small businesses and their staff? That is really critical. As we know — we have talked a bit about it today — historically it has been a challenge for us to spend capital quickly enough, specifically financial transactions capital. I would like to see us make full use of FTC, but what are we asking the Treasury for in order to convert any underspend to resource spending and get it out the door? The Finance Department acknowledged to the Committee that the Executive might struggle to get all £100 million of FTC out the door in this financial year. Are officials working on schemes that could aid our recovery from COVID by making urgent FTC allocations? If not, how much of the unallocated funding do they think that the Treasury will convert into conventional funding or resource spending?

There is also the question of reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing power, in which we have £200 million of headroom. In May, I asked the Minister whether he was looking at that. He said then that he was looking at it in general, but we have not heard anything about it since. Given the dire situation that we face, people watching today will want to know that we are not just waiting for Barnett consequentials. It is right to push London for further allocation, but, given the London Government that is in it, as it were, we need to demonstrate to the people that we are pulling out every stop that we have at our disposal.

The risk is not that we do too much but that we do too little. Those are the words of Jay Powell, the chair of the US Federal Reserve. They are also the words of Pearse Doherty, Sinn Féin's finance spokesperson in Dáil Éireann. He is right: now is not the time to be precious about borrowing costs. The IMF said last week that

Governments around the world, whether they are sovereign or, as in our case, devolved, should not think about the cost of borrowing. Costs are at historical lows. We should do absolutely everything to spend money where we need to, because not only do we face the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19 but we face the looming cliff edge at the end of the Brexit transition period.

I will not labour arguments about the specifics of Brexit — most Members know what I think about that — but every Department in the Main Estimates document specifies that EU exit costs are a specific pressure this year, but there is not a line from the Department or the Executive explaining in an overarching sense what those costs are. What precisely is EU exit costing us? Declan McAleer, the Chair of the AERA Committee mentioned the pressures. Mike Nesbitt mentioned them in relation to policing, as did Linda Dillon. It would be helpful to get a sense, by Department and globally, of precisely what EU exit is costing us. I know that the Minister is putting pressure on the Treasury in that regard, but it would be helpful to know exactly what we face in the cost of implementing the protocol, the loss of funding and, more broadly, the administrative implications.

No one thought that we would be dealing this year with the biggest pandemic in anyone's lifetime, but our citizens were certainly entitled to expect that the economic and financial response to the crisis would be ambitious and comprehensive. Unfortunately, it has not yet been either. While much of the responsibility sits with the Economy Department, it is true that, in the absence of an agreed Programme for Government or even a coherent crisis response plan, our in-year budgeting process has become the de facto strategic policy driver for the Executive. If it has to be that way, let us at least ensure that we show maximum ambition and maximum effort on behalf of our workers and our small businesses as we plot our way through the crisis. We may not have a road map or a GPS for the unprecedented period ahead, but surely we can do better than simply wait for people to shout directions from the side of the road.

Mr McGuigan: I am conscious that the debate today about the North's Main Estimates and the Budget debate tomorrow come a week after a similar debate on the Budget of the Twenty-six Counties. The two Budgets and the two debates expose the stark nature of partition and its impact on the island. In the South, there is a Government inefficiently using public money and failing to direct it to where it is most

needed; in the North, the Finance Minister is dependent on the British Exchequer and is being hamstrung from making better financial decisions because he does not have the necessary financial tools at his disposal.

In the midst of the global health pandemic in which we find ourselves, I wonder what different decisions we could have taken on behalf of the citizens whom we represent if we had done so on an all-island basis and if countless Southern Governments and right-wing Tory Governments had not imposed years of austerity Budgets that have resulted in a lack of investment in our health service, education, infrastructure and every other public service.

1.45 pm

Ireland as a whole has suffered from the effects of partition, but no part has suffered more, particularly economically, than the northern six counties. Minister, I look forward to the day — I hope that it will be soon — when I can watch you or our colleague Pearse Doherty set out a fair Budget as Finance Minister on behalf of all the people of this island. It will be a Budget fair to workers, families and small business owners, that builds up the capacity of our health service and addresses the damage that partition has done to the prosperity and wealth of the island of Ireland and its population.

Ach ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as an obair ghasta atá déanta aige lena chinntiú gur tugadh amach an t-airgead go héifeachtach le linn na paindéime. All that being said, and dealing with the current reality, I thank the Minister for his efforts and the work of his Department throughout this extremely difficult period, for showing leadership and initiative and for acting speedily to ensure best use of the public finances within his remit.

This is not a normal year, and therefore this is not a normal Budget process. In the context of the current pandemic, protecting lives and livelihoods must, of course, be the priority. I welcome that the Health Department will receive an extra £1.4 million in the Minister's Budget.

I also note the work that the Minister has done to ensure that businesses are protected. Swift action at the beginning of the pandemic included the cessation of business rates, allocation of money to other Departments and the recent financial support scheme to help affected businesses. It is clear that not only should businesses be protected but we need to protect wages. As others have said, the new furlough scheme is nowhere near enough to

protect workers. I note, Minister, that you are engaging with the British Treasury on that issue on behalf of employees in the North.

Other Members have commented on the businesses and workers that have had no protection throughout these difficult past few months. That issue needs to be addressed urgently. It is vital that some way is found to ensure that we protect the maximum proportion of our population. Like other MLAs, I have listened, over the past months, to many difficult accounts from constituents who are worried about protecting their businesses, jobs or their families. The Minister recently met some of those groups and individuals. I welcome his comments on the subject and, in particular, his request to other Ministers and Departments to quickly bring forward proposals that will address the situation.

Notwithstanding the challenges that the Executive face in dealing with coronavirus and its implications for the public purse, we still have the spectre of Brexit hanging over our heads. That presents entirely separate economic difficulties. Unlike COVID-19, Brexit is a conscious and deliberate political act, driven by right-wing English nationalism against the wishes of the people in the North.

Against the background of all those financial challenges, I commend the Minister for the management of our public finances. I also welcome his commitment to multi-year Budgets, which will provide greater certainty and long-term planning. We now face an economic crisis that will be greater than anything that we have faced before. Economic recovery will be an enormous challenge in the time ahead, but the lessons that we need to learn from the last 10 years include the importance of investment in public services and green growth in the way forward. There should be no tolerance for the disastrous austerity agenda, which has been imposed on us by Tory Governments and has caused so much damage.

Mr Boylan: I want to say a few words as the Sinn Féin infrastructure spokesperson. I reiterate some things that the Chair and my colleague Linda Dillon mentioned already in relation to support for the taxi industry, coach operators and hauliers. They have waited far too long for recognition, and I hope that the Infrastructure Minister will bring something forward.

The Finance Minister is bringing this Budget forward amid the unprecedented COVID-19 health crisis and all the economic and social impacts that have followed. It would be an

understatement to say that our financial position before the pandemic did not help our response to COVID. The effects of 10 years of Tory austerity on our public services, on our health service in particular, have undoubtedly impacted on our response to the current challenges. Our public services, such as those within the Department for Infrastructure, also suffered financially from that destructive Conservative financial policy, despite infrastructure having a vital role to play in connecting communities and driving balanced and sustainable economic growth.

Infrastructure, such as trunk roads, rural roads and our water and sewerage system, is essential to everyday life and is a bedrock of the economy and society as a whole. Public and community transport help to tackle rural isolation and provide equal access to opportunities and services. The importance of infrastructure is acknowledged in this year's Budget, as demonstrated by the fact that, despite our block grant being £360 million — in real terms, that is below pre-austerity levels — the Department for Infrastructure received an 8.6% increase in resource funding. DFI has also received a capital allocation of £558 million, the largest ever made to the Department and by far the largest capital allocation to any Department. Over the course of the pandemic, over £100 million has been allocated to the Department to alleviate pressures. Therefore, although pressures remain across all Departments, I commend the Minister for his management of our public finances in these difficult and challenging times, and against the background of all these financial challenges.

Moreover, these challenges have not gone away. Brexit, COVID and the climate emergency continue to loom over us. Infrastructure has a big role to play in helping to respond to these challenges. Capital projects can help to kick-start the economy. Therefore, the commencement of projects like the A5 must follow as soon as possible. Meanwhile, North/South projects committed to in New Decade, New Approach, such as the Narrow Water bridge and the Ulster canal, must be realised in order to enhance connectivity and improve the economic fortunes of this island. I look forward to continuing to work and engage with the Department and the Minister to address these vital issues.

Mr Speaker: Members, pending Question Time, which will start at 2:00 pm, I will suspend this item in the Order Paper.

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I draw the Speaker's attention to the remarks made by the AERA Minister, Edwin Poots, on Friday, when he accused the nationalist/Catholic community of having spread this virus. He also called into question the collective decision-making of the Executive. Those comments were unbecoming of any Executive Minister, and I ask the Speaker to investigate the remarks and report back to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: On that point of order, the Member will be aware that it is not within the bailiwick of the Speaker to deal with or address such comments. In fact, some of the comments might be described as touching on a breach of the ministerial code. Again, it is not the responsibility of the Speaker to adjudicate on that. The Member has made his point on the record.

We all know that, last week, the Executive and their colleagues, the Chief Medical Officer and so on, all worked very, very hard. Whatever we think, collectively or individually, about the outcome, people worked very hard last week and brought that message to the Chamber. All the party leaders called for a collective response and for people to put their shoulder to the wheel and work together. It is regrettable that, towards the end of the week, the calls for collective action and for people to stand shoulder to shoulder on this issue were, perhaps, undermined by some people's remarks.

When Members are commenting, especially on something as critical as the pandemic — people are trying to deal with this, and it involves very complex issues — it is important that they are mindful of how their comments sound and how they might be interpreted by others. The Member has made his point on the record. As I said, they are not matters for the Speaker to adjudicate on. However, I regret that, by the end of a week in which we saw a Trojan effort by the Executive to get an agreement, that agreement was, in some ways, and in the view of many out in society, undermined by a breach of the solidarity that had been expressed by the Executive.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can I draw to your attention the actions of the Minister for Communities? On Friday, before the relevant legislation was even made, the Minister issued a misconceived direction to sporting bodies that misrepresented what would be in the regulations and caused untold confusion and upset, not least at the Showgrounds in Coleraine. Should the House

not expect the Minister to know what is in the law and whether it has or has not been made?

Mr Speaker: The only comment that I will add to my last remarks will be directed at all Ministers, and, indeed, at all Members: people need to be mindful of how they conduct their business. As I said, it is not for the Speaker to adjudicate on the remarks of individual Members or Ministers. Again, as I say, it is essential that the good work of the Executive, the various Departments and all Members of the House in their own respective way not be undermined by the actions or words of any Member. Thank you.

I ask Members to take their ease while we prepare for Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

IT Equipment

1. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister of Education whether he is considering expanding the criteria for the provision of laptops and other IT equipment to pupils. (AQO 907/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. Just looking down the list today, I think that it might have been quicker if I had done an education ard-fheis with the party opposite to cover all the topics.

The provision of devices and Wi-Fi for those pupils who need them has been a priority. I have invested significantly in the provision of laptops and other IT equipment. However, as with any finite budget, resources have to be targeted where there is greatest need. Therefore, priority has been given to children in year groups 12, 14, 7 and 4, in that order, who are entitled to free school meals and have either special educational needs, are newcomer or looked-after children or are otherwise vulnerable.

Where devices are available, there is no bar to young people from outside those year groups that I have identified and who are entitled to free school meals from applying for a device. The Education Authority (EA) is working with schools to manage that process.

Mr McCann: The Minister will know that many families that are in difficult circumstances fall just outside the qualifying criteria and that many of them have now had their employment and incomes impacted by the pandemic. Given the prospect of increasing levels of remote learning, does the Minister agree that the need for IT equipment is greater now than the initial scheme had anticipated?

Mr Weir: We continue to roll out devices. As of September, 5,500 devices had been rolled out. The latest figures that we have, which are up to 9 October, indicate that that figure is now 7,865. Additionally, 8,000 Chromebooks were purchased, 6,760 of which have been built to

date, and just under 4,000 have been delivered to schools.

The Member makes an important point. We are working, first of all, with the EA to see whether its capital resources will be fully utilised this year and whether, if there is any underspend because of the practicalities of coronavirus, any additional money can be diverted to devices. If that proves insufficient, we will work with the Department of Finance to identify whether any other capital money can be diverted to digital devices. The Member is right: it is important that we ensure as much as possible that there is that level of provision.

I should make it clear that, early in the situation, we sought indications from schools. Where we find the greatest problem is not specifically with a household not having a digital device, but it is probably most pertinent where there is one device in a household with a number of people trying to share it. Allied to that is a need to retain, as much as possible, face-to-face learning to minimise pressure. However, I am cognisant of the needs that are out there.

Mr Buckley: Will the Minister elaborate on how he and his Department plan to cater for children in rural areas, particularly with greater concern surrounding technology and, indeed, broadband access?

Mr Weir: In May, I announced the scheme to lend digital devices to pupils. That included devices that were in the system, as there was initially a misunderstanding that devices in the system could not be easily adapted. However, they could be, through C2k.

In addition, that scheme included the procurement of additional devices, and, also, critically for some rural areas, remote broadband connectivity solutions. In July, I announced that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity would be provided to children and young people, including those in rural settings, who did not have access to digital technology.

My Department carried out a rural needs impact assessment in relation to access to broadband and digital devices. With the level of broadband across the country, there is a barrier, some of which is entirely beyond the control of the Department. I have been working with the Education Authority to provide, in partnership with BT, a range of solutions to address connectivity problems for pupils, particularly those in rural settings, so I have given consideration to rurality. That includes supporting the provision of an initial quantity of up to 2,500 Mi-Fi devices, which is a mobile

connectivity solution to support children who are not in a BT Wi-Fi hotspot, and the provision of 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers for disadvantaged children [*Interruption*] with up to eight months — . There seem to be restrictions on technology in rural areas, but they do not seem to have pervaded the Chamber. [*Laughter.*] There will be the provision of 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers for disadvantaged children, with up to eight months of internet access. The public-sector shared network project that is being delivered by BT — that contract was awarded by the Department of Finance, so we are, obviously, trying to work in a joined-up fashion — is in the pilot phase, but once it has been completely rolled out, it will see broadband connectivity increased in almost all schools.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members of the importance of devices being turned off. Also, questions should be brief and answers should not run over two minutes.

Schools: COVID-19-related Absences

2. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of COVID-19-related absences among pupils and teaching staff. (AQO 908/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department publishes information on school attendance on the Department website on a weekly basis. That information provides the overall picture on school attendance but does not specify which absences are related to COVID. We have been working with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Department of Health — the figures on COVID-related absences are held by them, not the Department of Education — to ensure that the information is produced on a sensible, informative basis.

While we have been monitoring management information internally to get an indication of the trend, it is difficult to give definitive figures on absences. However, let me give the figures that we have. The overall pupil attendance rate has fluctuated from 91.6% to 95%. The lowest attendance was in the week commencing 7 September, when it fell to 91.6%. The latest figure, for week commencing 5 October, is 93.7%. As a result of the way in which the data is captured, the pupil attendance rate also includes those who are self-isolating and learning remotely. As set out in a circular, a child will be marked as absent if they are ill or do not engage with remote learning.

To put that into context, the figures prior to this year, which were recorded only on an annual basis, show an attendance rate of about 94%. That suggests that, while COVID has had some impact, it has been limited. Similarly, for teachers, the latest data from 6 October suggests that 92% of teaching staff were on-site in schools. Overall, those figures show a high level of school attendance. I have some other figures that I might draw out in answer to a supplementary question, but I appreciate the point about the two-minute rule.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you for that answer. What lessons have been learnt over the past eight weeks in order to improve support for schools with high absences and to help schools to keep functioning when they return from the extended break?

Mr Weir: Support has been on the basis of the money that has been made available through the Executive, particularly for substitute cover. There have been both preventative and responsive measures. The Executive as a whole allocated just under £26 million, I think, for the full financial year for PPE. When we talk about PPE, we tend to think of gloves and physical equipment, but PPE is principally that used for cleaning and for hygiene products. There has been that level of production.

It is important that I give the scale of this. I appreciate that I was not in a position to give all my previous answer. On the initial information from the PHA — it is important that it breaks this down — cumulatively, a total of 1,491 individuals in schools have tested positive from 24 August to 13 October. I advise people that that is a cumulative figure. That represents about 0.4% of the school population. In most of the cases where there was an incident at a school, it was a single individual who tested positive. From that period, I think that a total of 10 schools out of over 1,000 have had more than one incident. The PHA is working on being able to provide more definitive information. It is important, therefore, that we get the PHA and DOH to produce information in a useable and accurate way as we move forward.

Mr Lyttle: What contingency plan is in place for children who are unable to sit transfer tests due to a COVID-19-related absence?

Mr Weir: I would rarely be accused of being bilingual, but this is very much a case of "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" from the Member: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The transfer tests are set by independent organisations, and, to that extent, the onus for the arrangements is on them. We have been in contact with the schools that use academic selection. It is important that they develop alternatives should they be needed, and there will be ongoing discussions. Academic selection and transfer tests are ultimately the responsibility of AQE and PPTC. There is no requirement on a school, for instance, to use that. Consequently, we will make sure that, whatever actions are put in place, we monitor the matter to ensure that anything that is done is done safely.

Mr M Bradley: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I apologise for that noise intervention. Only a Chelsea fan like me would know what it was.

Minister, with regard to absence among teachers, how will schools replace teachers who are self-isolating?

Mr Weir: I did not realise that the Member is a Chelsea supporter. In that case, he has to double-apologise to the House.

A great deal of good work has been done on remote learning, so there is that provision. Schools should continue to fill positions to replace teachers in the normal manner. There is a Northern Ireland substitute teacher list. To help to support many of the new pressures arising out of COVID, I outlined a significant package of funding to help to support the safe reopening of schools. That includes £17.5 million towards the costs of substitute teachers and other school expenditure. Further work has been done on that. In addition to that, the Executive have, through their COVID funding, released an additional £9.2 million. Again, we will look at the distribution of that. The fund for substitute teacher costs is being centrally managed by the Education Authority, and funding will be allocated to schools on a needs basis of verified cost. It should mean that, within reason, there is a provision for substitute teachers.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, what is the total number of teachers who have tested positive across schools in Northern Ireland? How many teachers have self-isolated since the schools reopened?

Mr Weir: As I said, those figures are held by the PHA and DOH, and we are working on those being revealed. The figures that I have currently are for a combination of the 333,000 students and 19,000 staff. The PHA has the breakdown of positive cases among students

and staff. The total of 1,491 positive cases is from the overall school population of 352,000. I hope that the PHA will be in a position fairly soon to be able to give more detailed figures. I reiterate that that is a cumulative figure over a period of six or seven weeks rather than an individual breakdown for a particular week.

Mr Butler: It is good to get a figure, and the First Minister gave us that information last week. The Committee has been asking for that information for a number of weeks. Will the Minister give us a commitment that he will produce something akin to the Department of Health's dashboard to keep parents, teachers and pupils aware of the weekly figures throughout this crisis?

Mr Weir: I certainly will try to do all that I can. The reason that DOH can produce the dashboard is that it is, regarding anything COVID, the central receptor of information. We depend on getting that in a format that can then be used by the Department.

To some extent, I have no problem with that as a general concept. However, we are dependent on getting those figures directly from DOH. The figures that we have, which are monitored by the Department directly, relate to the percentage of teachers in schools and also to pupils' attendance. Those are, if you like, two separate elements of the statistics that are monitored on a slightly different timescale but can, effectively, give an answer in each individual week. I am happy to publish those as well.

2.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn. Before I call Ms Ennis, I want to say that I allowed four supplementary questions to be asked about COVID because, obviously, it is a significant issue. Members should not take that as a precedent. There will not be four supplementaries to every question.

Irish-medium Education: Newry

4. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Education how he will meet the demand for Irish-medium education provision in the Newry area. (AQO 910/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. It is a matter for the Education Authority, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and other sectoral support bodies, to bring forward proposals to meet the needs of

children and young people. As the Member may be aware, meeting a particular demand is an area-planning consideration, which then becomes a development proposal and is published by the Education Authority. As such, the Department's role and, specifically, my role is then to give a verdict on a particular development proposal. Therefore, I cannot bring forward a development proposal or comment on one until it has reached that final stage. Legally, that would leave me in difficulties. Currently, there are no published development proposals for Irish-medium provision in the Newry area beyond what is provided at present.

Ms Ennis: I take on board the Minister's answer. Newry and Mourne has the highest percentage of Irish speakers in the whole of the North. However, the only bunscoil, Bunscoil an Iúir, in Newry city is wholly inadequate and in dire need of major capital investment. I want to put that on the Minister's radar and say that I would appreciate his visiting the school, speaking to the school community, principal and board of governors, and seeing how we can work together collaboratively to improve the provision of Irish-medium education in the Newry area.

Mr Weir: I would be very happy to do that. I have been to schools in different sectors. The Member's colleague Karen Mullan facilitated four visits in one day to Irish-medium schools up in the north-west. I have been to a number of others, including the largest post-primary Irish-medium school in Northern Ireland, Coláiste Feirste, roughly a month ago. Therefore, I would be more than happy to accept an invitation to see what is happening on the ground.

One issue in looking at a longer-term project has been the requirement for development proposals. As with lots of issues with COVID, the development proposal process has been delayed in the EA, sectoral support bodies and the Department, where not only financial but human resources have had to be shifted towards dealing with COVID. I am glad to say that there is some movement now to restart development proposals. Obviously, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has a critical role to play to give its thoughts to sustainable Irish-medium provision in the Newry area. However, I cannot comment on individual proposals until the point at which a development proposal is put forward directly for a decision.

Mr McNulty: Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. The principal, parents and board of governors are

passionate about the philosophy of educating young people through the medium of our indigenous Gaelic language. The Minister knows that, previously, I have asked him a number of questions about the school and the ongoing work towards its enrolment of 105 and qualification for inclusion in the capital works scheme. Can the Minister advise the House on whether the Department has agreed a site for any new build? Will he take the opportunity, when public health guidelines permit, to visit the school and see the incredibly positive work that is going on there?

Mr Weir: Obviously, in my response, I have given the more general position with regard to the Newry area. As I said, I am happy to visit any school. I cannot comment on the specific details of the school about which the Member has asked. However, I am happy to write to the Member and give him details on the issue that he has raised.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

COVID-19 Support: Derry City and Strabane

6. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education, in the light of the impact that COVID-19 will have on school attendance, what support and resources his Department has directed to the Derry City and Strabane District Council area to support education. (AQO 912/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. An updated version of 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland' was published on 29 September 2020. The guidance provides a framework for how schools and education settings can operate in an ongoing COVID-19 environment. Given that we are in a moving situation, guidance will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that it remains in line with the wider health position.

Designated link officers from the Education Authority are working closely with school leaders to ensure that individual issues are resolved promptly and to identify what more can be done to provide support. The EA has a dedicated COVID-19 helpline, and there is an FAQ section on the EA website.

On 24 August 2020, I announced a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools. That was supported by the Executive. That funding will help schools address some of the new pressures arising out

of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in doing so, will protect our children and young people and those working in education settings.

The Engage programme is helping pupils across the country who missed out, particularly between March and April. Some £1.26 million from that financial package has gone to 79 schools in the council area. The programme will enable primary and post-primary schools to provide additional teaching support for pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. That will help pupils to engage with learning, following lockdown, by enabling schools to provide child-centred, one-to-one, small group and team-teaching support by qualified teachers.

Mr McHugh: What contingency has the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) proposed for the delivery of examinations next year, given the fact that many people's education experience will be vastly different, owing to the sheer level of disruption and the unevenly distributed nature of that disruption? Surely we cannot expect students to be examined in the usual way.

Mr Weir: I will make three points about that. It is important that, if possible, examinations go ahead, because they are the most equitable and fair assessment of an individual's ability. Any other mechanism is always going to be second best to a certain extent.

The Member asks whether we can expect everything in 2021 to be done on exactly the same basis as it was done beforehand. No, that is not the case. That is why I took the decision that we have made on examinations. A range of mitigations has to be put in place. For instance, a range of assessment units has been removed from specific courses, largely for health and safety reasons. We have also asked the CCEA to explore optionality, in order to try to ensure that that is one other device through which things could be on a more level playing field for pupils. We also need to ensure that examinations are comparable with those in other jurisdictions. Our students will be competing with students from other jurisdictions, principally at A level and to a lesser extent at GCSE, so we have to ensure that we are on a similar pathway. Part of that will involve discussions across jurisdictions on the level at which we pitch the examinations, because simply to return to the level at which they were pitched in 2019 would be very difficult to sustain, given the issues with grade boundaries, for instance, and the level of disruption that there has been.

The Member mentioned contingency plans. I have also asked the CCEA to bring forward a range of options for contingencies for 2021. That request is less about whether there will be exams than it is about the likelihood that some individuals may not be able to sit an examination, depending on how we move forward, and those individuals will have to be catered for within the system.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, you rightly mentioned the Engage programme, which has provided a vital intervention for schools. Will the Minister explain how two schools in the same town — one with 750 pupils and one with 250 pupils — received the same sum of money? The allocation equates to £100 a child for the school with 250 children and to £36 a child for the school with 750 children, even though the school with fewer pupils has fewer children on free school meals.

Mr Weir: The system that was adopted was not relatively straightforward, because it was largely about purchasing teacher resources. We therefore could not have a situation in which 1,000 schools in Northern Ireland had differential amounts of financial support. That would not have made sense. From an administrative point of view, it would have been hard to put together in a short space of time.

Two criteria were produced. It is important that we get the greatest level of support where there is the greatest level of social deprivation, so there was a higher level of funding for schools that qualified as having above the average level of free school meals. Within that, there were, off the top of my head, four bands of funding according to numbers. You could have disaggregated that to each individual pupil, but it is not necessarily about the individual application; it is about providing a level of support.

Below that, to ensure that there was a level of support for other schools, there was a smaller pot of money, which has been allocated, roughly speaking, equating to 0.2, 0.3 or 0.5 of a full-time-equivalent teaching post. In any system, whether it is on a school's level of funding or social-security-type funding, where there is banding, you are always going to get anomalies.

It was important that we ensured that there was a distribution of money to schools, and do not forget that that is all additional money. I appreciate that some schools will have felt that they got a good deal, others less so, but it is all additional support.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr O'Toole is not in his place.

School Closures: Contingency Plans

8. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education what contingency planning is under way for the possibility of further school closures due to the rising COVID-19 infection rate. (AQO 914/17-22)

Mr Weir: Just keeping the Sinn Féin bandwagon rolling on in relation to that.

The Member will be aware that schools have closed for a two-week period from today for an extended half-term break until Monday 2 November. The proposal that was put through the Executive was that schools will reopen on 2 November. Everything to do with COVID is always under review. As we move ahead, there will be individual disruptions to schools. We have given guidance on that. It is important that the level of disruption is kept to a minimum. That is why it is important that we do see that resumption of face-to-face teaching on 2 November and beyond to ensure that we give the best possible support to all pupils.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. We are subject to an ever-changing public health crisis, which could require further closures if that is the medical and scientific advice. Does the Minister agree that, in these uncertain times, he should be preparing for the real possibility of further closures?

Mr Weir: No, I am not planning for failure. On that basis, it is important that we keep schools open. It is noticeable what has happened in other jurisdictions. Generally speaking, I do not look nostalgically across the border to the South, but they have obviously prioritised schools to make sure that they are kept open. It is vital that we ensure that our schools are kept open. The principal focus is on support for children. It also plays a key role for parents, the economy and for the future. We have to have a situation in which we do not damage the education of our young people.

I will be working with Health and the Chief Medical Officer. Where there have been issues around schools, they have not been within the schools themselves. Let us call them the more-peripheral aspects, so, for example, I will be talking later to the Infrastructure Minister on any actions that can be taken around school transport. There is also a clear message for

parents. One issue has been collecting pupils at school gates. We will need to look at all that.

The safest place for pupils, academically and from a public health point of view, is within schools, where there is a strongly controlled environment where education and health can be maintained.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There is less than a minute remaining, so if Mrs Rosemary Barton keeps it short and sharp, and the Minister does as well, we will get through it.

Mrs Barton: What reassurance and guidance can the Minister give to parents about children wearing masks on school buses? I am getting a lot of complaints about that.

Mr Weir: I understand that. I will be bringing a paper to the Executive and talking to the Infrastructure Minister about that in an hour's time.

The problem is not simply what happens on the buses, and this is where cross-departmental work is needed. One of the biggest areas of complaint that I have heard about is the congregation of young people when they are waiting to get onto buses. Also, we should not forget that, whatever happens in a broad school environment, the biggest problem is the socialising that happens at a distance from schools. That socialising, rather than what happens in the more controlled environment of work or school, is part of the problem that we have in trying to control things in wider society.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move on to topical questions.

Youth Facilities: Skeoge, Derry

T1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education, in light of the fact that the Skeoge area of Derry has a high level of young people and a chronic shortage of community services, whether he will consider repurposing the H1C land that his Department owns there, which is not big enough to build schools on, for youth facilities instead. (AQT 541/17-22)

Mr Weir: I will be happy to look into specific problems in an area. If the Member writes to me with greater detail, I will get back to her. I will certainly look at that but am conscious that, presumably, I will be bound by what I can do legally. I will take all that into consideration, but

I want to ensure that we have the maximum number of facilities for all our young people.

Ms Anderson: Minister, I appreciate that response. During the week, Karen Mullan, who, as you know, is a fantastic education spokesperson for Sinn Féin, and I facilitated a meeting between officials from the Department and the Education Authority and a community organisation in the Skeoge area called the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership (GSAP). One of the things that I would like you to consider when looking at that H1C land is helping us to develop a business case. I ask that, if you can help to take that forward, you assist with the business case process.

Mr Weir: Again, we will try to be of whatever assistance we can within the limits of what we are allowed to do legally. I am due to your speak to your colleague via a Zoom call on Wednesday. That will probably be about the wider context of youth settings, but this may well come up. I do not know whether that call will deal with this specific issue or whether it will be more about wider youth provision, but I will certainly be happy to look at anything.

Young People: Emotional Health and Well-being

T2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education what support he can give to children and young people, especially for their emotional health and well-being at this time, given the fascination that other parties have with closing schools and, ultimately, the detrimental impact that that has on young people who have to stay at home and on family life. (AQT 542/17-22)

Mr Weir: This is important. The focus has been on the academic impact of closure and rightly so. However, there is also a danger that children being off school, both in the spring and now, will have a devastating effect on their mental health. If things are followed through in the way that they are supposed to be, it will lead to isolation among young people.

Two levels of support will be made available. I will take forward a broader mental health and well-being framework that was being developed pre COVID and has funding, which would be on an annual, ongoing basis. Obviously, there is also an immediate need. As well as the Engage programme that is dealing with academic catch-up, some one-off mental health support is needed to address the COVID situation. As part of the overall restart package for schools, the Executive agreed a £5 million funding package. We have made proposals, which, I think, just

need final business case approval, and we hope to move on that relatively soon, probably in early November.

As with the Engage programme, that will make support available to schools, and they will be able to determine where, they feel, the best interventions should take place. I am conscious that we should not do everything on a simple top-down basis, because that would be trying to put square pegs into round holes.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for the answer, Minister. You referred to November: is that when the package will be in place, or is it when schools will see the beneficial impacts of that money on the ground?

Mr Weir: The quickest way to distribute the money is through direct funding. Schools get a proportion of that money and are able to decide. It is also the case that, leaving everything else aside, because individual circumstances will vary, areas will vary. For example, a school in the middle of Belfast may take a different view from a school in a rural setting in, say, County Tyrone. Similarly, the interventions that you would make for a seven-year-old would be very different from what you would make for a 17-year-old. That level of flexibility will be produced. As I said, we are also looking at additional work, some of which will be in the form of pilot programming when we have the mental health and well-being framework. We will need Executive sign-off for that, but that level of support will be mainstreamed into the future.

CCEA Proposals

T3. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education whether he accepts that the recently announced CCEA proposals, which came a week before schools were closed for an extended mid-term break because of COVID, need to be reconsidered, especially because many school leaders and students have been left disappointed and frustrated and to take into account the likelihood of further disruption to the school system this year. (AQT 543/17-22)

Mr Weir: No. There will be a slight degree of adjustment, and exams that were planned for November in the autumn series will have a slight degree of delay. As I said, having a situation in which examinations take place is the best possible solution, albeit with the range of mitigations that have been put in place. We are not yet at the final point of those mitigations. It is also appropriate that there is a situation in

which individual contingency plans are worked out.

At times, there are a lot of advantages to devolution in terms of individual things that we can do, but I suspect that one thing that we cannot do as a society, although we may see ourselves, often with a level of justification, as a place apart or a special place, is go on an entirely solo run when it comes to examinations and qualifications and risk a situation in which what we put in place for our young people is either more difficult than anywhere else, which would disadvantage our pupils, or is simply not regarded by universities or employers as robust compared with other jurisdictions. We must make sure that, across a range of local jurisdictions, there is a level of comparability and portability of those qualifications. Otherwise, we may produce very nice results for one year, but, in the long run, those pupils will be disadvantaged. It has to be about that level of compatibility.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned contingency plans, but we were aware that the decision to close schools in March would have consequences for this year's academic work. Here we are, nearly at the end of October, and we do not have comprehensive contingency plans or scenario planning. Will the Minister advise when those plans will be completed?

Mr Weir: I hope that they will be completed as soon as possible. It is also important that we get it right. CCEA produced initial proposals, which went out to consultation. Beyond that, a level of discussion took place between the Department and CCEA. That also involved the trade union side and stakeholders; for example, this was discussed with the reference group of school principals. There was then a level of discussion with other jurisdictions to make sure that nothing that was done would be so out of kilter with other countries that it would disadvantage our students. If I have my time frame correct, that meant that an announcement about the overall position was not made until about a week and a half ago. As part of that, we instructed CCEA to look at getting options for continuity, which is important.

To some extent, we were in a position that decisions in the spring had to be made quickly, and it may be argued that not everything was done right and that we moved too quickly. We have to make sure that, where we have contingency plans, they are robust in all circumstances and are thought through. I hope

that those plans will be produced as soon as possible.

Home-to-school Transport: Assessment Criteria

T4. Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to explain the system used by the Education Authority (EA) to compute the distance between homes and schools for the assessment of entitlement for free home-to-school transport. (AQT 544/17-22)

Mr Weir: Without getting into the technicalities, although I am happy to write to the Member with the details, attempts have been made over the years to ensure uniformity, but there have been challenges. Having been involved at local level, I have seen it happen with schools where there was divergence in how the distance was calculated, whether it was the nearest, if you like, physical route or as the crow flies. Where things have been wrongly applied, that has led to successful appeals. I think that a uniform system is produced, but I will write to the Member with the details of precisely how it is calculated.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that answer. Does the Minister accept that a uniform approach does not take into consideration the unique characteristics of different geographical areas or the difficulty and safety of some routes and that, therefore, this is not the ideal way to approach the issue?

Mr Weir: I understand the argument. However, if there is a range of situations where this is judged almost case by case, it becomes entirely inequitable, both administratively and from the point of view of fairness. You might find yourself trying to make judgements about, for example, a pupil having to walk to school. What are the pavements like? What support do you give in connection with that? What is the level of rurality? How busy are the roads that the pupil has to cross to get to school? All those factors would make it incredibly difficult to find a fair system, as it could always be argued that somebody had missed out or that someone else should have got more and vice versa. Let us remember that this is a situation where there is universal free transport. Every year, about 80,000 pupils get a free bus pass, so it is one of the more generous systems. It would be impractical to take every individual factor into account when a child is trying to get to school.

We must also recognise that, nowadays, the vast majority of children are taken to school by their parents. When I was at primary school — I

do not want to venture a guess at just how old the Member opposite is — large numbers of children simply walked to and from school, but the numbers using active travel have greatly reduced. All that has to be taken into account. There will always be reviews of the right way to do things in school transport, but tailoring a decision according to the individual will inevitably create disparities and inequities between individuals.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have two minutes. I call Ms Pam Cameron.

Flu Vaccine: Schoolchildren

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Education, given the Public Health Agency's (PHA) statement about delays with flu vaccinations, whether he foresees any difficulty with the roll-out of the programme in schools, albeit that the statement was released during Question Time and he likely will not be aware of it and the PHA has stated that children will not be affected because the delay relates to the adult dose rather than the child dose. (AQT 545/17-22)

Mr Weir: We will be happy to work with the PHA on the issue. Prior to the decision to extend the half-term holiday, we had intended to put a large number of children through this week. However, that would have been fairly impractical, given the fact that the schools are closed. The best way of doing it with children is probably by organising it class by class so that you ensure that the bubble is there. Even with that, we had, I think, worked with the PHA to see whether alternative arrangements could have been made over the next couple of weeks with regard to, for example, almost a drive-by situation; indeed, from that point of view, I think, a common position had largely been reached with the PHA. From what the Member has said, it appears that that has largely been overtaken by events and that we will see an overall delay. I assume that the PHA will be able to factor that in to ensure that children get the flu vaccination and that the Department will continue to work with the PHA to ensure that that is the case. However, it is a lot easier to do that in a school environment when schools are fully functioning, which would, at least, mean that there was an alignment between the time that the vaccination takes place and schools being fully operational.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Education. The next item on the agenda is questions to the Minister of Finance. I ask the House to take its ease for

a few moments to allow Members to come in and out of the Chamber.

2.45 pm

Finance

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask those Members who are leaving the Chamber to do so. Question 1 has been withdrawn, and questions 5 and 9 have been grouped.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Newspaper Sector

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any plans to extend the 12-month rate relief support scheme to the local newspaper sector. (AQO 922/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I am very aware that the local newspaper sector is struggling to survive given the significant loss of income that it has experienced over recent months. I confirm that, back in June, I put plans to Executive colleagues to extend the 12-month rate support to the local newspaper industry. That was in line with similar relief that had been provided in Scotland. I remain keen to see the matter agreed by the Executive.

In response to representations from the local newspaper sector, I am also seeking an increase in the Executive's advertising in that area.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer and efforts to date. We welcome the Minister's support for the newspaper sector, which plays a key role in our local communities. It is vital that it gets support, especially with rates. I urge the Minister to do what he can to encourage public-sector advertising in local newspapers in order to increase, in particular, awareness of the public health issues that need to be highlighted.

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member, which is why, as I said, I put a proposition to the Executive in June. That has not received support yet, but I am still hopeful about it. After meeting a cross-sectoral group from the local newspaper industry, I engaged with the Executive information service on its advertising campaign. It seems that not much of that advertising trickles down to the local newspaper sector, even though it is, of course, vital to business and community life in the areas that it covers.

Through advertising, the sector also hits a demographic that social media and electronic media do not, and it gets to some of the people who most need to hear the public health message about protecting themselves and whatever vulnerabilities that they might have. I am keen that such an advertising campaign is stepped up and, as was done in Scotland, targeted through local newspapers so that we can get to the demographic that is not getting its information from social media.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his words of support. There is another action in his gift that would be of long-term benefit to local media, namely, supporting libel reform. He will recall that Sammy Wilson, as Finance Minister, not only did not bring forward a legislative consent motion on the Defamation Act 2013 but did not even consult with his Executive colleagues on it.

Mr Murphy: I am happy to look at that. It is not something that has been brought to my attention since I came into post. Obviously, we very quickly had to deal with COVID and all the issues that it has thrown up, but I am happy to go back to the Department to see where that issue has been sitting and what can be done on it.

Ms Sugden: Given the new restrictions and the challenges that are presenting themselves, is the Minister considering whether to extend the 12-month rate relief scheme to any other sectors?

Mr Murphy: I have not had specific requests from other sectors. The work to identify the sectors that were most in need of targeted rate support was done by Ulster University's economic team. Since then, it has looked again at the newspaper sector and, given the drop-off in entertainment that is, obviously, a big source of advertising income for the local press, it has recognised that it had been particularly badly hit and has advocated that it should be supported in that way. If there are other particular sectors that feel that that is the case, I am more than happy to look at them. The initial support was based on research that we undertook that identified particular sectors.

Mr O'Toole: I have engaged with the Minister in the past on this matter and have been campaigning on it. He said that a bid had gone into the Executive for extending relief for local newspapers, but will he be specific? Is there an outstanding bid and have Executive Ministers not agreed to it, or is it just that it is waiting for a future bids process? Where exactly is it?

Mr Murphy: We quantified the cost of a rates holiday for that sector for the rest of the financial year. The Member will know that quite a lot of local newspapers have a shopfront, and some of them have their own printing facilities, which would qualify them under manufacturing rate relief. We quantified that cost but it has not got on to the Executive agenda. That is a matter of regret, and I hope that it will do so very soon.

Aviation Sector: Support

3. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any recent discussions he has had with Executive colleagues on targeted support for the aviation sector. (AQO 923/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I secured Executive agreement to a package of time-limited support measures for the aviation sector in April 2020, as the lockdown resulted in significant reductions in passenger numbers. That package was developed in conjunction with the Economy and Infrastructure Ministers, who have policy responsibilities for aviation. The package provided up to £5.7 million for Belfast City Airport, City of Derry Airport and those airlines that operate the essential flights that help to keep the air bridge open with Britain.

In May, I also announced 100% rate relief for Belfast International Airport, Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport until 31 March 2021. That additional package was worth £2.2 million. In June, the Executive agreed to further support for the airports given the material losses that they are suffering, including continuing to support City of Derry Airport until March 2021. My Department is actively considering what further support might be required to maintain local connectivity, and I understand that other Departments are doing the same.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his answer. In relation to the help that is available to the aviation sector and, in particular, to Belfast International Airport in my constituency, will he detail any discussions that he has had with the Treasury about the possible removal of domestic air passenger duty?

Mr Murphy: No, that has not arisen in our discussions with the Treasury. As the Member will understand, we have focused on some of the schemes that the Treasury offered, including the job retention scheme and the job support scheme that will replace it, as well as some of the loans issues. We are continuing the discussion and have had quite a lot of dialogue with all three airports, collectively and

individually, over the past while. We are ascertaining what the key issues are for them and where their key costs lie, including for Belfast International Airport, and we will attempt to put together further support for them based on their needs and requirements at this time.

Dr Aiken: It looks as if Belfast International Airport will no longer be able to operate on a 24-hour basis. I am afraid that the Economy Department has been rather laggardly in putting forward bids to support the airport. Will the Minister encourage his Department, which seems to be more capable of getting money for the airports and airlines, to look at the situation and endeavour fairly quickly to make sure that we have at least one aviation facility in Northern Ireland that is fully capable of 24-hour operation?

Mr Murphy: As I said, we have had regular and ongoing dialogue with the airports since the start of the pandemic. We recognise very clearly that all three airports are key to connectivity, which in turn is key to our local economy. We are happy to continue that dialogue with Belfast International Airport. Issues that affect the timing of flights are probably beyond my Department's scope, but we have acted, if you like, as a kind of conduit between other Departments in understanding the airports' immediate requirements. We have been talking not only to the Treasury but to the Department for Transport in London about our airports, and we are making sure that local Departments are responding to their needs.

Mr Dunne: Can the Minister give us an assurance about the manufacturing industry, especially Bombardier, due to the impact from the drop-off in aircraft flights and the risk of the loss of jobs in manufacturing to Bombardier and other suppliers in the supply chain that work tirelessly for manufacturing in Northern Ireland?

Mr Murphy: It would primarily be up to his colleague the Minister for the Economy to bring forward propositions and to engage with those sectors to understand what their losses may be. I understand — the Minister has mentioned it on a number of occasions — about the broader aviation and aviation support industry being very much challenged in the time ahead because orders will drop off and there will be a much longer comeback for them than perhaps for other sectors that might be able to respond more quickly.

I am more than happy to hear from Departments about where they think the critical issues are that need to be addressed. Of

course, they will have to quantify that with a bid, and I will be happy to analyse that in order to do some due diligence and present that to the Executive for support.

COVID-19: Targeted Rate Relief 2020-21

4. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will offer targeted rate relief in 2020-21 to those business sectors affected by the pandemic. (AQO 924/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the current 2020-21 rating year, I am pleased that over 25,000 businesses are benefiting from the targeted 12-month rate relief or holiday that was introduced to help businesses particularly impacted by COVID-19. This initiative, which is providing £213 million of rates support, is acknowledged by local businesses to be have been essential. This targeted support builds on the £100 million provided in the four-month rates holiday provided earlier this year to all businesses and demonstrates our continued determination to help businesses to get through the pandemic.

You will have heard my response to the Member for North Down concerning the newspaper sector. I consider that this would be a small but suitable extension to the scheme.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his response. The assistance given in this financial year is to be welcomed and should be extended to cover industries affected by the further restrictions now in place. What work is being done to look at relief for the next financial year, 2021-22? I ask that because I know that a number of businesses will continue to suffer a downturn in trade as a result of the pandemic.

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member in his last point that it is unlikely that we will be through the economic consequences of the pandemic, whatever about the health consequences, by the end of the financial year. We sincerely hope that there will be some end to the pandemic and that solutions will be found, but, undoubtedly, economic damage will continue. We have already begun the exercise of looking at next year's commercial and non-domestic rates, and we will begin to engage with some business sectors on that.

The piece of work that we undertook to target more rates support beyond the first four months that benefited all businesses was undertaken by Ulster University. We have asked it, again, to give assistance in looking forward into next year. The Member will understand that it is very

difficult, given how unpredictable the virus has been and the consequences of further restrictions having to be introduced. We are undertaking that work, and we will again engage Ulster University to assist us in looking at the specific sectors that will continue to struggle in the new financial year.

Mr Allister: I ask the Minister to look at one particular sector in business that has not been provided for in rates relief, namely the B&B sector. Its businesses primarily pay domestic rates, yet they seek to operate businesses that have been devastated. Would it not be fair and appropriate, in that niche, to provide rates relief for B&B operators?

Mr Murphy: I am certainly content to look at rates relief for them. It is timely because, in our consideration of the scheme to support businesses that are forced into closure, we have been able to include the smaller bed and breakfasts. It was on the basis of a conversation with them that, as the Member quite rightly identifies, it was identified that they come in under the domestic rating and, therefore, Land and Property Services (LPS) was unable to distinguish between them and ordinary households. LPS advised us that the Tourist Board gives them a certificate of accreditation. It was simply a matter of getting a list. That could have been done earlier in the pandemic, and I regret that it was not, because we could have got support to that sector more easily.

We have now been able to include B&Bs in the support package for businesses that are obliged to close down under the new restrictions. It is not the rates relief question that he raises, but it is something. It points out the necessity not just of Departments collaborating but of arm's-length bodies bringing information in to assist.

I have asked Departments to adopt a can-do attitude, and the same applies to arm's-length bodies. The sector is vital to the tourism industry here, and some 400 businesses are affected. That should have been picked up on earlier in the year, but I am glad that it now has been.

3.00 pm

Ms Dolan: Minister, do you agree that the business rate policy for the next financial year needs to be set as soon as possible in order to give businesses time to plan?

Mr Murphy: Yes. It should be. We have budgetary issues that we have to get clarity on. We are pressing very hard to get that clarity. We want to set policies against the budgets that are available to us. We are planning on the basis that we are into a multi-annual Budget of three years for resource and a four-year one for capital. We have yet to get absolute confirmation from Treasury in that regard. The spending review has begun. We, as well as Scotland and Wales, are very keen to get some information from Treasury on how that is being conducted. I agree with you that the planning should be done as early as possible, but being uncertain about the funding envelope that we have makes it much more difficult to plan.

Mr Catney: Consideration is being given to extending targeted rate relief to the local arts sector. Does the Minister agree that it is irresponsible to continue to rely solely on the ad hoc handouts from Westminster to address the structural challenges to Northern Ireland's economy that have been thrown up by COVID? What discussions has he had with the Minister for the Economy around developing an economic intervention programme to address the long-term impacts on job and business creation?

Mr Murphy: The Executive have discussed the broader issue of economic support, and I have had discussions with the Minister for the Economy as well about support in the here and now. The difficulty, as I identified in my previous answer, with longer-term economic input and providing longer-term support — this is undoubtedly going to be a protracted economic recovery — is in knowing the funding envelope that we have for the years ahead. That is why we need some certainty from the ongoing Whitehall comprehensive spending review (CSR) process. As I said, we need to find out the time frame in which we are operating and the sum that we have attached to that. That is not to say that we should not be engaging with the business sectors and formulating plans, but putting something concrete in place requires us to know the time frame of the Budget and the funding envelope that we have.

Business Support Grants

5. Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Finance, in instances where additional regional restrictions are introduced, what funds have been ring-fenced for geographical areas that may require a new business grant scheme. (AQO 925/17-22)

9. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses in the Foyle constituency will benefit from the business support package announced on 7 October 2020. (AQO 929/17-22)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I will group questions 5 and 9 for answer.

The Executive agreed a support scheme for businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area that were directly affected by the health regulations announced on 1 October. Following the Executive receiving an additional £200 million, I moved swiftly to double the payments that were previously announced for Derry and Strabane and to extend the support package to eligible businesses that were subject to the new restrictions across all council areas from Friday evening. As Finance Minister, I want to use the levers at my disposal to make a difference quickly. The £35 million scheme enables us to put payments in place promptly. We estimate that around 430 eligible businesses in Derry and Strabane may benefit from the support. Applications opened last Wednesday. As of this morning, I think that there have been in and around 400 applications.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. This is a fast-moving situation, so your response has almost already exceeded the question. Has the Minister made any assessment of the budgetary needs, particularly for the Department for the Economy, should the current four-week restrictions on many business sectors be extended further or extended in a more localised context?

Mr Murphy: I had a conversation with the Minister for the Economy prior to Thursday's Executive meeting. The scheme that I have outlined picks up businesses with rateable premises that are forced to close. That is probably most of them, but it is certainly not all. Many people who provide close-contact services operate from their own home, travel to provide services to people or hire a chair in another person's premises. I spoke to the Economy Minister about coming in quickly on the back of the scheme that we had. We were able to get it on the ground quickly because the Land and Property Services (LPS) data had been tried and tested on the £10,000 and £25,000 schemes earlier in the year. It was essential, because this is a four-week intervention, to get that money out very quickly to support people.

I hope that further schemes will be developed. The Economy Minister told the Executive on Thursday that she intended to bring some schemes to the Executive early this week. I look forward to seeing those. They will come to my Department for assessment, and then, I hope that, at this Thursday's Executive meeting, we will have some understanding of what that amounts to and will be able to try to get support to those people as quickly as possible.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for acting early to provide support to businesses to Derry and Strabane and for continuing with that process. When will those businesses receive the portion owed on the higher payment?

Mr Murphy: As I said, we moved ahead with the scheme for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area because, even though we knew that further interventions were coming, they had already been closed for more than a week by that stage. It was important to move ahead as quickly as possible with that scheme. The scheme for all 11 council areas opened this morning, and I understand that several thousand applications are already in. The rest of the regulations are in place, but when the regulations in relation to the level of payment come through, we will add to the payments already received by some of the Derry and Strabane businesses and will make sure that they get the same amount as everyone else as quickly as possible.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his responses so far, and I commend him on getting the finance package in place and open today. When the north-west package was announced, the SDLP leader claimed that Nichola Mallon was critical of the package made available. Is the Minister aware of any such representation or criticism from the Infrastructure Minister?

Mr Murphy: I am loath to get into internal Executive matters, but suffice to say that, when that scheme was put in place — obviously we circulated the scheme to all Executive colleagues for comment before it was brought to the Executive — we received no objections to the scheme at all.

Budget 2020-21

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance when he will publish a Budget for 2020-21. (AQO 926/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Budget for 2020-21 was published on 31 March this year. However, if the Member is referring to the 2021-22 Budget, that cannot be published without understanding the overall financial context. In that regard, the Executive's funding envelope is yet to be determined. The funding envelope is dependent on the outcome of the Treasury's spending review, and the Chancellor has not yet set a date for the spending review outcome. I and my colleagues in other devolved Administrations have been pressing him for that.

Once we know the outcome of the spending review, a local Budget process will follow. The Executive must have a Budget for 2021-22 in place before the new financial year.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the publication of the Main Estimates in the last few weeks. It is important to have detailed estimates for planning purposes. Does the Minister appreciate the importance of having a draft Budget published and engaging with the public, going forward? Will he assure me that we will have one this time and that he will not become the second Sinn Féin Minister to fail to publish a draft Budget?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that I can only publish a Budget when I know the amount that will be there and the time frame within which we will be planning. The comprehensive spending review was due to have taken place in Whitehall over the summer months. It is now pushed back into the autumn. I and the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers have been jointly pressing for the earliest possible information because the lack of information on that affects all our planning. I can assure the Member that, as soon as we have sufficient information to allow us to do so, we will engage in the Budget planning process immediately and make sure that there is full consultation with the Assembly and its Committees and with other sectors that have an interest.

Ms Anderson: Minister, are you are planning a multi-year Budget? I am thinking primarily about infrastructure money and the Infrastructure Committee. It would be quite useful and helpful for the north-west, particularly Derry.

Mr Murphy: Once we know that, I intend to have a series of discussions with Executive colleagues individually on their budgetary requirements. It is necessary to do that, but we are also doing it with one eye blind, if you like, because we do not know what amount we will have. It will be for the Minister for Infrastructure to bring forward spending proposals within

whatever time frame we have. I look forward to receiving those from her, including some for the north-west.

Mr O'Toole: The Budget published in June of this year was basically a placeholder. That was, in part, because of the COVID crisis. We are now 10 months on from the restart of these institutions and only about 18 months from the end of this mandate and new elections. We are also in the midst of the COVID crisis, which will probably not be over for at least six months, even on the most optimistic timeline. Does the Minister accept that it is extremely unlikely that there will be a full multi-year Budget, a Programme for Government or anything approaching a serious strategic budgeting process for the Executive? Further to that, does he accept that he needs to sit down with the Economy Minister and deliver a more coherent economic response?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I suspect that the Minister's answer will be shorter than the Member's question.

Mr Murphy: I do not accept that. I operate a can-do process. We should, of course, have the ambition for this institution to deliver a Budget and Programme for Government that are properly set out and which have been properly consulted on and properly debated. The economic plan is not the responsibility of just two Departments. The Department for Infrastructure, for instance, has a huge role in economic development, and the Department for Communities has a significant role in town centre regeneration. It is not simply a matter of two Ministers knocking their heads together and coming up with a grand plan for the Executive and Assembly. This is an Executive-wide responsibility. I look forward to discussions on the Budget process with the individual Departments and then, collectively, with the Executive.

Mr Blair: Will the Minister, in the interests of future planning processes, provide an update on the prospects of multi-year Budgets starting in 2020-21?

Mr Murphy: As I have said, when I put that question directly to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury a fortnight ago, he said that they were still operating on that basis, which did not entirely fill me with confidence, because we want certainty. That is a question that we continue to pursue with Treasury, and it is not just us. Scotland and Wales are pursuing the same question. They are in the same bind as we are when it comes to getting their Budget

processes going: getting consultation going, understanding the funding envelope and knowing what will be the time frame attached to all of that.

Procurement Board

7. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his plans to reconvene the Procurement Board. (AQO 927/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Procurement Board is responsible for setting policy priorities for procurement expenditure, which influences around 25% of the Executive's Budget. It is important to ensure that these policies are developed by experts in public procurement, along with representatives of the key sectors of the economy.

I have asked the Executive to agree to a reconstituted Procurement Board, and I have asked the appointment representatives of key sectors of the economy to work with procurement professionals to develop future policy. It is important to ensure that procurement policy is informed by experts, if it is to address the immediate priorities of the Executive in regard to economic growth, social value and the faster delivery of infrastructure projects

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I am glad to hear that the board is to be set up. How does the Minister intend to ensure that social value is at the heart of such procurement?

Mr Murphy: In reconstituting the board, the intention is to have expertise on it and to ensure that the policies and advice that it brings forward are adopted by the Executive. Social value is a key policy objective for me and the Department. We want to ensure that, when those policies are agreed, they do not just sit in the Procurement Board but, to make sure that they are effective, they filter down through all the Departments and arm's-length bodies. In some of our public institutions, there is a tendency to be overloaded with policies but not have much by way of implementation. My idea in reconstituting the board is to get expert advice, get Executive approval for policies and then follow through, in each Department and arm's-length body, to make sure that things like social value are properly put in place in procurement.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's response, particularly his reference to putting

together the Procurement Board. Does he accept that the Procurement Board must work as part of a much wider framework? If so, will he also consider the appointment of a one-off fiscal commission to examine budgetary settings and structural challenges for the economy in the difficult times ahead?

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: You are correct in that procurement is one part of public spending; it is about 25% of public spending, so it is very important. It is important that we have policies attached to that: things like social value and more efficiency around the spend are key. I am looking at the idea of a fiscal council to assist with the overarching spending plans and what levers we have available around revenue raising.

Mr Dunne: As Minister, you will be aware of the concerns around unacceptable delays in the opening of tender documents for public-sector schemes. What have you done, as Minister, to try and progress that issue?

Mr Murphy: If the Member has specific issues, I ask him to communicate with us and we can look into those. Of course, we want procurement to be as efficient as possible and to make sure that tenders and all the issues are done in such a way that Departments are delivering them as quickly as possible. During the pandemic, we sent a note to all Departments to advise them to get construction projects ready and to make sure that they were at the point of tenders going out, even when the construction industry was shut down during the earlier lockdown phase — to do that and get those issues ready so that all the procedural things were done and construction could very quickly get back up and running again.

We are always keen to improve on efficiency and effectiveness. If there are specific issues that the Member is aware of, I invite him to let us know and we will deal with them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The time for listed questions has passed, and we now move to topical questions.

Rates: SOLACE Proposal

T1. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of whether the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives' (SOLACE) suggestion of marrying together the district rate and the regional rate would be a

possibility, given that he may be aware that SOLACE briefed the Committee for Communities two weeks ago and was very complimentary about him and his permanent secretary and the work that they are doing around rates. (AQT 551/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is very worthwhile, particularly because, through the interventions that we made in relation to business support; the councils' take from the rates was actually protected in that. It was a good outcome for councils, and I am not surprised that they are complimentary about the Department — whatever about me. It was a good outcome, because some of those businesses might have closed and the councils would have lost the rates. We guaranteed the protection of their rates.

On setting an overarching policy, if the Executive took the initiative to support businesses and reduce the rates on them, but the council took the initiative to increase the rates — an individual council, or a number of councils — one part of the policy would undo the other. The closer that what regional government does is to what local government does, the better the outcome and more consistency in approach that we will have.

I am very keen to work with local government, through SOLACE and the councils. I have met the Northern Ireland Local Government Association on occasions as well to discuss these things and try and get more joined-up working arrangements right across the public sector. It is to the benefit of everyone.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Following on from that, we all know that the rates are based on the estimated penny product. SOLACE also mentioned, in its briefing to the Committee, protecting that for it going forward because it is worried about clawback when the figure becomes a reality. SOLACE has asked for that for two or three years, but will the Minister give an assessment of that for the year ahead?

Mr Murphy: As part of the rates process that I talked about earlier, around looking at what rates might be like next year and what relief can be provided, we also have engagement with councils. For a lot of the more technical issues, like the penny product and others, we can undertake engagement, but I am committed to closer working with the councils. Clearly, over the course of the pandemic, we, at various times, found money to put through the Department for Communities into councils

because we recognise how vital they are to public services and support on the ground. We want to make sure that the councils are in a position to deliver public services and continue to function and do the good work that they do. That level of collaboration and understanding of all those issues is something that we are keen to work on.

COVID-19 Restrictions: Support Scheme Eligibility

T2. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister of Finance whether social enterprises and B&Bs are included in the support scheme for businesses that have been subjected to the COVID-19 restrictions. (AQT 552/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I confirmed in a previous answer to Mr Allister, after a conversation with the smaller bed and breakfasts, the Department ascertained that the Tourist Board's list can be used to verify those businesses, and the smaller bed and breakfasts were included in the scheme. Social enterprises have also been included: not only do they have a business side to their function but they are hugely important for delivering services and engaging and employing people who otherwise might not make their way on to the workforce.

Mr McCann: Further to that, has the Minister received any proposals on financial support for sole traders, taxi drivers and the coach industry?

Mr Murphy: We have yet to receive proposals for a range of sectors, many of which were mentioned in the earlier debate. Some of the delay has been due to the difficulty in getting individual Departments to decide who has responsibility. Other delays may be caused by the need to find ways to verify the data about who is economically active in the various sectors. I have encouraged all Ministers who have a responsibility to bring forward support schemes urgently. I have made it clear that we are now on the second round of providing support for some businesses, and that is all the more acute for those who have yet to receive any support. It is vital that we get those schemes brought forward and delivered quickly.

COVID Business Grants

T3. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Finance whether, as the Minister with responsibility for the public purse, he is confident that the £13 million of COVID business-related grants that, last month, the Northern Ireland Audit Office

reported had been paid in error can be clawed back and the money utilised in other areas, albeit that she appreciates that the schemes were designed by the Department for the Economy. (AQT 553/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that those schemes were developed in an unprecedented — "unprecedented" has almost become overused — situation and that speedy support for businesses was of primary importance. We had discussions with the Comptroller and Auditor General to advise him that we were taking a risk with the schemes. Having said that, I recognise that the amount that you have identified is an estimate based on samples that have been worked up. On that estimate, 93% or 94% has been paid out accurately, which is remarkable, given how quickly the schemes were put together and the money paid out. I understand that some money has already been clawed back. Where money has been paid out in error, I encourage Departments to seek to get it back. As the Member says, it is important to spend that money in the areas that need it.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate that the schemes were developed quickly and that the aim was to get money out as quickly as possible. The frustration is that there are still so many businesses that have been unable to avail themselves of any moneys, while some have availed themselves of more than they were entitled to. If money does come back into the Department of Finance's coffers, I encourage the Minister to distribute it as quickly as possible, not just to businesses that have already received money but to those that have not received anything.

Mr Murphy: Absolutely. However, the Member will know that it is not up to me to distribute that money. It has to be on the basis of a scheme brought forward by a Department. In this case, the Department for the Economy has to say, "We recognise that these people have missed out. Here is a way to supply money to them". Any conversations that the Department of Finance has had with businesses has always been about getting cash to businesses quickly, as have any conversations since the further intervention by the Executive. That is what businesses tell us that they require. Of course, we will try to do that as best we can.

Some businesses were able to continue to trade during lockdown. So it was important to target to make sure that we were not giving money to people who were doing OK and who continued to trade with very little restriction. It is important to find ways to target the support

where it is needed. However, in doing that, sometimes people miss out or fall through the cracks of various schemes. I have asked Ministers to bring forward proposals as urgently as possible.

Healthcare Staff: Lost Wages

T4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Finance why money allocated to healthcare staff to reimburse them for wages that were lost while they were on strike has not yet reached those staff members. (AQT 554/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed on 18 May to allocate £1.64 million to reimburse healthcare staff. It is disappointing that, five months on, the Department of Health has yet to provide that money to healthcare staff. I again urge the Health Minister to reimburse healthcare workers, who are at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a matter of urgency. The matter has been agreed by the Executive, so I am not sure what the hold-up with the payment is.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Hospices provide a vital service here but their funding has been badly impacted as a result of COVID. Will any extra funding be provided to the hospices in the time ahead?

Mr Murphy: In May, I announced £6.75 million support for the hospices and had an opportunity at that time to visit some of them to see at first hand the incredible work that they do. I am working on a further support package for the hospices, which I hope to bring to the Executive in the near future. We have been engaging with the hospices, including Daisy Lodge, which is the children's support project, and the Cancer Fund for Children. We hope to bring a proposition to the Executive in the very near future on that.

Getting emergency support to the hospices at this time is one thing, but there is the outstanding issue of funding for the hospices being mainstreamed. We need to make sure that that 50:50 funding that had been agreed with the Department of Health some time back is honoured. I know that there is ongoing dialogue between the Department of Health and the hospices, and I hope that we do not end up in a situation where we are continually trying to find emergency funding for those very worthy projects and that we get them on to a more mainstream way of funding in order to remove

that uncertainty for them on how they carry out their services.

Support for Supply Chain Businesses

T5. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance whether he is prepared to consider support for the businesses that directly supply goods and services through the supply chain, particularly to the hairdressing and hospitality sectors, given that the closure of those sectors has had a knock-on effect on such businesses, which brings to mind a small company that normally employs 16 people but, because of the closure of hospitality, is down to five people. (AQT 555/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The short answer is yes. The recognition in developing the schemes, which we did very quickly, was to get support to people who were obliged to close their business under the new regulations. There was also a recognition in our discussions at the Executive of people who were not necessarily obliged to close their business but who would feel a very adverse economic impact from the closure of businesses where their primary function was to supply them.

The Minister for the Economy is looking at a range of issues, including those businesses that have been forced to close but that cannot be got through the rates-based scheme, if you like, and at people in the supply chain. I hope that some schemes or propositions on that will be brought forward to the Executive very quickly.

Mr Newton: I accept that that is not the Minister's responsibility, although he indicated that it would happen very quickly. Will the Minister give favourable consideration to supporting the suppliers of goods and services to those particular sectors?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I will give favourable consideration to that. I make a recommendation to the Executive, so, ultimately, the Executive have to approve it, and I can make a recommendation based only on a scheme that is brought to me. I encourage all responsible Ministers to bring forward schemes very quickly. We have a limited pot of money, and it would help us not only to know what we need but to get that money out quickly, because the COVID-related money that we received has to be spent in this financial year. Therefore, if that money is due to businesses that need that support, it is important to get it out on the ground very quickly to allow it to be spent.

Free Face Masks

T6. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has had any discussions with the Health Minister about rolling out a scheme to provide free, reusable masks to the general public in order to deal with the pandemic and the worrying rise in cases. (AQT 556/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No. The Health Minister has not approached me about any such scheme, nor have I received any such proposal. I know that there are various considerations for supporting the community generally in dealing with the pandemic, but that scheme has never been put forward to me.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is worrying that he has not received any proposals. I know that this is hypothetical, but if he were to receive a proposal from the Health Minister, would he look favourably on it and be minded to support the roll-out of such a scheme in order to tackle the pandemic?

Mr Murphy: Undoubtedly, the wearing of face coverings is hugely important. It has been identified as one of the three key elements that the community can actively engage in, which are sanitisation, face coverings and social distancing.

There has been investment in providing sanitisation on the high street and in shops, and support has been given to schools to provide that. Clearly, if there were an issue with people being able to afford face coverings and a proposition were put forward to address that, I am sure that there would be considerable support in the Executive for that, given their central desire to promote the very strong message on face coverings.

3.30 pm

Paul Quinn

T7. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance, given that tomorrow is the anniversary of the brutal murder of Paul Quinn, whether he can find it within himself to publicly and unequivocally acknowledge that Paul Quinn was not a criminal and thereby bring some relief to his still grieving parents. (AQT 557/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I do not consider that to be part of the Finance brief, but, nonetheless, I have made a number of statements in relation to that, and I reiterate and stand over those statements.

Mr Allister: The Minister has never acknowledged that Paul Quinn was not a criminal. He knows that that is what is required to unlock the matter. Why can he not find it within himself — he holds a position of great authority — to offer to an ordinary family in south Armagh an acknowledgement that their son was not a criminal?

Mr Murphy: I repeat: I made a number of statements in relation to that, and I stand over those statements. My offer to meet and discuss the issues with the family remains.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments to allow a change at the Table, after which we will return to the debate and discussion on the Supply resolutions.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £4,757,631,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £4,791,050,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £112,618,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 and that resources, not exceeding £183,290,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Mr Catney: I have to get my glasses out. I can see the time I did not need them. Things are not working.

Mr Speaker: Get your glasses on and you can see your way clear to make your comments.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you, Minister. I am sure that the Minister will note the approval of the Finance Committee to allow accelerated passage of the Budget Bill, but I know that the Minister does not take this for granted and that it is not a ringing endorsement of the level of scrutiny that the Committee has had in this process. When the further Vote on Account was brought forward, both in the Committee and in this Chamber, I asked that better opportunity for scrutiny be given to the Committee as we are talking about large sums of public money being spent and proper time and consideration must be given to their use. I know that the Minister agrees with me on that.

We all know the strain that the pandemic has put on many different government processes. However, the Minister must now put the maximum effort into regulating the Budget process and bringing back a sense of normality to this process. This is not about the Committee trying to butt in or cause an issue. It is about recognising that we are yet to see the full impact of this pandemic as we look to the coming year, along with Brexit looming, and that regularising the Budget process can only allow the Committee and this Chamber to support the Department and the Minister during what I am sure will be a difficult Budget process. Having said that, I do welcome the fact that the Minister has brought forward this expenditure plan for the rest of the year, and I thank his team in the Department for the work that has been done to produce this Budget.

There are some areas that I hope to cover in the Budget debate, but there are a few technical points that I want to make. Although it may come up in the Budget debate later as it is not decided, one point that I will make is to steal the thunder of my Committee colleague Mr Allister, who is sitting at the back. There are still a number of those notorious black-box payments indicated in the Estimates. I know that a number of Departments have given notice of their intention to use sole authority going forward. I hope that, with our ability to legislate now restored, the Minister will see this used less and less. That is not to say that it should be eliminated. We cannot foresee every instance. Where possible, I hope that the Minister will encourage spending programmes

that this Chamber and the Committee can have proper scrutiny over.

One key area that we cannot escape is that of the difficulties that there have been in using capital expenditure this year. I welcome the initiative that the Minister has taken with the Finance Ministers of the other devolved Administrations to ask for increased carry-over of underspends going forward. However, more needs to be done to allow capital-to-resource transfer to deal with emergency issues in year. Although the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has said some ludicrous things in recent days, especially in my constituency of Lagan Valley, one thing that is absolutely true is that many of our businesses will not come back if there is a continuing cycle of lockdowns without more support in place. If we can push for greater flexibility to use capital underspends to help businesses, that can open funding streams and even borrowing potential to put support schemes in place whatever the future might bring.

Although I hope that we will get the accommodations needed from the Treasury, the Department must plan for how we can adopt our budgets if the Treasury does not move. This will mean Departments surrendering underspends early so that we can utilise as much as possible in the upcoming spending review, which should be the goal of the Budget process.

Mr McHugh: I am pleased to support the accelerated passage of this Bill, which was supported unanimously by the Finance Committee when representatives from the Department presented themselves to the Committee, answered all questions and gave clarifications on matters that arose. The Bill gives power to the Executive to direct £4.75 billion of resource to where it is most needed.

As the Chairman of the Finance Committee said earlier, flexibility is required: the same flexibility that was exemplified by the Minister recently when, on his own initiative, he supported businesses in the north-west that were impacted on by restrictions that were placed on the area two weeks ago. Those same supports have been extended to the rest of the country and increased.

It is not by accident that Health, the Economy, Communities and Education are the Departments that are the main beneficiaries of the Budget. In the midst of the pandemic, it is of the utmost importance that those Departments be provided with resources to meet the increasing demand for their services. It is not

only an investment in the here and now to fight the pandemic itself but an investment in the future. It is important that business and industry be supported to ensure that we still have an economy at the end of the crisis and to ensure that services can be delivered to those who are most in need.

Comments were made earlier about one-year and four-year Budgets. Many of the people who are most in need live on a weekly budget and may not know where their next shilling is coming from. That situation has intensified since the COVID outbreak, with businesses and employees finding themselves under pressure. Young people, at this stage in their life, must feel bewildered by what is happening. It is important to reassure them that they have a future and that every opportunity will be exploited to provide the best possible education to enhance their future prospects.

In the past, I have spoken in support of a retention of the furlough scheme, which is due to finish at the end of October, and about how it is incumbent on the British Government to provide resource to industry when that scheme comes to an end. That is not the only resource that we demand of the British Government. Commitments that they made under NDNA, which are needed even more now, in every respect, to support the region have, unfortunately, like so many other commitments, been broken, to date at least. They have not delivered on them.

In looking at commitments in each Department, I notice that every one has ensured that it has the resources that it needs to deal with the cost of Brexit: costs that we could do without at this time. Added to that is the additional stress of a no-deal Brexit and how it will impact severely on industry, which is clearly calling out for certainty. That illustrates the magnitude of the problems that we face.

As it is with the economy, it is with the pandemic on this island. The pandemic affects us all. It knows no borders, so it is imperative that an all-island approach be developed to meet the current crisis. Today, a two-week firebreak has been announced in Wales. The Republic is likely to move to level 4, and possibly to level 5, which would bring it more into line with our current restrictions. It has been acknowledged that a county-by-county strategy does not work. Contrary to what the Minister of Agriculture may think, the rising trend on this island is consistent with rising trends in Britain, in the rest of Europe and throughout the world, with a few notable exceptions. The spread cannot be categorised by whether a council

area is nationalist or unionist. The pandemic will be with us into the future. It will require the very best from us all, at all levels, to minimise its detrimental effect on our health and our economy.

Finally, I commend the Minister for bringing forward the Budget (No. 3) Bill, which will help to provide some certainty to so many people in these uncertain times. I commend him for showing leadership and for being able to respond quickly to the needs of all.

3.45 pm

Ms Bradshaw: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party and will focus my comments on health, with some dovetails into justice.

This is a dramatically changing financial situation, and I have concerns that vital bids from Health will not be agreed to. Every time that happens, we move closer to a COVID service than to a health service, and it has a hugely detrimental impact on society. The surge framework sees vital work around cancer, as well as some day-care centres, which remain operational but not as they were before the pandemic. The Estimates provide for funding pathways to secure those services. However, elective procedures have been postponed or cancelled; support for long-term conditions such as diabetes or Parkinson's is being redeployed so that even basic services are lacking; access to GPs is still extraordinarily difficult in many locations; and we are storing up huge problems down the line. Those problems will cost more to fix when we get to them than they would if services were maintained and procedures could take place now.

We are also in the precarious position of still being largely reliant on Barnett consequentials to provide vital uplifts to spending. In effect, our ability to respond financially, as required, is determined by what is deemed required for England rather than for Northern Ireland. At times like this, when we are moving up the curve faster, that presents a considerable challenge.

There is an allocation of just over £600 million for additional spend on COVID in the Health Department. Our challenge relates to the fact that, although the Estimates contain allocations for that money, we have no detailed clarity on how or even if it will all be spent. The question is not what we can aspire to spend but what can be spent. We do not want to arrive at a situation in the new year in which we have not spent money usefully. We need detailed actual spending for that money urgently. The Minister

has indicated explicitly that any money not spent out of the allocation will be made available to other Departments, but we need to know now how much that will be, because people need support now.

We also have to consider the broader situation around health. Among the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' are some that mean so much to us all: dealing with the waiting lists; the reform of adult social care; three cycles of IVF; the mental health strategy; the new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol; and palliative end-of-life care. Those issues are of high priority for us all.

Waiting lists are so long that some services are effectively unavailable, and even being on them causes further health problems for many people, not least around their mental well-being. Even the recent postponement of elective care in the Belfast Trust, for example, will have had a devastating impact on the people who had prepared themselves for it and who will not regard the word "elective" as apt for the vital procedures that they were about to undergo.

The reform of adult social care has received a funding uplift of £1.7 million. That is welcome, but we must recognise that, in the context of the overall health and social care spending, it is a paltry amount for a care sector that is more vital yet more complex than ever. A tough decision awaits about how exactly we fund care in the future.

The mental health strategy is more urgent than ever. I commend the work of the interim mental health champion to carve out a niche providing vital information and sensitivity at this difficult time. However, there is an urgent need for a strategy that takes account of the real issues raised by the pandemic and of the need to link in a raft of other issues, such as victim recognition, tackling addiction and so on. Surely, that is an area to which money could be allocated highly efficiently, but we urgently need plans for how that bid could be made available in this financial year to fund those vital interventions, not least the new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol.

The problem with such debates as this is that they concern numbers and tables, but we are dealing with the basics of human interaction and humanity. I agree with many in the Health Committee that the toughest stories that we have encountered recently have been around palliative end-of-life care. We cannot allow the separation — even physical separation — of people from their loved ones in care homes at

this time. The seriousness of the strain caused by the lack of social and physical contact with loved ones must not be underestimated. If ever there was a topic that is not about Estimates or Budget lines, it is that. We need to spend whatever it takes on PPE, testing or additional staff to ensure that people in care homes can spend time with their loved ones.

We have to talk about the charts and numbers. In the Main Estimates, there is some good news on transformation. The funding of just over £94 million is £13 million more than the original stand-still projection. However, the reality is that the wider health transformation has again, unfortunately, been seriously disrupted and delayed at the very moment when the need for transformation has been demonstrated.

I will move on to justice. Much of the health transformation agenda is about early intervention so that significant problems can be avoided down the line. Much of what the Department of Justice is trying to do falls into broadly the same category. We must never forget that rehabilitating offenders, for example, is not some soft option. It improves lives directly and indirectly improves society as a whole. It is therefore concerning that Justice has seen a real-terms cut to its budget of 12% since devolution, yet there is no less need for its services. Consecutive Ministers have had to manage rising demand for services on ever-decreasing budgets, often because the outcomes of those services are not immediate and do not suit an electoral cycle. It is time for that short-termism to end and for the funding of the vital services that are designed to keep people safe — the prisons, probation, youth justice, tackling paramilitarism and the rest — to be prioritised. There is irony in DUP and Sinn Féin Members calling for more police officers, when, in office, their Finance Ministers have reduced budgets year after year. If you want it, you have to pay for it. The implications for public safety and security of cutting the Justice budget have to be recognised.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bradshaw: OK, thank you.

Ms McLaughlin: Before COVID-19, we knew that lots of things had to be addressed. However, without an Assembly and Executive, they could not be addressed. Let us be honest: many things were swept under the carpet long before then. Coronavirus means that we cannot ignore them any longer.

One of the elephants in the room is our health service. Let us appreciate the role of Pivotal, the think tank, in forcing the scandal of waiting lists into news bulletins at the beginning of the year. At that time, Northern Ireland had 120,201 patients waiting for more than a year for planned care. In England, that figure was 1,154. The waiting list was 100 times longer in Northern Ireland than in England, yet the population of England is 30 times larger. Our waiting list, weighted for population, is 3,000 times longer than that in England. That is astonishing, and COVID is making a terrible situation so much worse. That puts a considerable strain on our capacity for Budget planning.

Other examples of where a bad situation is getting so much worse include the devolution settlement. The British Government are taking advantage of Brexit to remove powers and funds from Northern Ireland. They have taken to themselves funding streams that had been provided through the European Union and on which we had much greater influence than we are likely to have with the British Government after Brexit. In the Estimates, every Department cites additional cost as a result of EU exit, and many cite loss of revenue from EU funding. However, we do not have a clear articulation of those numbers from the Department. We need urgent clarity on precisely how much the EU exit is costing us in protocol implementation, the loss of EU funding and the staff cost in preparing for it. That is not all. The UK Internal Market Bill is removing from the Assembly the powers to make laws on market regulation. That is unacceptable.

Meanwhile, Departments do not have all the funds that they need to support businesses and workers through the COVID crisis. We now have the highest rates of infection in the UK and Ireland, yet the Barnett consequential are inadequate to provide the financial support needed to prop up our economy. All power to Andy Burnham and the people of Greater Manchester for demanding more financial support from the Government for their workers and businesses. Their demands are also our demands. The furlough scheme needs to be extended on a more generous basis than that being rolled out next month, with support provided for workers and businesses on a more comprehensive and inclusive than has been the case to date.

So far, we have failed to produce a joined-up economic recovery package for the sectors most directly affected by the ongoing pandemic. Allocations over the past number of months could be characterised as coming in dribs and

drabs, more indicative of the last group or sector to press the Executive for support. What we need is a strategic, cohesive, all-government recovery plan based on real needs. We do not have the borrowing powers to help our economy through the crisis or to undertake capital investment at the scale that is required to enable us to build for the long term while providing an economic stimulus in the short and long term. We need to get creative about schemes that could help to aid our recovery from COVID, about borrowing and about finding novel ways to utilise the financial transactions capital that we have often proved chronically incapable of spending. Using those fiscal levers, we can make serious commitments to deliver major infrastructure programmes, as well as investing heavily in education and skills for our future generations.

We cannot avoid the truth that we need to do more to improve our public services. We also need to reform the devolution settlement, but in the opposite direction to that being taken by the British Government.

Mr Beggs: I will speak first as the Ulster Unionist member of the Public Accounts Committee. I wish to address the Northern Ireland Statement of Excesses for 2016-17.

We are advised that many of the adjustments are of a technical nature and that, had the 2017 spring Supplementary Estimates occurred, the situation would have been regularised. There are excesses that are clearly of a technical nature, particularly around pension schemes requiring additional funding. We need to cover employee obligations, and it would be right to correct that error. Minister, are we getting better at calculating pension estimates so that there are fewer such adjustments going forward? There is relatively little information about many of the other excess expenditures. However, we are aware that civil servants were in an impossible situation when there were no Ministers in place and the opportunity to move money during the spring Supplementary Estimates was not there.

Turning to some of the larger ones, I notice that the Department for the Economy had the largest adjustment. There was £81.6 million of additional resource bid for or required, £51 million of which was a result of an underestimate of the notional student loan subsidy. Again, have we learnt lessons, and are we better able to plan? It is better if we can accurately project costs at an early stage, rather than having to make adjustments late in the year. Also listed is £27 million of additional RHI expenditure as a result of the absence from

the Northern Ireland RHI scheme of controls that were in place in the GB scheme. I would be interested to know whether there were subsequent additional costs of RHI that resulted in funds being diverted in a similar fashion.

I notice that there was also a large overexpenditure by the Department for Infrastructure. The Minister might be able to advise at some point whether that overexpenditure dates back to pressures that he experienced when he was Minister of that Department or, indeed, when my colleague, Danny Kennedy, was Minister and it appeared that that Department was regularly underfunded, even having to make winter funding awards from in-year funding at the last minute rather than their being budgeted for, as is the case today. Again, I ask the Minister this: have we learned lessons? I notice in the request for resources (RfR) A section that there was a breach of the Department's resource limit by some £40 million and cash limit by some £63 million.

Have we learned lessons to better plan yearly budgets and to avoid moving large sums of money to roads maintenance in the less than ideal winter period when we put tradesmen under difficult conditions and undoubtedly get poor results by putting down a great deal of tar in the middle of winter?

4.00 pm

I also noticed that the Executive Office breached its RfR A limit by some £35 million and had a net cash requirement of some £34 million. The extra expenditure was attributed to the social investment fund, a Strategic Investment Board grant, and Together: Building a United Community. Have we got better at planning so that, had the Executive had been there at that time, we would not be moving large sums of money in the last three months of the year? That is not a good way to build a Budget.

I have a number of queries on the Main Estimates. Initially, I will comment largely on the Department for Infrastructure, the Committee for which I serve on. I noticed that in the introduction to this section in the Main Estimates for the Department, there are, as others have indicated, words of warning regarding uncertainty related to Brexit. We are coming to the end of the Brexit transition period, and there may be unknown costs that may affect the Department. From being on the Committee, I am aware that provision is being made to enable additional grants to be made to

our ports and airports should additional emergency funds be necessary, so I can see why that warning is there. Similarly, there is great uncertainty about COVID-19, and it is right that there is a warning listed about it.

On the figures quoted, I noted that there is a significant increase in the Driver and Vehicle Agency resource funding from £7 million to £24 million. There is also a small increase in expenditure for ferries from £3.3 million to £4.3 million and significant increases for railway services, from £112 million to £205 million, and for road passenger services, from £70 million to almost £118 million. Will the Minister confirm that each of those significant increases is largely as the result of having a reduced number of customers? Buses and trains are still running, but less income is being generated. I am interested to know whether that is the cause of all those significant increases or if there are other factors that are not listed.

On roads, there has been a significant uplift from 2019-2020 to 2020-21, from £164 million to £209 million. What I found strange about that significant uplift is that there are still ongoing difficulties with issues such as fixing potholes. Can the Minister advise whether that money is going entirely, or significantly, to new roads and that we are failing to maintain our roads as we should and are creating problems with potential accidents and claims due to the poor state of our roads —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Beggs: — and whether we will ensure that we make better use of our money in future?

Mr Dickson: I support the motion. I will make some brief comments about the Committee of which I am a member: the Economy Committee.

By anybody's book, this has been a very difficult year for the Assembly and the Executive. We have certainly had some difficult times in the past, but none has been so severe in its challenge to our health, wealth and well-being over such a concentrated period. As a result, and given the incredibly fast pace of events during 2020, we have seen the Main Estimates being laid much later than would otherwise be the case.

The amount of money that has been spent over the past few months is unprecedented. More than £2.2 billion extra has been allocated to Northern Ireland by the Treasury to respond to the health emergency and to support individuals and businesses. We still do not have a full

picture of what financial room and flexibility Northern Ireland will have over the remainder of this financial year and beyond, and we await a spending review from Westminster.

We need a recognition that austerity has failed, and that should be very clear to our Finance Minister and to our whole Executive. It is not the way forward, so I hope that the Finance Minister will see flexibility and will be asked to allow Northern Ireland to spend its allocation where pressures arise.

The Department for the Economy has, like the Department of Health, been on the front line of the COVID-19 response. As such, it has seen huge amounts of money flow through it over the last number of months, with some £450 million in additional funds, and it has a net resource requirement for this year that is about 30% higher than last year's.

For the most part, the Department for the Economy has, I have to admit, coped well with delivering funds to those that need them. The biggest single intervention has been the £10,000 small business grant, and that is at £246 million. However, unfortunately, there are still those businesses, including individual businesses, that have gone without support. We need to find funds to support those that have been excluded. I note that the Finance Minister gave indications that he will be receptive to bids on that front, but I understand that it requires a bid from the Economy Minister. Perhaps the debate will be a further prompt for her to do so. The Department is, understandably, given its past reputation, risk-averse, but there has to be a means of delivering interventions while ensuring that public money is being spent wisely.

Perhaps helping those who have been left out would require access to what appears to be a difficulty, which is HMRC data. That would be of considerable assistance not only to the Department of Finance but to the Department for the Economy in delivering small, sharp and fast financial interventions. It has been achieved in Wales, so why can it not be achieved here in Northern Ireland? I recognise that the situation is different in Scotland, as they have tax-raising powers and, therefore, have more access to HMRC data than we do in Northern Ireland.

The Department for the Economy needs to be more confident in moving forward. We cannot have people being unfairly left out with underspends and missed opportunities because we are not seeing clear bids that are linked to a comprehensive economic strategy.

Nonetheless, I understand that the sums have been vast this year, and we should not lose sight of the fact that public money has to be spent wisely. Of course, the Department for the Economy has had a difficult first few years in taking on the challenges of its predecessor. We see a reminder of that in the Statement of Excesses. RHI, with an excess of £27 million for 2016-17, is also a reminder that the Assembly has a fair amount to do to resolve the problems of the last three years of failure, given the absence that that caused.

There are challenges in spending money, which are ongoing, but I understand that the challenges in accruing resources for the year are due to the unusual set of circumstances, which have altered demand and consumption. There is, perhaps, a perception that this would pick up later on in this part of the year. However, with the disruption being so prolonged and severe, I think that we all have serious concerns. Will the Finance Minister comment on how such things have been built into his Estimates?

I note that there are two elements of spending by the Department for the Economy that are under the sole authority of the Budget Act. Northern Ireland Screen is to receive £14.6 million, and there is a £450,000 payment for HMS Caroline. I understand that the funding for Northern Ireland Screen has now been regularised with the legislation that was passed in the Chamber only a few weeks ago. I also think that it is important to reference the royal naval maritime museum, which has responsibility for HMS Caroline, along with the Department for the Economy. The issues there need to be regularised as quickly as possible not only for the staff but for the venture in particular as it goes forward.

I will also make a specific point about European structural funds, which represent a considerable source of funding to the Department. In late 2020, however, we still await specifics on how those will be replaced. Meanwhile, disability employment organisations are also entirely funded by the European social fund, yet today they are unable to plan for the future due to a complete lack of information. I want to see a plan from the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy on how we are going to avoid a cliff edge for those groups and many like them.

I mentioned the previously unseen levels of public expenditure for Northern Ireland. It is necessary that we spend wisely and strategically, and look forward and towards our recovery. What we need from our Executive is

an endorsed economic recovery strategy to incorporate the interventions made by the Department for the Economy in particular.

I look forward to the October monitoring round, which has been delayed, and hope that we see a bolder set of bids from the Department for interventions, with assurances that such money can be spent wisely. We cannot return funds to Treasury when individuals and businesses are in such dire need of support.

Mr Butler: I pay tribute to the many officials from across all Departments, not just the Department of Education, involved in developing the Estimates and Budget reports. I thank the Minister for bringing them to us today.

If you will indulge me, Mr Speaker, I would like to pay my respects to a friend and ex-neighbour who died at the weekend from COVID. She was not at the average age of 82, did not have underlying conditions and will no longer be with her family. All of us, including those who compile these reports, probably have friends or family who are involved and are under great pressure. Last week, the Executive Ministers worked tremendously well to pull together something that, although very difficult for people to understand, has the potential to save lives. I ask them to do that again this week so that we see a return to collective thinking.

I also pay tribute to all those involved in the education sector, because, as I said last week, teachers and support staff are on their knees. As has been said many times, in terms of the budgets for which each Department is responsible, the education budget is over £2 billion. That sounds like an awful lot of money, but, with the pressures that are on education, it is, unfortunately, not enough for the factors that need to be addressed. The Department of Education reported a £2.8 million underspend, and the Education Authority reported a £0.5 million overspend, which should be seen as a warning. The Department was able to secure significant additional funding through the in-year monitoring rounds process, which contributed to the reduction in the Education Authority's reported overspend to somewhere in region of £0.5 million. However, as those allocations were a one-off, there continue to be significant pressures going into 2020-21.

One of the major pressures on the financial resources of the Department of Education is the significant rise in cases that require support from the special educational needs services right across Northern Ireland. The Department has seen the numbers increase by over 20% in five years. The Department needs to have that

increased demand supported with resource in order to tackle the issue and to help to deliver the best education possible for those vulnerable children who require additional support in their education and in many other areas in order to be a success in life and be the best that they can be. The recent announcement of multiple consultations by the Education Authority could prove pointless if they are not guaranteed and underpinned by the promise of financial and resource support. Our SEN pupils deserve better.

The Department of Education has also seen increased spending on the Strule campus, which has sadly been delayed until 2025. With a mounting series of seriously fiscally overspent projects — this has been going on for many years — it is really important that the Department, the Committee and the Minister provide the necessary scrutiny not only to deliver the project but to deliver it as close to budget as possible and on time.

No one can be content with the complexity of our education system. Perhaps that complexity contributes to the large budget. Regardless of the educational sector that our pupils come from and of their religion and faith or none, we are all aware of the need to tackle mental ill health and well-being in our schools because it is part of a preventative strategy. Mental ill health, like COVID, is a problem for all, and I would like to see a greater emphasis on it with regard to the Estimates and budgetary allocations. We need to make sure that there is significant investment in and access to quality nurture- and resilience-building initiatives, with increased mental health resources for all our schoolchildren.

That process will come with a cost but will surely have incredible benefits down the line in preparing our children to deal with mental health challenges throughout their life. That can be described as a process of "invest to save".

4.15 pm

Mr Allister: The Estimates are, undoubtedly, pretty dry documents, but they are important because they amount, along with the Budget Bill, to the legal authority of the House, as the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, for the spending of public money. Therefore, they perform or should perform a critical role in terms of that responsibility to be paid by the House to the people and in the transparency that should attend it.

The first issue that I want to raise is a presentational one in respect of the Estimates. In every table, wherever one goes in the document, it sets out, for example, what the resource provision is to be for the current year, 2020-21. Then, it tells us what the provision was in 2019-2020 and what the out-turn was in 2018-19. Given that we are in October, why are we not getting the out-turn figure for 2019-2020? As I understand it, the out-turn figures are known from June or July. Why, when we get Estimates in October, are we not getting the out-turn figure for the previous year? The importance of that is that it affords MLAs the opportunity to compare and contrast the provision being made today for this year with what was needed last year; in fact, all that we are being given is what was provided or made available last year, not what was needed last year. I do not understand why the Estimates do not address that issue.

When we turn to an issue such as that, by way of example, on page 42 of the Estimates we come to the vexed issue of RHI expenditure. In the annually managed expenditure (AME) figures, we have a figure of £33.4 million for this year. We know that, in 2018-19, the actual figure was £23.7 million. We know that the provision made last year was almost £29 million; yet, on page 42, we see that, this year, it is to be £33.4 million. As I understand it, the tariffs, which were reduced, have continued to be reduced and have not been increased, so I would like to hear from the Minister why the figure is at £33.4 million, which is £11 million higher than the last out-turn figure that we have been provided with. That is one of the things that I would like to have explained.

The other matter that exercises me about the Estimates, as it did last year, is the black-box figure. That is the figure that has been spent not on the authority of any legislation that governs the affairs of an individual Department but on the sole authority of the Budget Act. Of course, that robs us of proper scrutiny of the basis for any spend. I raised the point last year that millions of pounds were being spent on the basis of the Budget Bill, whereas there should be legislation to cover that spend and it was not there. Here it is again: this year, £34 million is being spent on welfare reform without legislative authority other than the Budget Bill. Why is that? Why has the Department for Communities not legislated to govern that? NI Screen is to receive £14.5 million, which is now, belatedly, covered by legislation. On page 219 of the Estimates, we find that almost £8 million is to be spent on good relations. My understanding is that that would be social investment fund (SIF) money. Why do we not

have legislation that authorises the expenditure of yet another £8 million of social investment fund money?

I asked that question at the Finance Committee and asked to see the letters, because the guidance that covers the funding of public money requires that you should not have any more than £1.5 million on any subject in a black box unauthorised by specific legislation. You should not have it for more than two years. I therefore asked, "Can we see the letters, please, that drew that to the Department's attention before it gave authority to items like that £34 million without having any budgetary authority to do so other than the Budget Act?". After the debate started today, Finance Committee members got a letter from the Department that I find astounding. There was no written authority given by the Department of Finance to spend the extra millions on welfare: there was a verbal approval, we are told. There is no legislation governing it. Guidance on spending public money states that you need written authority: it does not exist.

Oh, yes: the letter was sent out last Friday. After I had raised the matter with the Finance Committee on Wednesday and the Committee pressed officials about it, a letter went out last Friday retrospectively approving. Up until that point, it was a shrug of the shoulders and the giving of a verbal approval. The same thing happened with the good relations money, the SIF money: again, only a verbal approval. Frankly, Mr Speaker, that is not good enough.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: Those issues need to be addressed urgently.

Mr Carroll: Not for the first time, I will highlight in the Chamber the absurdity of the Executive making huge financial decisions with little or no mechanism for accountability or scrutiny. It has got to the stage at which the Executive do not even pretend to follow the normal democratic functions of oversight that we are supposed to expect from legislative chambers and Parliaments. The Estimates commit large amounts of public expenditure and form an integral part of the Budget process, yet it is only today that we get access to information on a Bill that will be debated tomorrow. In that sense, MLAs who are not in the Executive have only a matter of hours to look at the incredibly important detail of the Budget. Frankly, it is virtually impossible to have any influence over the direction of public funds. It speaks volumes about the value that the Executive place on

transparency. Such a lack of scrutiny is unacceptable at any time but is especially so during a pandemic. I ask whether it has been totally lost on the Minister that years of austerity, signed off in Stormont Budgets, have led to health service cuts and attacks on public-sector pay that have fundamentally undermined our ability to grapple with the crisis.

Our ability to come through the pandemic is dependent in large part on the financial decisions of the House. The need for accountability, to make sure that we get those decisions right, is paramount. It is unacceptable that that has been shirked once again by the Minister and the Executive. From the Estimates, from where I sit, it looks as though the Executive may repeat some of the mistakes of the past. The increases, which reflect money committed to the COVID crisis, do not appear to be enough.

I will look at some of the figures in the Estimates. The increases for the Department for Communities will, no doubt, be welcomed by the Minister but are nowhere near enough to overhaul our benefits system so that people are not falling through the cracks. The benefit cap needs to be lifted at least until the economic crisis is over. The bedroom tax needs to be written off for everyone, including those who are paying through the tooth every month. Those changes are necessary only because the Executive endorsed welfare reform in the first place. Anyone with their ear to the ground in working-class communities will know that the changes are necessary to support people at this time. A serious financial package for hospitality workers and those who are set to lose out because of the latest restrictions is also lacking. If those workers had not been rushed back into workplaces before the furlough scheme had even ended or the virus was properly contained, they would not face another period out of work, this time with less support from the state. COVID payments from the Assembly have overwhelmingly favoured the business community over workers. Despite having raised that repeatedly and brought it to the attention of many Ministers, I see no attempt to rectify that imbalance.

The Estimates reflect the Department of Health's request for an increase in funding, which, in some ways, is unsurprising, but I am not convinced that it is enough to meet the challenges that we face. On top of the massive COVID costs, people are concerned about surgeries being postponed or cancelled, which is, largely, down to the fact that our health service is overstretched. The Estimates make no attempt to fill the void and recruit the extra

healthcare staff or obtain the hospital facilities that we need urgently to ensure that we can fight the virus and continue to provide vital services to people who need them.

Nor will the Estimates make a serious dent in the mental health crisis in our communities. The Government in the South — by no means a radical Government — have increased mental health spending by £50 million. Where is the sustained and significant increase to tackle the mental health problems in our society that, we know, will increase after the pandemic? We have heard about the increased anxiety and depression faced by so many due to the pandemic. Where is the plan to rapidly increase funding to provide more access to counsellors for things such as cognitive behavioural therapy and all the other mechanisms that are needed to support people in need?

Earlier this year, I raised the important issue of the £50 million reduction in funding for trusts. When people were clapping for the NHS, there were plans to strip back the NHS via the trusts. We have been told that there is a bid to plug that gap, but we do not know whether it has been accepted or when it will be. We need information on that as soon as possible.

There are serious concerns that need to be addressed and highlighted in relation to the Estimates for the Economy Department. Resource spending for the Health and Safety Executive seems to be down from last year. That would be extremely worrying at any time, but, during a pandemic, when people are worried about their safety, that seems to be preposterous. Why is that the case? Why are we not ramping up and expanding our Health and Safety Executive? Why are we not recruiting more staff and carrying out regular on-the-spot checks to ensure that workers are safe and protected at this time? There also appears to be a serious gap in funding for student support services. It is unclear why that is the case, but it is worrying.

Beyond the financial decisions that I have raised, the Estimates contain traces of previous bad decisions and wasted expenditure. A significant reduction in spending on public-sector superannuation for Civil Service pensions seems to be a reflection of the changes in workforce driven by years of austerity and a disastrous voluntary exit scheme that has led to worse terms and conditions, reduced trade union membership in the public sector and wasted expenditure. There is also a concerning increase in spending on agency staff at a time when public-sector jobs have been gutted.

The Statement of Excesses gives us another glance, as people have said, at the £27 million listed as added expenditure from RHI from the 2016-17 period after the Assembly collapsed and £17 million on the SIF programme, which, for some at least, acted as a slush fund of power and patronage. There are many other issues on top of those.

The Westminster Government need to step up to the plate and provide more funding for the North. We have been chronically underfunded for some time, but that should not be an excuse for the Executive. They should be shouting loudly about that. It is not good enough for the Executive to say, "We don't control the purse strings", not when they have, for years, wasted tens of millions of pounds on RHI, PFI and austerity, to name but a few issues. Many will ask whether —.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: It is important to raise those issues. I am unlikely to divide the House, but I oppose the Estimates for those reasons.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the motion. It is detailed and timely. However, I concur with some Members that the work of the Departments would be less constrained if we could move away from the single-year model of Budget-setting.

However, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that, when it comes to setting a Budget, this year is like no other we have ever faced.

4.30 pm

Other Members spoke about the strain on small businesses. We see and hear about their situation daily. Their problems are a stark reality. I commend the Minister and the Executive for, earlier this year, quickly coming up with schemes designed to get money out to businesses. Using the rates database as the pointer to facilitate prompt payments helped to reduce the associated administration. The money made available was very welcome, and it was paid into bank accounts as quickly as possible. Local errors and omissions were, once identified, fixed in a timely and sensitive manner. That said, a large number of people in my constituency fell through the cracks due to the delivery mechanisms. I tried to reassure those who approached me about their dilemma that their situation would be recognised and rectified. I am disappointed that this remains

largely unresolved. Someone needs to address the situation urgently.

This new four-week circuit breaker has reopened wounds. Taxi drivers and the hairdressers who rent a chair in a salon make up only a very small section of a self-employed community that feels left behind and, indeed, even abandoned. On their behalf, I appeal for someone to grasp the nettle and, finally, sort that out. Local government will also require intervention, and I hope that that will be forthcoming.

In relation to the logistic and financial demands inflicted on our National Health Service, I recognise that money has been found to try to deliver a service that saves lives. However, a lot of the negative issues that have arisen in our health service during the pandemic are exacerbated by previous years of serious underfunding. When we finally defeat this dreadful virus — we will — we must be prepared to make available the budget necessary to tackle unacceptable waiting lists, which have been lengthened by the pandemic. When this crisis is over, we cannot return to how we approached health in the past. We must also make provision for a fast COVID vaccination programme for when a vaccine is found. That will come with a huge cost.

This year, Northern Ireland will receive billions in direct financial assistance through, for example, the job retention scheme, as well as Barnett consequentials. Like so many other regions, were it not for our membership of the United Kingdom, we simply could not have responded in the manner that we have. To those who criticised the British Government for some of their policies — I am not a frequent cheerleader for them — I say, "Be grateful", even begrudgingly, for the assistance that they have given us to date and which will, no doubt, be added to in the weeks and months ahead. Had the British Treasury not been in such a generous mode, the job of the Finance Minister would have been significantly more difficult than it has been to date. I wish the Minister well in his endeavours.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Financial support is essential to the running of the different Departments. In January, when we returned to Stormont, one could never have imagined how different, within weeks, Northern Ireland would be because of the COVID-19 pandemic or the effect that it would have on the Budget that we are looking at today.

Today, however, I direct my comments mainly towards the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Estimates. I welcome the various financial aid packages that were put in place to support our agricultural, horticultural, including ornamental horticulture, and fishing communities. The substantial financial support that was made available to councils has been of wonderful benefit to them in dealing with waste management and other issues that arose due to the period of COVID-19 lockdown. All of that was very welcome, and it is to our Government in London that we are very grateful. However, I am aware that there are still sectors of the agriculture industry that have received no support. Here I must pay tribute to our agri-food industry, which ensured that we had no food shortages during the present crisis. Our population was well fed and, through innovative methods, the industry ensured that the movement of livestock continued through these difficult times and that the farming economy continued. There are, however, some uncertain times ahead for the agri-food sector, with the uncertainties of Brexit and the movement of goods, particularly west-east and east-west. There are so many unanswered questions. Will all legal impediments to the trade at the end of the transition period be resolved? What is the definition of "qualifying goods"? Those are just two of the questions. I welcome, however, the prompt payment of the basic farm payments, due out in November. Hopefully, these will continue for the agricultural community for the foreseeable future.

Looking at the Main Estimates, I assume that the significant reduction in the common agricultural policy is due to Brexit and payments not coming from the EU. There is one other issue I wish to ask about. Will the Minister please advise why, when the operating accruing resources for forestry were approximately £10.5 million in 2018, in 2020-21, it is down as far as £14,000?

I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy, to conclude and wind up the debate. The Minister has up to 26 minutes.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Supply resolution debates can often cover many aspects, not always related to the Bill under consideration. However, I suppose that on this occasion the background of COVID-19 has helped to focus most, if not all, minds on the importance of public expenditure and the decisions that we debate in the Assembly. I will endeavour to address as many of the points raised during the debate as I can in the time

allotted to me. There were quite a lot of contributions, and if I miss some points or do not pick them up, I will ask officials to read through the transcript and see whether such points can be answered in writing.

I once again thank the Finance Committee for its agreement to take this important legislation through by accelerated passage. This agreement secures a timely passage of the legislation through the Assembly, thereby avoiding any risk or uncertainty over the funding for public services at this critical time.

I listened with interest to Members during the debate, and I wish to respond to some of the points — as many as I can. The Chair of the Committee raised the issue of the Budget exchange scheme and whether it should be reviewed. Members will be aware that I, along with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, have sought additional flexibilities from the Treasury — Mr O'Toole asked the same question — including an increase in the Budget exchange mechanism, which limits us to carrying forward unspent funding up to a maximum of 0.6% of resource DEL and 1.5% of capital DEL. These limits hinder good financial management at the end of the year, with underspends that emerge late in the year being reallocated to where money can be spent quickly, rather than to the highest priority. It can result in a loss of funding to the Executive for the sake of a day's delay in contracts being signed. It would be much better to have the flexibility to carry forward our underspent funding so that it can be appropriately utilised. This is not really a call for additional funding; it is a call to have the tools to allow us to manage our existing funds. I will meet the Chief Secretary to the Treasury later this week and continue to press for these flexibilities.

Dr Aiken also asked about payments being made for reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing. The principal repayment costs are costs against our rates income. They are approximately £120 million for 2020-21. Interest payments are a direct cost to our resource DEL, and amount to approximately £48 million for this year. The costs of borrowing are handled centrally to ensure that there is a consistent approach and to reduce the administrative burden on Departments.

Dr Aiken also asked a question in relation to the Public Accounts Committee report on the Excess Votes and the review of the financial process. The Excesses in 2016-17 were unique, due to the fact that the Assembly was unable to pass the spring Supplementary Estimates at the end of that year. My

Department is working on the review of the financial process and, while this has been delayed due to the impact of COVID, the Department will be bringing it to the Assembly in due course. It will include engagement with the Finance Committee over the format and process for the approval of the Estimates and the Budget Bill.

A common theme that Members raised was in relation to schemes for business sectors that have not yet received any funding. I reiterate the point that I made during Question Time, which was that I have encouraged Ministers to bring forward schemes as quickly as they possibly can.

On the question asked by Caoimhe Archibald and Andrew Muir about Invest NI and its role in providing business support, I recognise that there may be gaps. Obviously, it is for the Ministers who have policy responsibility for that area to develop proposals, but I am happy to consider any such bids. I have asked the relevant Departments — in this case, the Department for the Economy — to bring forward proposals to provide support for those affected by the restrictions. As I said, we have set aside £55.2 million specifically to address sectors that have fallen through the gaps.

Andrew Muir asked about Kickstart and why we did not have a scheme that, for three months, has been in place in England. I cannot comment on specific timings, but I understand that the Communities Minister is drawing up local plans to introduce a scheme similar to Kickstart. Mr Muir also asked about further funding and engagement with other jurisdictions. I continue to press Treasury to ensure that support is available to protect people and businesses, whether in the form of schemes from the British Government or additional funding for the Executive. I am in regular contact with the other devolved Finance Ministers, who keep me apprised of situations in their respective jurisdictions. We have joined forces in pressing the Treasury on those matters.

Mr Muir: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Muir: Does the Minister agree that the funding allocated thus far is to be welcomed, but, for us to properly deal with this public health emergency, we need additional support from Westminster? There are consistent calls for us to align our approach with what is happening in the Republic of Ireland, but we

cannot do that without the necessary financial support from Westminster.

Mr Murphy: I am very much aware of that, and I think that the Member made the point about some of the English cities. His colleague Paula Bradshaw made the point that, when the demand comes from England and is then spent in England, it comes across as a Barnett consequential, and that is not necessarily the best way to get funding. Over the course of the debate, a number of Members criticised the bit-by-bit approach, but the Barnett funding came bit by bit over the past six or seven months. It was not the case that we had an allocation at the start and could decide what to do with it; we received Barnett funding at various stages. While additional Barnett funding is welcome, it is not ideal for planning. It would be much better if we had an agreed way to support the expenditure that we need.

A number of questions were asked about the Department of Education. I do not purport to answer on behalf of every Department, and Members are free to scrutinise and ask questions of individual Ministers. A total of £137 million was given to the Department of Education to address COVID-19 funding, including £1.9 million for free school meals during the initial stage of the pandemic in March 2020. Additional costs have been put forward for resource funding, capital funding and the childcare response. Of course, the initial childcare scheme, as Members mentioned, was undersubscribed and, fortunately, a better scheme was later put in place that was more fully subscribed.

A question was asked about the A5 road scheme. The Member who asked it is aware that it is one of the Executive's flagship programmes and that it was funded not only by the Executive but by the Dublin Government. That commitment was most recently made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I understand that the most recent public inquiry is being considered by the Department for Infrastructure, and I will discuss the required funding with the Infrastructure Minister as part of the Budget discussions. I am not sure whether the Member is in the Chamber, but he will be aware that the Dublin Government have announced a capital programme for the next five years that, I hope, will assist in other cross-border infrastructure developments.

Mr McCrossan also asked about the isolation fund. Whilst we do not have one locally, the Department for Communities has established a £10 million food and distribution scheme for vulnerable people, including those who

received shielding letters. The spend to date on that is £7.2 million for the food box scheme. That intervention is planned to continue throughout the year.

Mike Nesbitt asked about the New Decade, New Approach commitment for additional police officers.

I am content to honour all the commitments under New Decade, New Approach. It is important that we do. However, it must not be just the Assembly that does that, and that is why I challenged the British Government about their lack of commitment to the financial propositions that they made in that document.

4.45 pm

The Department of Justice submitted a strategic outline case seeking approval for the PSNI to proceed to an outline business case for an additional 600 officers at a cost of £40 million a year. My officials are engaging with the PSNI and the DOJ on that strategic outline case. On the basis that it demonstrates value for money, the Executive will consider funding for that in light of the Budget envelope that is available. Obviously, it is for the whole Executive to agree that, but, as I say, given our commitment to New Decade, New Approach, we will want to ensure that the target is met.

Mike Nesbitt also asked about Brexit funding. We submitted a bid to the Treasury on 11 September for a number of different costs relating to the protocol, including PSNI costs. Officials responded to the Treasury on a number of queries, and we are awaiting confirmation that it will fund the costs of a lot of the protocol issues that other people raised. We are awaiting confirmation of the funding. Mike Nesbitt made the point about the multi-year Budgets, and I agree with everything that he said about planning and the ability for the community and voluntary sector in particular to plan on a year-by-year basis. The failings of annual Budgets are very evident to all of us who support that sector.

A question was raised about the failure to spend all the Barnett allocations. Prior to receiving the additional £200 million as part of the guarantee extension on 9 October, the Executive allocated the available funding. As I outlined, £55 million has been left for other sectors, and £600 million has been held pending an assessment of health costs. It is crucial that the money is spent to best effect, and I urged Ministers to come forward with proposals for that. Of course, the COVID-

related money has to be spent within this financial year. It is incumbent on all Members and Committees to ensure that the Departments that they are scrutinising come forward with bids that are made in good time and that can be spent in the available time.

Mr Frew asked for an explanation of the figures on the Vote on Account, which is shown in table 1.3 of the document. The Assembly passed two separate Votes on Account this year. The first was passed in March in the Budget Act alongside the spring Supplementary Estimates, which is the normal process. That was intended to see us through to July, by which time we would have the Main Estimates. However, as the Member will remember, we were unable to bring the Main Estimates, and we had a further Vote on Account. The figures in table 1.3 in the Main Estimates are the sum of the March figure and the July figure.

I am disappointed but not surprised at his challenge to the Executive's position on the interventions that we have made with further restrictions. Members are entitled to express opinions if they want, but we have a broader responsibility for the public message. For him to reiterate the view that was expressed by the Agriculture Minister and endorsed in some shape or fashion by the Education Minister is damaging to the public message. I very much regret that he expressed that view.

Chris Lyttle, as the Chair of the Education Committee, asked questions about the Education Department. The Department has advised us that no significant capital underspend is anticipated between now and the end of the financial year. While construction work has been down on anticipated levels, there is additional demand from ICT and transport, which will balance that reduction.

He also asked about the Fresh Start capital. It is disappointing that the Strule campus appears to have been held up. We are fully committed to delivering that significant education programme. Treasury approval is required for the release of Fresh Start funding, and I have engaged with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in order to secure the timely release for this specific purpose, but I have not yet received a response. Any delay in confirmation from the Treasury will significantly impact upon the campus's opening date.

The Member asked whether the Treasury had confirmed the availability of Fresh Start funding for re-profiling over the remainder of the funding period. I confirm that such an agreement exists to re-profile shared and integrated education

and shared housing funding. Work is under way to revise and update the profile for that spend.

I think that Mr Lyttle also asked about the establishment of an independent review of education. New Decade, New Approach recommended the establishment of an independent review of education, and, therefore, I support its delivery.

Matthew O'Toole asked a number of questions about EU exit costs. There is still some uncertainty about the protocols and what may emerge from them, particularly with the Department of Agriculture's requirements on ports and other areas. We are coordinating, particularly with the Department for the Economy and the Department of Agriculture, to understand the impact of the protocol. We will then lead the engagement with Treasury and work to encourage the mitigating measures that are required — financial, legislative or otherwise — to alleviate, as far as possible, any negative repercussions locally, and we will seek full recovery of any associated costs from Treasury.

We had provided some costs, but those have a tendency to change depending on the outcomes of negotiations. If we move to a no-deal scenario, as the British Prime Minister has predicted, the potential cost will be much more substantial. It is not possible, therefore, to give an accurate feed at the moment.

Other Members raised a number of issues. Pat Catney spoke about proper scrutiny. We recognise that this has been a unique year for doing our business, and the intention is to get back to proper budgetary processes.

Maoliosa McHugh quite rightly spoke about the difference between the job retention scheme and the job support scheme. Thankfully, the job support scheme, which initially was not intended to assist anyone who was forced to leave work as a consequence of regulations, is now intended to do that, but that will not capture people whose businesses are not obliged to close but will undoubtedly suffer severe financial loss.

Paula Bradshaw made some points about Barnett and the spend in Health. Health recently provided us with the detail of how it intends to spend the £600 million. That leaves some return to the Executive, but a substantial amount will be used by Health. People who are involved in the Health Committee, and MLAs generally, will know that that is a very significant amount of money, and it has to be spent in this

financial year. I am sure that the necessary level of scrutiny will be provided to that.

Mr O'Toole: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. Further to what Alan Chambers said, will any of the additional ring-fenced Health money be used specifically for vaccine provision? We do not yet have a vaccine, but it would be helpful to know whether there is that level of planning in the Department.

Mr Murphy: I cannot say for sure whether that is the case. I know that a certain proportion of it is COVID-related, and another proportion is for ongoing Health requirements. The Health Committee Chair — he is sitting beside you — might know more about that, but it is in excess of £500 million, which is a very substantial increase in Health spending. There has already been a significant spend on PPE and other matters.

Roy Beggs asked a range of questions, particularly about infrastructure, and he is quite right. I know from my time in the Department that it is a victim of habitual underspending, but that has been the way in which budgets have been provided to us.

That takes me on to Stewart Dickson's point that austerity has clearly failed. It has damaged public services for a long number of years. He asked about securing HMRC data to support employment support schemes. We had asked HMRC for assistance in looking at that, and we were told very bluntly that it was not going to provide any assistance to any devolved Administration to do that. The Member raised the issue of European structural funds. Again, we were told that we will have a shared prosperity fund to replace any lost EU funding, and as yet we have had no significant detail from Treasury on that. Along with Scotland and Wales, we will continue to press the matter with them.

Jim Allister asked for the out-turn figures, and I will get an answer for him. I am not certain why those have not been provided by this date, but we will respond to him.

There were comments about welfare mitigation and the sole authority. As part of the Fresh Start Agreement, the Executive agreed to put in place schemes to mitigate some impacts of welfare reform, and they provided funding for a four-year period ending on 31 March 2020. The extension of the scheme beyond 31 March was included in the NDNA deal, and £40.3 million was allocated for mitigation payments in 2020-21. The extension of the welfare mitigation scheme requires two new pieces of legislation

to be approved by resolution of the Assembly. In the absence of that legislation, the Department has been making mitigation payments, under the sole authority of the relevant Budget Act, from 1 April.

Mr Allister raised a point about consistency in approval, which I recognise as an issue. I have spoken to officials about that. There has not been consistency in the past. At times, there has been a letter of authority. At other times, there has been an email of authority. As the Member identifies, in some cases, there has been verbal authority. We want to see, going forward, consistency through the provision of a written letter of authority. I am happy to ensure that that is carried forward. I have no doubt that we will continue that discussion in the Committee. I do not think that there was good practice in the past. We need standard, consistent practice on approval.

Gerry Carroll raised the issue of austerity and its impact on public and health services. The impact of austerity has been a consistent theme from this side of the Chamber for many, many years. That is hitting back all the more forcefully given the COVID response. He raised the question of Executive support for the economy and said that that had been biased in favour of businesses as opposed to workers. Anybody with a cursory observation of this will know that the schemes in support of salaries and workers come directly from London. The Executive do not have HMRC data to be able to pay workers under the job support or job retention schemes that came directly from London. That is why I have consistently lobbied for the continuation of the job retention scheme: to ensure that workers receive salaries. The job support scheme initially was not to assist workers who were put out of work as a consequence of the restrictions, but we argued against that, and it has now been altered. It is, however, still far short of what we require. We have been consistent on that. To try to land that criticism on the Executive is mistaken and unfair.

The Member also mentioned some of the spend in the South, where we find ourselves in opposition. One of the things that we have to do in the South, in opposing or criticising a Budget or public spend, is to provide an alternative Budget. That has to be costed, and it has to stack up when having a public debate. I know that, through autumn and into spring, we will have an opportunity to debate next year's Budget, so I look forward to him providing some figures, rather than simply criticising all the spend that we have allocated, and identifying where the additional spend that he would like to see will come from and, as a consequence of

the restricted and finite pot of money that we have, where spend will be taken from to address other measures.

A Cheann Comhairle, in drawing my remarks to a close, I want to thank you very much for your patience during the debate. The Assembly approval of the motion today on the Main Estimates 2020-21 is a crucial stage in securing the public expenditure that the Departments need to continue to deliver in this unprecedented situation. Failure to pass the Supply resolution would put at risk the continuation of public services for the remainder of the financial year. Likewise, the Supply resolution for the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses will regularise the excess expenditure concerned and close off that outstanding matter. I therefore commend the Main Estimates 2020-21 and the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses to the Assembly, and I ask Members to support the two motions.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Questions, I remind Members that it is established practice that the votes on the motions require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £4,757,631,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £4,791,050,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £112,618,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 and that resources, not exceeding £183,290,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

5.00 pm

Budget (No. 3) Bill: First Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of a certain sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2021; to appropriate that sum for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of that sum; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31 March 2021; to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of an excess cash sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2017; to authorise the use for the public service of excess resources for that year; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that I have received a letter from the Committee for Finance informing me that the Committee is satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2).

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance to move the Bill on behalf of the Minister for Communities.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill [NIA 10/17-22], which is a Bill to make provision about liquor licensing and the registration of clubs.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: Members, please take your ease for a few moments while we prepare the Table.

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

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The next item of business is three motions to approve statutory rules, all of which relate to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations. There will be a single debate on all three motions. I will call the junior Minister to move the first motion. The junior Minister will then commence the debate on all three motions listed in the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. That process will be repeated for the remaining statutory rule. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an rún a chur chun cinn. I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Mr Kearney: As you aware, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the most recent amendments to the

regulations were announced in the Chamber last week. Members had an opportunity to probe and scrutinise them before they were made. I believe that Members will agree that those most recent amendments have moved us on considerably. It is within that context that I bring forward amendments No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations.

With your permission, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I will focus my remarks exclusively on the amendments that are at the centre of the debate. Amendments No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 to the regulations came about following the establishment of a cross-departmental working group on entertainment issues. The group considered the risks that are associated with certain activities, such as singing and dancing, and the effects of loud music. I will outline for Members the changes that have been brought about by the amendments.

I will begin with amendment No. 5, which came into effect on 23 September 2020. It placed requirements on venues where alcohol may be consumed in respect of music, dancing, risk assessments, seating, consumption of food and drink, and the collection and sharing of visitor information. It also made it an offence for a person who organises or operates a gathering not to comply with the relevant conditions, and further required that person to provide a risk assessment and an account of the measures that are being taken on request. Finally, certain regulations on gatherings are amended so that the numbers that are permitted to participate do not include children who are aged 12 or under.

Amendment No. 6 ensures that outdoor venues where intoxicating liquor may be consumed are now subject to the same requirements as inserted by amendment No. 5 of the No. 2 regulations. It does, however, provide an exemption for places of worship.

Finally, the third motion. Amendment No. 7 ensures that movement is permitted in such premises to access a smoking area for the purposes of avoiding injury or illness, to escape a risk of harm or to provide emergency or medical assistance. An exemption is provided for residents of hotels or guesthouses. It also places restrictions on the opening hours of certain venues at which alcoholic drinks and food and drink may be consumed.

I acknowledge, however, that, with the decisions that were announced last Wednesday, the situation has moved on. Now, the hospitality sector is subject to further restrictions. The Executive have not taken

those decisions lightly. Tuigimid go mbeidh brúnna agus deacrachtaí suntasacha ag cur isteach go mór ar an tionscadal. Many of our friends and family are connected to the industry. Therefore, we know that licence holders have very challenging times ahead, not only for their own businesses and families but for their staff, their families and all those who rely upon that sector for their livelihoods.

Molaim an rún agus na rialacha don Tionól. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office. Statutory responsibility for scrutinising those regulations lies with the Committee for Health. I look forward to hearing about its deliberations when the Chairperson of that Committee gets to his feet. The Committee for the Executive Office recognises that amendments need to be made to the regulations to reflect new medical and scientific advice, and to help to protect the health service and the health and wealth of the public and economy.

The Committee's message throughout the pandemic has been to encourage compliance with the restrictions that are in place. That message has not changed. However, situations can change rapidly, and the worsening situation that we have witnessed unfold over the past few weeks proves that we need to be nimble and flexible in our approach to fighting the spread of the virus.

I will speak now in my capacity as an MLA. There can be no doubt that times are difficult. People are unhappy, worried and stressed, and businesses and the self-employed are reeling. Those in the creative industries of art, music and drama feel totally undermined. Their very existence is challenged. The spread of the disease in the past few weeks has been shocking. Our death toll sits at over 600, and the number of positive cases has increased to over 7,000. That number continues to rise.

The introduction of the most recent restrictions last week was massive but necessary. I welcome the fact that, last week, we had the announcement and statement to the House by the First Minister. I will give credit where it is due: having the statement, and the ability to scrutinise and seek clarification, was important for Members. I also respect the parliamentary process, but what we are dealing with today is ludicrous. The first amendment — amendment No. 5 — was made at 7.40 pm on 22 September, and, here we are, at 5.00 pm on 19

October, discussing it. The others follow a similar timeline.

Those changes had a substantial impact on the hospitality industry — in bars and restaurants and on where music and dancing can and cannot take place. They even dictate where people can and cannot move in such venues. Behind every decision is a person, a family, an income, a life. I will set this in context. It may seem straightforward that you can leave a table in a bar only to go to the bathroom or to enter or exit, thereby reducing the circulation — that is important — but not getting to the gaming machine or the pool table, for example, means that those who service those machines have no work now. If self-employed, they have no job or income. Such decisions bear a heavy weight on people in our communities.

Let us not forget the inconsistencies. Last Wednesday, the First Minister said, in the Chamber, in response to my question:

"There was never going to be a situation in which we would announce overnight that people had to do something the next day."
[Official Report (Hansard), 14 October 2020, p3, col 1].

Yet and all, those who work in bingo halls and amusement arcades, as well as some in the hotel sector, found out on Friday evening that they had to close or leave that very evening. Even people who were queuing up for a football match received last-minute instructions. People have been left hurt, sore and broke — all in the mouth of Christmas.

Decisions need to be scrutinised, analysed and interrogated. I continue to reiterate that the process is defunct and needs to be amended to allow greater transparency and openness in the decision-making process. We owe that, at least, to the people whose lives we are shattering.

We need to see COVID numbers come down. They must reduce. I make a simple, direct appeal to the naysayers, the COVID deniers and the anti-maskers: more testing does not equal more cases. However, more cases equal more hospital admissions, which, in turn, mean that more ICU beds are needed, which, in turn, equals more deaths, but not of just COVID. If hospitals are overrun with COVID, who looks after your granny if she has a stroke, or your child if they are involved in a car accident? No one wants to turn up to an emergency department and see a "No room at the inn" sign. Is that what those who spread the view that there is no such thing as coronavirus want

to see? If the disease spreads and hospitals close, we will all suffer.

To those who gathered in the grounds of Stormont yesterday — those who did not work with the Police Service to ensure social distancing or that people stayed in small groups — I say this: if the virus jumped into that crowd as quickly as some were jumping on the backs of police officers, any work that might be achieved as a result of the next four weeks will have been undone.

To those voices I say, "Wake up and get real". This is not about control or a cashless society or even the Rothschilds. This is not about the denigration or stripping away of your human rights. All we ask is that you wear a mask in public spaces, keep your distance and maintain cleanliness. The virus is real. It is among us and is flooding our hospital wards. Our collective effort as legislators and members of the public is not simply about fighting a virus; it is about saving lives by protecting the health service.

5.15 pm

Speaking of legislators, I would say that Executive Ministers and Members of the Assembly really need to rise above the dissenting voices. If you disagree with the regulations, raise it here or at the Executive table. Do not do it on 'Talkback'; do not do it in the columns of newspapers; avoid the temptation to fill interviews with your dissenting voice or begin a keyboard war. Ministers who think that a solo run is an appropriate method of responding to the pandemic should know by now that it is not, and such moves should be resisted at every juncture. The public will not thank you for it. Their confidence in the institutions will suffer, and they will flood our inboxes demanding that we call you out on it, and rightly so.

I welcome all interventions to deal with the scourge of the virus and its second wave, which we are battling together. I would like to see a review of how we address the legislation, even if that just means more ministerial statements and scrutiny. However, I am happy to support the amendments.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Because of the nature of the confirmatory process, the regulations reopening and regulating so-called wet pubs were in force for a period before consideration by the Committee last week. By last Thursday, however, they had been overtaken by events, in

that, on Wednesday, the new four-week restrictions were announced. Members were keen to understand the implications for the regulations and the circumstances in which they would resume operation. The Committee is acutely conscious of its responsibility to play its part in considering the merits and implications of the many regulations being brought forward to manage the crisis.

Because of the fast-moving situation, the Chief Environmental Health Officer was not in a position to advise the Committee whether today's regulations would be revoked in light of Wednesday's announcement or whether the new regulations would require an amendment to the provisions under consideration today. The Committee asked about the circumstances in which they would become operable — in other words, the criteria, whether defined by R rate, prevalence of the disease or other factors being used to determine when it will be safe in public health terms to reopen wet pubs. The Chief Environmental Health Officer advised us simply that the decision would be taken by the Executive on the basis of a basket of indicators.

We also enquired about the period during which the regulations were in operation and how their impact was monitored and measured. The official advised that the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer provide a weekly update to the Executive but he does not have sight of that advice. He could not comment on any consideration given by the Executive to the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) advice of 21 September in relation to the risks associated with reopening wet pubs. The Committee restated its previous concerns at the lack of supplementary evidence and advice coming to the Committee to facilitate our scrutiny of the regulations. The official undertook to see what evidence he could provide of the impact of the regulations to date.

The Committee asked whether it would not have made more sense to revoke the regulations before us today and remake them at a time when the Executive deem them safe to bring into force once more. The Committee would then be in a better position to consider that question on the basis of conditions at that time, which remain very uncertain. The official stated that that was a possible approach but could not say more.

In light of the limited information before us and with no assurances in terms of criteria for reopening wet pubs, the Committee therefore declined to come to a view. While, once again, the Committee fully recognises the extreme pressures under which the Health Minister, the

Executive and all officials are working, the Committee was unable to complete its role and regrets that it is, therefore, not in a position to advise the House today.

I would now like to make a few remarks in my role as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson. It is no coincidence or surprise that the vast majority of the House's time has been taken up in dealing with the COVID-19 health protection regulations. It is a fast-changing and dynamic situation with serious impacts for all our society and across the community. I speak as the Sinn Féin health spokesperson, as the Committee did not take a view on the regulations. Although the rising number of COVID-19 cases has superseded the regulations, it is still important that they are considered in full, given the aforementioned impacts that they will undoubtedly have. I will refer to all the regulations together as, although they make different changes, they mainly relate to hospitality premises: our pubs and restaurants.

Requirements on seating arrangements, the playing of music and dancing are not to be taken lightly. I understand the impact that the regulations have on the hospitality sector and on many communities and livelihoods, including those of the singers, musicians and artists who rely on live performance for their income. I refer in particular to the creation of a requirement to collect visitor information, names and contact details. That is important, as it shows the lengths that we have to go to for a joined-up, effective strategy to tackle the spread of coronavirus.

Maybe it says something that, over seven months into the public health crisis, there is only now a requirement to collect contact-tracing information. However, what I am concerned about is that, as the hospitality sector has additional responsibilities and requirements placed on it, the public systems, such as contact tracing, are not being built up to support it. Just last week, the Health Committee heard how the Public Health Agency had grossly underestimated the demand on contact-tracing services. It estimated 300 cases a day, but, in reality, as we now know, contact tracers face some 900 cases a day. Recently, it moved to a "Digital First" approach, which is essentially a text message to tell someone that they have to self-isolate for two weeks. It does not provide any support or advice, and there is no human voice to reassure and direct people to further necessary support services.

We also have the concerning issue of identifying how many numbers and contact details that have been given to the hospitality

sector are incorrect or where contact tracers were not able to get through to someone, leading to gaps in knowledge for tracing efforts and impacting on our efforts to break the chain of transmission. I illustrate that concerning fact to highlight that none of the regulations can be taken in isolation; they must interlink to provide an effective suite of measures to fight the spread of COVID-19. If a duty is to be placed on the public and on the hard-pressed hospitality sector to collect information, there must be a concurrent responsibility on public health authorities to use it effectively and with purpose and urgency.

I have mentioned the reality that the regulations have been affected by the changing circumstances. The rates in the North continue to be deeply concerning, in particular the impact on lower-income earners and areas with higher levels of deprivation. As of today, Members, we have 820 new confirmed cases and 261 inpatients with COVID-19. We have 80 care homes with active outbreaks and 29 people in ICU with COVID-19. It is also interesting that additional information has now been made available by the Department of Health dashboard. Although limited, it gives an insight into new cases per postcode area. A quick glance should be enough for anyone to see the correlation between deprivation and the current high levels of cases in those areas. It is, perhaps, telling that some Members have ignored poverty and deprivation and, unfortunately, chosen instead to attempt to focus on religion or politics. It is important that those who are opposed to increased restrictions and the current circuit-breaker approach recognise that the measures are necessary to buy time, to reduce the chains of transmission and to give our already hard-pressed public health services the time that they need to rebuild in order to stay ahead of the virus. Maybe it is now time to revisit the test, trace and protect strategy and to put in place a robust and fit-for-purpose find, test, trace, isolate and support strategy that works with industries, businesses, communities and the public in a way that meets the needs of a rigorous and appropriate public health response to COVID-19.

Mrs Cameron: Like most Members who are tasked to speak in these debates, I almost feel that the regulations apply to something that is a distant memory. Such is the nature of how things have moved on since the rules were in place, certainly in the context of where we find ourselves today, which is much more restrictive than what is in the amendments.

I want to briefly focus my comments on two aspects of the regulations. The first is our hospitality trade and, specifically, our public houses. Today, those businesses are closed. The regulations are a reminder of how much we have asked of those businesses in recent days. Aspects of their businesses have been taken away, there are restrictions on what they can do and demands have been made about how they manage their patrons. Yet, despite all that, we find that their doors are closed. My heart breaks for those people. They went above and beyond, and, on Friday, they were told that that was not enough. We need to explain to them why the measures that we are discussing today have not been enough. We owe them that. Some will never reopen, and people will be unemployed as we approach the festive period. We need to support those who have been so badly impacted.

At this point, I would like to raise a small issue about the regulations, and that is the collection and sharing of contact information. The Chair of the Health Committee outlined much of what has been discussed by the Committee recently, but, when I asked a question of Nigel McMahon, he confirmed that the contact information to be supplied was not specified in law. It would be useful to have that information to ensure that postal addresses, in particular, are collected. I am sure that the regulations will be used in the near future — hopefully, that will happen when we come out of the next four weeks — and it would be good to have those postal addresses to help to enforce the restrictions on households and on the number of households that can sit at one table in those establishments.

The other matter that I want to mention is places of worship. They remain open, with specific exemptions in place for their continued opening, and I welcome that. While primarily places of worship, our churches also provide places where issues like social isolation and mental health challenges are alleviated. Faith is important to so many people; indeed, at this time of uncertainty, a place of solace and comfort is what we all need. I welcome the continued opening of churches and trust that that can continue.

Sadly, things have moved on so much since the regulations were imposed, given the number of cases and the loss of life, and we are now in a much worse place. We need to analyse publicly what works and what does not work in tackling COVID effectively. None of us should hide from that. Those whom we ask to sacrifice everything deserve it, and, ultimately, it will help us to gain public support and beat COVID-19.

As I have done all along, I fully support the regulations. As I said last week, the measures are not welcome, but they are absolutely needed in order to keep our health service from being overwhelmed. We will not have the luxury of choosing which services can go ahead if our health service is flooded with COVID patients and staff are required to leave their normal day job in order to cope with the reopened Nightingale facility. We owe it to every member of our health service staff to respect and follow the law and guidelines to the letter whether we like it or not. We have a personal responsibility, and we have the power to control what happens in two or three weeks' time. We can prevent people becoming infected and prevent those who are so vulnerable becoming critically ill or losing their life.

How many times must it be said? We all know the message inside and out. We must stay apart, practise good respiratory and hand hygiene and wear a face covering in the appropriate places. If we could only get back to taking those basic actions, we would likely not need these draconian measures in order to keep the virus under control.

Mr Beattie: Standing here, I do not know what to say that has not already been said time and again.

Six people died today of coronavirus-related illnesses. Many more people died due to heart disease or cancer. We put in these restrictions to try to save lives and to help people's health. If those restrictions helped people with heart disease or cancer, we would put them in without thinking twice.

5.30 pm

We all have to admit that, in doing this, we could be destroying people's livelihoods. It is the trade-off that we have made and that we need to understand, and yet people complain about wearing a face covering and social distancing. I just do not understand it. I absolutely hate wearing a mask, but — I have said this before — if I can save the health or life of just one person by wearing a mask, I will wear a mask. It is not too much to ask. If, by wearing a mask, I can get an older person to feel a little more comfortable about being out and about, I will wear a mask. It is not difficult. If I have to social distance, I will do all that I possibly can to stay socially distanced.

What people want from us is consistency, and they want us to be proactive rather than reactive. We are standing here talking about

amendment regulations from two or three weeks ago. Although that is nobody's fault, if I am really honest, it is slightly nonsensical. Let us set measures and put in the mitigations as quickly as we can. We saw the numbers growing and the deaths increasing. If our Executive are meeting and saying that they saw this coming, they should have been ready for it and put in the measures straight away. We should not be waiting until today for the financial package to be put in place for businesses. If we saw this coming, that should have been done on the day that the measures were released. That is what we have to do.

Let us not allow this to become a sectarian issue. Of course, people have made mistakes, and we will all be able to carry out the post-mortems on those mistakes in the months to come. However, right now, we do not need a unionist or a nationalist COVID: we just need to fight it. We need to stop it from killing our people, and, if we can do that, those same people who are keeping us safe — the doctors and the nurses — can concentrate on people who have heart disease and cancer. It takes 100 nurses to run the ICU beds. They need to be working somewhere else.

We can look at these restrictions from two or three weeks ago, which have been superseded by new restrictions, and argue, "Do you know what? This should have been a hard lockdown. We should have gone all out in the way that we did in the spring. Do it, have the mitigations in place and make sure that the money, the funding and the financial package is there for businesses". You can argue that case, or you can argue the case that we should not have locked down at all. We could instead have pumped all the money into looking after the vulnerable; that is another argument.

However, the reality is that our Executive came up with a plan, they delivered that plan, and it is incumbent on every single one of us in the Assembly, whether unionist, nationalist or none, to get behind it, to show the people that we are united and not to bicker any more. I do not want to be standing here in 2021 and still going through this, but, right now, I think that I will be.

We are going to have a miserable Christmas, but we will be here and we will be alive. What I do not want is to be doing this again next year and to have people, in whatever form, using it for party political point-scoring. Let us not, let us stop, let us try to work together, and afterwards, when it is gone and we are doing our post-mortem, people can point-score all they want. The bad decisions are not going to go away,

but right now we do not need to be too worried about them.

Ms Bradshaw: Before I begin my remarks, I offer my sympathy to the families who have been bereaved since we last spoke about the amendments to the health protection regulations.

As the Health Committee Chair noted, we did not reach a decision on amendment No 5, but I will be supporting the amendments this evening. However, the Health Department should use the next four weeks so that, when we come through this round of restrictions, there are better provisions in place for wet pubs in particular to reopen. That is about monitoring the risk assessments and compliance.

The amendment was passed by the Executive on the basis of the evidence, which, as we heard at the Health Committee, was subsequently revised. That poses serious questions about where we are getting our evidence, and we did not receive as full an answer to those questions as many of us would have liked.

The evidence presented in mid-September was that transmission was largely taking place in households. However, it remains entirely unclear where Northern Ireland-specific evidence is coming from. For example, in August, there were far more applications per head of the population to the Eat Out to Help Out campaign in Northern Ireland than in any other region of the UK. It was exactly at that time that the transmission level rose to a higher rate here than in the rest of the UK for the first time. That may have been a false correlation, of course, but there was already a suggestion that hospitality was a risk area, and the evidence a month or so on seemed to demonstrate that.

I have two particular concerns about our evidence. First, the Chief Scientific Adviser confirmed to the Committee that it is derived mainly from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and Independent SAGE. Those are very useful sources, but their evidence is designed for the UK Government and often specifically for England. Secondly, contact tracing has long since failed to provide us with information about the origin of infection, which has made it much harder to identify where to intervene appropriately to break chains of infection. It appears, therefore, that we have not been operating on the basis of definitive and clear Northern Ireland-specific evidence. Contact tracing is not able to provide that, and it is unclear what other sources of Northern Ireland-specific evidence there are.

Fundamentally, it was either a mistake to reopen pubs or a mistake to close them again. What is understandably galling for the hospitality sector is the lack of evidence either way. Given the lack of evidence, it appears that the regulations were rushed and that the issue of how to reopen pubs and any premises serving alcohol in a safe manner was not fully thought through. In fact, there was plenty of evidence from elsewhere in Europe that masks should have been worn by all customers until they were seated, that contact details should have been taken for all customers, that ventilation should have been subject to specific legally binding guidance and that risk assessments should have been subject to quality assurance and monitoring. None of that is covered under any of the regulations that we are discussing.

I said before that what we are aiming for at all times is voluntary compliance. That will come about if the rules are clear and the reasons for them are provided in a transparent manner. We need to be able to explain to the public, particularly when the decisions that we are taking concern social contacts and economic livelihoods, not just what we are expecting of them but why.

Consideration of the regulations needs to be backed by clear, published Northern Ireland-specific evidence. That means two things. First, we need to give greater clarity on the basis of the evidence provided by the Executive for the regulations, if we, as a Committee, are to properly scrutinise them and this House is to adopt them. Secondly, we must not waste the next four weeks. By mid-November, contact tracing has to be reformed and resourced so that it can provide us with clearer and more specific information about the origin of infections and thus how we can best intervene without closing down entire sectors to break the chains of infection.

Last week's nonsensical shenanigans around solo runs have again caused a serious breach of trust. To put that right, we need much clearer, evidence-based decision-making and clearer, united messaging.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for bringing the amendment regulations to the Chamber this evening. This has been an extremely difficult and challenging time for our hospitality sector. No doubt, every contributor will echo that sentiment. We have heard it expressed many times since the start of the pandemic. I do not want to sound patronising in any way, but I really and truly feel sorry for the owners of bars, restaurant, cafes, nightclub venues, hotels etc,

and, of course, the many staff whom those establishments employ. Their livelihoods have been put on the line as a result of the COVID pandemic and the hard but necessary measures that have been put in place to protect our health and save lives.

The amendment (No. 5), amendment (No. 6) and amendment (No. 7) regulations that we are debating today were made just a short time ago, when the sector was beginning to emerge from the first wave of the virus, after there had been collective efforts to bring down the level of transmission and stop its spread. That required the help of and buy-in from the general public and collaborative working with the hospitality sector. I recognise the tremendous effort that has been put in, operationally and financially, to ensure the implementation of the sets of regulations that we are discussing today.

Today, of course, we are in a different reality than we were in in September. The virus has begun to take hold again, and we are in the grip of a second wave. To be clear, Sinn Féin does not want to see our hospitality sector close. The collective decisions that were taken by all parties at the Executive last week were not easy, but they were necessary. They were taken because the medical and scientific evidence told us that we had to do something to protect lives and stop our health service being overwhelmed.

Those businesses and the many thousands of staff who work in them, who made significant efforts to adapt to the new normal, must be commended. All their hard work, as well as the plans that have been put in place by the hospitality sector, is vital for changing habits and behaviour around social contact. That will stand us in good stead in the time ahead, as we focus our energy on tackling the transmission of COVID, which has had an impact on families and communities across the North, and on protecting our health service and supporting our economy.

To have a thriving economy, we must protect public health in a way that inspires confidence in the public to engage in economic activity and support our businesses through the pandemic. We need to use the next four weeks to address, as much as possible, the COVID transmission rate and, importantly, to ensure that adequate testing, contact tracing and supports are in place to help suppress the virus. I support the regulations.

Mr Durkan: I join other Members in offering my condolences and heartfelt sympathy to those families who have lost loved ones over this past

awful time. I also offer our support and solidarity to those who are staring into an economic abyss and facing huge financial uncertainty as a result of these necessary regulations.

I am conscious that the regulations that are before us today have long been superseded by more and more stringent restrictions. The decision, for example, to enter into a circuit breaker has caused understandable dismay, frustration and fear, not least in my constituency of Foyle, which has been subject to additional restrictions for a number of weeks. The past seven months have been extremely difficult, and none of us wanted to have a repeat of March in any form. The vast majority of people understand and do their utmost to do what is required to overcome the virus, however.

If we expect the public to adhere to restrictions on their freedoms to curb the spread of the virus, it is incumbent on the Executive to make it financially viable for people to do so. It is totally unacceptable, and remains so, that, unlike in England, Scotland and Wales, there is no self-isolation support grant in Northern Ireland for people who are forced to self-isolate and who cannot work from home. The Communities Minister has informed the Committee for Communities that her Department is considering a bid for such a scheme in the January monitoring round, but that is just too late. We need that scheme now.

We cannot leave people torn between protecting their neighbours, workmates and the public at large, and putting food on the table for their families and themselves, which is what we are doing with the lack of such a scheme.

5.45 pm

Similarly, there is a swathe of businesses and workers who have been overlooked again by the Executive, not least sole traders and the self-employed. Other businesses have been left in the impossible situation of being allowed to stay open, and therefore not eligible for support, but their income stream is effectively halted. Many will be glad that gyms, for example, have been allowed to stay open, given the associated physical and mental health benefits, but they cannot hold classes — a vital income stream. Anomalies also exist around soft-play and child minders, another area that is in need of specific, tailored support. The gaps in support in these regulations must be urgently plugged, and I hope that the Minister can set out when that will be done.

People and businesses have complied, despite the fact that these regulations are only being debated and voted upon in this House after they have been implemented and before they were even published. That is a testament to the public's willingness to heed the advice from our scientific and health experts and to protect one another to end this pandemic as soon as possible. Unfortunately, their collective efforts are not being entirely matched by this Executive.

It is one thing to expect people to follow laws that have not even been published. That is not good governance, but it is perhaps forgivable given the urgency, but only just. What is not excusable is Ministers contradicting one another on the airwaves hours after these arrangements have been agreed. Clear, coherent communication of the regulations is, quite literally, a life-or-death situation. It serves no one for Ministers to undermine the messaging by trying to insinuate that they are more favourable to one sector or the other and trying to disown decisions that they had a hand in.

The Executive cannot command adherence from the public if the public is not afforded coherence from the Executive. It is reckless for the DUP to be talking out of both sides of its mouth on this. I do not know whether Minister Poots thought to share his criticisms of these regulations with his Executive colleagues before he shared them with the BBC. However, I do know that his party had the power to veto them but chose not to.

Political representatives need to be making the same collective effort that we expect from our constituents and definitely not making this a sectarian issue. I do not deny Minister Poots's observation that levels of this virus are higher in predominately nationalist areas. However, his observations were devoid of any recognition of the link between deprivation and high levels of the virus, just as in many other countries in the world. We need to understand the variation in levels across the North and determine the reasons for it, whether that may be the inability to work from home, housing or underlying health conditions, and to respond accordingly by committing to addressing those inequalities rather than making this a sectarian head count.

Mr Chambers: I had not intended to speak in this debate. The corporate message has been undermined by those in this House who should really know better. The most recent example was the words of an Executive Minister distancing himself from the collective and unanimous decision taken by the Executive just

days before and supported by him. He was wrong to speak as he did, and I really do not know what his motivation was for doing so.

Regrettably, his remarks were compounded by bringing religion into the equation. The religion of a patient who is lying in a COVID ward certainly does not matter to me. Thankfully, it most certainly does not matter to the nurses and doctors who are wrapped in PPE and doing their best to save the life of that patient. However, how many in the House have clean hands in relation to supporting and remaining on the health message? Point-scoring is running wild. Foolish comments and actions are alive and well, but the biggest attitude at play is, surely, hypocrisy.

We hear a lot — we have heard it tonight — of people asking, "Where is the evidence?". The evidence is the 89 nursing homes, which we have heard about tonight, that are suffering a COVID outbreak. It is the 29 people lying in ICU and fighting for their life. It is the hundreds of patients in COVID wards who may take a long time to recover from the effects of the virus. It is the deaths that have left families and lives devastated. What more evidence do we need?

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Chambers: Yes.

Mr McGrath: I respectfully take the point, but that is not necessarily the evidence; that is the outcome of people not following the rules. If we had the evidence and put it simply to people, they may understand it better and stick to the rules. Then, we would have fewer people in hospitals and ICUs, and fewer people dying. I can think of nothing better than putting the evidence to the hundreds of people who were here yesterday and saying, "There you go. There's the evidence. That's what you're breaching. Now, go home and follow it", but, at the minute, all we can say is, "There's evidence there somewhere".

Mr Chambers: I take an opposite view. People like Mr McGrath, who demand this evidence, are playing right into the hands of those who were in the grounds of Stormont on Sunday. They are planting a seed in their mind that this is not what it seems and that more evidence is needed. So, yes, why do you not seek more evidence? I do not particularly buy that.

The hospitality sector is certainly hurting, but can we afford to give it an exception during the next four weeks? I noticed at the weekend that the streets in Bangor — there is a thriving

evening economy in Bangor — were empty. I am sure that other Members saw that in their towns and villages. There were no taxis or cars on the road; the place was like a ghost town on Saturday night. Surely that is what the circuit breaker is all about. We must get back to collective responsibility, and we must provide the leadership that people deserve.

I conclude by giving a message to the people who are filling my inbox with emails telling me that this is all a hoax: will you please stop writing to me?

Ms Anderson: I, too, express my deepest sympathy to all those who have lost their life through COVID-19 and to all those struggling with the disease. I reflect back to June, when figures were down and restrictions were easing. We assured the public that we would not keep the restrictions in place one minute longer than was necessary. However, since opening up society, COVID cases have gone up. Too many people let their guard down. I reflect back to places such as Ballymena, which was the first place to see a rise in cases after society opened up, and restrictions were put in place. Unfortunately, many other places followed. The rate of the spread across the North, especially, as has been said, in places of high deprivation, has rightly alarmed many.

I am reminded of the comments of Emily Maitlis, the 'Newsnight' presenter, one evening — this has struck very clearly — that we are not all in this together. However, some of the language around the amendments and restrictions that have been put in place has been misleading. You are not protected from COVID, despite what anyone might tell you, if you are from one religious denomination as opposed to another. COVID is neither orange nor green. In that respect, it is a leveller.

The amendments and subsequent restrictions that have been put in place are across the North. The sectarian insinuation articulated regarding community transmission is nothing short of scandalous and shameful. These political institutions — the Assembly and the Executive — should be able to handle the global health pandemic without, intentionally or otherwise, attempting to introduce a sub-zero sectarianism. There is enough fear and uncertainty across society without the introduction of baseline, anti-scientific and sectarian rhetoric from people who should know better.

For those interested in interrogating why the virus is spreading in more deprived areas, look at the fact that people are less protected if they

are more exposed to it because they are serving on the front line, work on or use public transport, stack supermarket shelves or are carers, hospital porters or shopkeepers — basically, all those who are low-paid workers and members of our society. There are too many low-paid workers in my constituency in Derry, which is one of the most deprived constituencies in the North. They are more likely to be exposed to this deadly disease. Those with manual jobs are not able to work from home. This is a health issue with huge ramifications for social welfare, and it is a social welfare issue that has huge ramifications for public health. When you are assessing why the virus is out of control in areas that have higher rates of deprivation, you should understand the need to tackle regional inequalities.

Listening to you, Minister Kearney, I know that the Ministers and the Executive took hard decisions over a number of weeks, and last week was no different as you tried to suppress the community transmission levels. With the closure of schools for two weeks and the closure of businesses for six weeks in Derry and Strabane, whilst we are talking about wet pubs today in amendment Nos 5, 6 and 7, things have moved on, as other Members have said, and businesses have been hit hard. As you have said previously, these restrictions give us a chance to double down and to strengthen the test, track, trace, isolate and protect system.

Almost everyone in Derry, Strabane and, indeed, Donegal knows someone with COVID, someone who is self-isolating, someone affected by these amendments when they were introduced or someone impacted by the subsequent restrictions that have been put in place. People have been clearly reminded that we are the hosts. We are the carriers of this deadly disease. Therefore, it has been spreading at an alarming rate.

We had to reflect and look at our behaviours — all of them.

6.00 pm

We can turn this around. Fortunately, we can report that the restrictions that have been in place in Derry and Strabane for two weeks have started to see the R rate of the virus come down. However, just as it comes down in Derry and Strabane, I am conscious that, as of today, the R rate is climbing in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

Community transmission has brought the deadly virus into our homes, care homes and

hospitals; indeed, on Friday, it was reported that Altnagelvin Hospital was on red alert. Nurses are struggling with COVID-19, and many more are self-isolating, which has put pressure on our health service. As the Chair of the Health Committee told us today, 80 care homes are now battling with COVID-19. Minister, we need to protect our front-line workers, our carers, especially those on low wages, who do not receive statutory sick pay if they self-isolate. The MLAs from Derry and Strabane, along with the MPs, spoke to you on Friday once again. I acknowledge that the Executive Office has afforded us the opportunity on two occasions to talk to you about the impact that the restrictions have been having on Derry and Strabane. After the great efforts made by wet pubs, cafes and restaurants, there came further restrictions, and that broke the hearts of many who work in that industry. We talked to you and collectively expressed our concern about the number of people in Derry and Strabane and across the North who are not self-isolating because they cannot afford to and decide to keep their head down and carry on. Minister, we must give the maximum support possible, within the limited spending power available to the Executive, to workers and the most vulnerable in our society. We cannot simply tell people that they need to self-isolate but not provide financial support if their employers are not paying them even basic sick pay. Whilst the COVID-19 discretionary support grant is welcome, the threshold for successful applications cannot be above the living wage of just over £20,000 per household. That, in itself, is simply not enough to lift families out of poverty. I know that the Minister for Communities understands that. The Assembly needs to let those in Derry and elsewhere who are struggling and juggling the need to self-isolate with the need to put food on the table know that a financial package will not leave them behind.

Unfortunately, the amendments that we are discussing did not stop the spread of this deadly virus, because there were a number of reasons why the virus spread. The further restrictions are impacting on thousands of sole traders designated as "newly self-employed", businesses without premises, charities and small manufacturers. Again, I raise the case of the transport sector. Taxi drivers have been left behind since March, and, just as their wheels were starting to turn again, the restrictions now in place have stopped them. Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, put a financial package in place last week, just days after further restrictions were announced. Yet the self-employed, taxi drivers and the recently self-employed, who are all hit by the restrictions, are running on empty.

Telling them that close to £800 million has been allocated for rate relief, business grants or the newly emerged support grants is neither helpful nor welcome, because most of them fell through the cracks. They have not received one penny. Some hoped that the Economy Minister's hardship fund would offer them some support, but, because the criteria were so limited, they could not avail themselves of it. They got nothing; they did not get a bean. They are rightly annoyed, as they watch hardship money being returned, not spent.

On Thursday, Friday and Sunday, I heard the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, once again call on his ministerial colleagues to bring forward proposals for sectors that are they are responsible for. Whilst we are dealing today with amendment Nos 5, 6 and 7, which cover wet pubs, we know that further restrictions have been brought into place, so Minister Dodds needs to bring forward a scheme for the recently self-employed. She can use their accountants to verify the authenticity of their business. Minister Mallon needs to bring forward a scheme immediately for the transport sector, including taxi drivers and others.

Minister, this island is a single unit, and all-Ireland policies and practices have been put in place for the 10,000 pigs that come into the North every week. We have seen an all-Ireland health strategy with policies and practices for the thousands of cows and sheep that cross the border every day. Whilst we are talking about wet pubs today, we have had situations in Derry where the restrictions were different from those in Donegal. We have also heard of a memorandum of understanding that the two Administrations, North and South, we were told, had established, but doctors have told us that they have neither heard of it nor operate it. Government, North and South, must act swiftly, collectively and collaboratively if it is to protect the 30,000 people who cross the border every day to work and study and the thousands of others they come into contact with. It is absolutely reckless and wrong that people in Derry and Donegal operate under two different COVID restriction practices. There are houses and other buildings across the border corridor that partitions Ireland where the front is in the North and the back is in the South or vice versa.

Finally, I acknowledge the huge debt of gratitude owed to the healthcare heroes who have been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 and who, once again, face the serious challenge that the deadly virus presents. There are many strands to the amendments that we have talked about today

and to the subsequent restrictions that are now in place. In order for people to be able to afford to comply with them, we need to hear more about the support schemes that Minister Murphy has called for for those who are most in need so that, in places like Derry and elsewhere, our much-needed services, whether they are public or private, are not brought to their knees. I support the amendments.

Ms Armstrong: These new restrictions — amendment Nos 5, 6 and 7 — have been and gone. They are subject to negative resolution. That means that they took effect on the day that they were laid. I ask the junior Minister to clarify, please, why it takes so long for the regulations to come to the House. They are subject to negative resolution, and, as soon as they are laid, they become law, so why do they take so long to get here? Earlier today, amendment (No. 10) went through. If that had been subject to affirmative resolution, we could have debated it in the House and it would have gone through. The way that the process works means that we take for ever to get these through to the House. We could have done amendment Nos 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 today, but, instead, we are doing things that were passed at the end of September and the start of October. I ask the junior Minister to clarify that for us.

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

That is what is happening now. There is delay after delay, and we heard it from many Members here this evening. There are delays in the Department for the Economy getting money out to people. Really? What is the problem?

The money is there and it needs to go out. People need it. Why is there still a delay? The situation has changed since the amendment regulations were written. That was so long ago that the pubs are now closed. The amendments are irrelevant given what has since come to pass. As many Members have said this evening, Northern Ireland cannot afford any more delays for the businesses that have been impacted.

There are necessary rules in place. Please do not get me wrong. I have absolutely every sympathy for any family who has had a death, for those who have tested positive and been left with poor health, for those with loved ones in hospital whom they cannot see and for those in care homes who are heartbroken and do not understand why their family cannot see them or hug them. This virus is horrendous. While

people are frustrated with the virus, we have delayed things. We need to move more quickly.

I have already written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to say that part of the current problem is not only the rising COVID infection rate in the community but the boring message that we are giving to people. The arts sector is on its knees, and thank goodness the Executive have said today that money will go to the sector. Can we please use interesting people to get the message out? No harm to anyone, but the podium has become irrelevant to folk. A boring message is being put across in such a doom-and-gloom way that people just hear it as "another day at the podium".

We need to take people with us on this journey. They need to fight with us. They need to be with us. They need to stick to the message. They do not need their businesses going down the pan because they have closed again. They have to keep at this because it is all about saving lives. I read on social media that the reason people wear a mask, wash their hands and keep a social distance is to keep someone else alive. We have to keep that message going.

When the next round of amendment regulations comes forward, I ask the Minister to recognise the carers and not just the businesses that Ms Anderson talked about. Since March, the carers have been caring 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I know that people on Twitter or some smart alec will say that you cannot work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but carers do. They do not get a break. They have not had a break. There is no day care. There is no respite. There is no help. No one is rushing to help carers. When the carers go down, our health service will be on its knees.

While we are sticking this out and trying our best not to spread the virus, we should recognise that up in Derry — my goodness — there are further weeks when people have no opportunity to make an income. We are in the mouth of Christmas, and families do not know what they will be doing. Presenteeism is happening because some employers are forcing employees into the workplace. Some employees are working more hours because they feel guilty as their children are at home, and it is presumed that they are not working.

We cannot afford any more delays. Can we please get all the outstanding regulation amendments forwarded to the House as soon as possible? The Speaker has said on plenty of occasions that we need more Executive business to come to the House. Let us get the business moved forward and start planning for

the future. Let us start planning for a time when we are not closing things. Let us start planning ahead. I know that the Budget is coming through, but we still do not have the October monitoring round. We still cannot see what is happening with next year's Budget. We need to move forward.

Why are these amendment regulations coming to the House so late? It does not have to be 26 days. We will work with you. The House will work with the Executive to do what needs to be done to ensure that our citizens have the best possible service from us. Amendment (No. 10) was laid today, and it could be done next week. Why not move it forward more quickly? Why not put forward the economy pieces that we need more quickly? Why not invest in where the money needs to go?

Mr McNulty: I cannot let today pass without welcoming the reopening of the emergency department at Daisy Hill Hospital. I thank the Health Minister, the chief executive of the trust, Shane Devlin, and the entire team at the Southern Trust for their work to remodel Daisy Hill in order to open the emergency department today. Most of all, I pay tribute to the medical teams and support staff for their commitment and determination to keep the show on the road despite untold pressure, duress and uncertainty. They are the heroes who are ultimately responsible for the reopening of Daisy Hill's emergency department.

6.15 pm

As others have said, these restrictions would not sit easily during normal times. Restrictions affecting civil liberties, people's way of life and their livelihoods do not rest easily with me, but we are not in ordinary times.

These regulations are over a month old. Many of them have been superseded by the regulations that came into effect on Friday. However, when the current tight restrictions are lifted, we will revert to those restrictions. Whilst these restrictions have been necessary, the plan to get us out of these restrictions and to rebuild our economy and our society will be equally necessary.

A big issue with the implemented restrictions that we discussed and the ones that have followed is how they are enforced and how effectively they are enforced. We need to get back to the compliance levels in the community that we had in March. That is the only way that we will defeat this virus. We need to drive home the message and communicate better why each

restriction is needed, and we need people to observe the restrictions not because they have to but because they understand that, by doing so, they will save lives.

Lots of businesses, individuals and organisations feel that they have been left behind and are still falling through the cracks. That may have been acceptable in March, April or May but not six or seven months into this pandemic. Why are people and businesses still being left behind: close-contact services, such as the health and beauty industry; self-employed people; people who work in the gig economy; freelancers; taxi drivers; town and city centre businesses, many of which are family-owned?

Just this morning, I met two gentlemen who were driving an ambulance to Belfast. Those two men run a gym in Armagh, but they have had to close it. Whilst the gym can remain open, without classes, it is inviable. I applaud those two gentlemen for the important work that they are doing now, but it is incredible that they have been forced into that situation.

We are telling people to stay at home, and we are telling shopkeepers to stay open. How does that make sense? How does that add up for those business owners? People from the health, beauty and close-contact services are also asking why they have been shut down when they have complied with every regulation. Other businesses are in the same boat and find it difficult to understand the rationale. Is there a better way of communicating why each restriction has been introduced? Surely, the publication of the relevant scientific and PHA data that informs each decision would help to encourage greater compliance and buy-in. I support the regulations.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendments, but I wish to make a couple of comments. First, as we all know, this is a global pandemic that does not recognise race, gender, religion, political affiliation or anything else. In fact, as I have said on several occasions, it is an equal opportunity killer that has no regard for who you are or what postcode area you live in.

As we all know, regrettably, with pandemics, there will be multiple waves, and we are now dealing with the second wave. We can see the impact not just on this island or on these islands but across Europe and the world. If anybody noticed what was happening in Belgium or France today, they would realise that this has a long way to go. The best way that we have of defeating this virus is to stop giving it an opportunity, because this virus exploits

weakness, it exploits ignorance, it exploits dissension, it exploits complacency and it exploits bigotry. What it must not be allowed to do is to overwhelm us.

We have an opportunity to come together. On Tuesday, the Northern Ireland Executive decided to make particular rules and regulations and put in particular procedures that will help us get through this next part of the COVID pandemic.

The reason that we did that was to prevent our health service from otherwise being overwhelmed. This is no longer a question of, "We do a bit of this or we do a bit of that". We all have to join together to prevent our health service from being overwhelmed.

All of us — every single MLA here — will know people who are healthcare professionals. We know people who have been on ICUs. We know people who are fearful about going into work for their next shift because of what they might see and what they might receive. They are also extremely angry about what they see as politicians, the Assembly and the Executive not coming together to make the right choices and the right decisions. They want to see us all working together.

Last week, the party leaders came together to say that we would support whatever came out of the Executive and put our full-hearted support behind that. We as party leaders also committed our parties to doing exactly the same thing. That is because COVID does not respect politicians. COVID does not respect political parties. What we have to do is break the transmission path. To do that, the people of Northern Ireland need to have confidence in the message that is coming from us. They have to have confidence that the Northern Ireland Executive are making the right decisions.

I therefore send a message from the Assembly to all those healthcare workers who tonight are about to go on a shift in some fairly horrendous conditions that we support them and that we do so by supporting these rules and regulations. We do not quibble over them; rather, we get behind them. Frankly, Members of the Assembly, we do not have the time or the space in which to do that. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendment regulations.

Mr O'Toole: I will try to be brief in order to let other Members in, given that we are close to the end of the day. As many Members have said, it is slightly surreal that we are debating the amendment (No. 5), amendment (No. 6) and amendment (No. 7) regulations, which are

specifically regulations for the hospitality industry, when, in the past week, we have gone much further and closed down, out of necessity, the hospitality industry for the next four weeks.

First, I want to talk about the hospitality industry, because the regulations are specifically about it. It cannot be said often enough that the virus and the unavoidable response to it have imposed extraordinary and heartbreaking challenges on the industry. Sometimes, the debate here and in other jurisdictions has fallen into the narrow and unhelpful binary of health versus wealth, or the idea has been that the economy is something that is participated in purely by rapacious, cronyistic capitalists. As we all know from our constituencies and from our lives, however, the vast majority of people who own and operate hospitality premises, be those coffee shops, pubs, restaurants or, indeed, hotels — perhaps not so much hotels, because they tend to be slightly larger entities — run independent businesses and are quite often sole traders. Those people are intimately and profoundly connected to the community that they serve. What they provide is not just a local business or an amenity but something that defines and binds local communities. That is particularly the case on this island. In Ireland, we have a particular tradition of hospitality that is very special and intimate to our sense of self, whatever part of the island we are from. Indeed, it is strategically important in a sense, because it relates to our tourism offering.

All that is preamble to saying that this is a profoundly difficult moment for our hospitality industry, and no words that I or anyone else in the Assembly can say today will, in the weeks to come, alleviate the acute need, frustration and, I am sure, intense anxiety of many people in that industry. What is the answer to that? The answer is, clearly, the maximum possible help that we can give that industry through the next few weeks and the maximum possible financial support in the most straightforward possible way for them to access it. That is true of the other industries that are most directly affected by the new restrictions; not these regulations that we are technically debating today but those imposed in the past week.

It is not just about having an economy on the other side, although, clearly and self-evidently, we need an economy on the other side and we need employment. It is about having those businesses such as coffee shops, restaurants and pubs that create a sense of place and, frankly, a sense of self for people and places here. I speak as someone who grew up working in pubs and who has pulled more pints than I

care to remember — not quite as many as my Assembly colleague Pat Catney but certainly quite a few.

That brings me on to the next point about these regulations and our broader response to COVID, which, touching on something that my colleague Colin McGrath talked about, is about consistency and clarity of communication. I agree with what Kellie Armstrong said about moving these amendments to regulations in the Assembly more quickly, so that our communication to businesses and the public can be more coherent and joined up. As Colin McGrath said, it is really important now that, as we have already moved into the most complicated bit of the public health response to this, we are as clear and consistent in our messaging as we possibly can be.

Let us be honest; this is a unique jurisdiction. It is not totally unique in that there are other consociational power-sharing arrangements in the world, but we have a pretty unique arrangement. It is certainly unique in these islands and in western Europe. That creates certain specific challenges with communication and with political buy-in. It is a challenge for jurisdictions everywhere, whether a single-party Administration or whatever, to communicate the difficult bit, which is that new partial restrictions may be required.

That is a challenge, but it is not an excuse for, I am afraid, some of the inconsistency and some of the unforced errors that our Executive have made. I have two points to make about that. First, I agree with what Colin McGrath and, I think, other Members said, that publishing the evidence and being as clear and as forthright as possible is the best way to bring people along.

I do not agree, with respect to him, with Alan Chambers, who said that, purely by publishing the evidence, you are feeding conspiracy theorists or people who do not want to go along with the regulations. Bluntly, I say that the opposite is true. My experience, as someone who worked for a very long time as a civil servant, largely in communications, is that you get the maximum buy-in from people — first, from the media and, secondly, from the public with whom you are trying to communicate — if you show them your working out. It is a little bit like primary school. If you show people your working out, they are a bit more bought into it. So, if we can be as maximalist as possible in explaining to people why these restrictions are necessary and why we are imposing them now, I think that we have a greater chance of buy-in and, therefore, a greater chance of compliance.

That includes the regulations that we are discussing today.

The second part is around consistency at Executive level. As I mentioned before, we have a unique jurisdiction here. No one expects that every Member of every Executive party will constantly and consistently speak from exactly the same hymn sheet on all policies. That would be impossible, given our context. We would just have Mr Carroll and Mr Allister to keep us honest. I am sure that they would do a very good job on that, but the rest of us would not be doing our jobs if we were not here debating this frankly.

However, it is clear that remarks like those made by the Agriculture Minister over the past few days can only be detrimental to the public health message. I will not dwell on his remarks. Frankly, I will not dwell on them because I do not want to. They were pretty contemptible. It was a pretty lurid and garish display of sectarianism of the kind that saddens and frustrates me. Frankly, it is a reminder that, unfortunately, this society is struggling with a disease that has been with us for significantly longer than the virus of COVID-19 and which will probably long outlive COVID-19, sad to say. That kind of utterance is, frankly, completely counterproductive, and, yes, there have been other examples of Executive Ministers behaving in a way that was counterproductive. My party has been clear about that, and there is no point in going over those where we have discussed them in the past. Clarity and consistency is needed.

6.30 pm

My next point is about the consistency of our financial response to the crisis. We talked about it earlier with the Finance Minister and will talk more about it tomorrow. We have not yet seen, I am afraid, a consistent and clear enough response to the overwhelming economic crisis that we face. I do not want to get into a ministerial blame game. Others in the Chamber have done a bit of that. That is OK; it is fine. All that I want to say is that we need to see a clear, more coherent financial and economic response from the Executive. That has to be tied in to a serious look at what the next three, six and 12 months will look like with regard to the virus, Brexit and what we can expect in fiscal terms from the UK Government.

It is true that, while my party clearly and unequivocally supports the restrictions that have been imposed in the past week, it is also the case that we need to see — this is why evidence is really important — the clearest

possible vision from the Executive of the exit strategy from the current restrictions. That is not because I am a sceptic about the restrictions or that I do not think that they are a good idea; I think that they are completely essential to prevent the health service from being overwhelmed. However, we need to have a discussion about how we progress through the pandemic and what the mechanism and thresholds will be for easing those restrictions and getting back to some sort of normality. That will not happen immediately but as we move, hopefully in the spring, towards the availability of a vaccine.

Those are the key points that I wanted to touch on: the centrality of the hospitality industry; the need for clear and concise messaging from the Executive; and my view that the maximum publishing of evidence does not feed conspiracy theorists, because, frankly, the best antidote to conspiracism is to publish clear, evidence-based scientific advice. I hope that the advice from the CMO and CSA will be published in full by the Executive and that that will lead into an overarching and coherent financial response to the crisis, understanding that some of that response will be limited by the fact that we must wait for Barnett consequentialians from London. However, that is not the full alibi, as it were; we have many tools at our disposal in this place. There is also the fact that the Treasury is not stopping us being coherent in our response or setting out what we see as the clear road map for various sectors over the next few months.

In conclusion, I support the regulations. However, I want to see a much clearer set of communications from the Executive moving forward.

Mr Allister: There is, indeed, something inherently farcical about the debate, in that we are debating amendments to regulations that have been overwhelmingly superseded by events. These regulations date from a time when the Executive were telling us that hospitality venues were safe but your home was not. Therefore, you could meet your granny in the pub but not in your home. That was the genesis of the regulations that we are discussing. Of course, to make places of hospitality safe, their owners, with great diligence in most cases, spent thousands of pounds on taking the steps that the Executive required of them, only to have all of that pulled away last week and those very premises, effectively, closed.

Maybe it is not entirely coincidental or inappropriate that there is something farcical

about a debate such as this because, frankly, there is something farcical about the Executive's stance on issues such as this. Last Wednesday morning the First Minister, quite properly, came to the House and gave us an outline of what the Executive had agreed. I stood where I am standing now, and one of the questions I asked was, "Where does this leave spectators at elite sporting events?" She very clearly indicated that nothing had changed in that regard and that spectators could still attend elite sporting events under the existing restrictions.

We had such an event on Friday night at the Showgrounds in Coleraine, involving Ballymena United from my constituency and nearby Coleraine. Bear in mind what the First Minister had said. Nonetheless, even before the regulations were made — they did not come into effect until 10.30 pm on Friday, even though various hospitality places had been told to close from 6.00 pm, and did so. Up until the moment of 10.30 pm, the regulations were of no legal effect whatsoever. Yet, at about 6.00 pm or 6.30 pm on Friday, the Communities Minister — a member of the Executive, who had agreed the very regulations that were coming into effect — sent a letter to the sporting bodies in Northern Ireland telling them that, with immediate effect, they could not have spectators at their matches. Not surprisingly, chaos and confusion reigned in Coleraine.

What a preposterous situation. I think that "preposterous" was the right word for the First Minister to use, on Friday night, on the social media that she does not use. What a preposterous situation that a Minister who is a party to the making of the regulations so misunderstands them as to go out of her way to misrepresent what they say. Nowhere do those regulations say that spectators cannot attend elite sports. Whether they should is another question, but they do not. In any event, we had the farce of the sports Minister telling people the very thing that was not in the regulations as if it was.

Of course, it did not end with Sinn Féin. We then had the DUP Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister, who also is a member of the Executive, seeking to create an aura that he and his party were not really for these regulations and that they were, in fact, in opposition to aspects of them. That might be for the gullible within the base that he was trying to settle, and who were unsettled by the stringency of some of the regulations, but it is not for any thinking person who knows anything about how the Executive operate. Anyone who knows anything about that knows that nothing

comes to the Executive table until it is put on the agenda and agreed by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister acting jointly. Therefore, the proposals that came to the Executive on Tuesday night came with the imprimatur of the Democratic Unionist Party. When they were debated, it seems, from reports, there was not a cheep of opposition because they were the pre-packaged, already agreed proposals of DUP/Sinn Féin. So, for the Environment Minister to strut his stuff as if he were an opponent of the very things that he did not require a vote on in the Executive, and which his party endorsed, is quite inappropriate.

Maybe a little embarrassing. Maybe that is why, today, we have had but one token speech from the DUP Benches on that issue. Where are the defenders of Edwin Poots? We are told in press briefings that, apparently, it was not a solo run. I suspect that that is probably right. If it was not a solo run, he is looking very solo tonight in this debate. No one is rising to defend his position.

It is not that there are not points to be made against these regulations. There are, but not by those who agreed them. That is the difficulty. The fact that they are more likely to kill the economy than to kill COVID-19 is certainly a point that can be made. However, politics, not for the first time, is over-riding the issues. This debate, in its own way, shows that.

To finish, I come back to a point that I have made many times: here we are again with a junior Minister, who, when we debated some of the early amendments on 30 June, could not be in the House because he was off attending the funeral of a terrorist. Yet, once again, the public are being lectured by people who have not apologised and are being told, "Do as we say, not as we do". That is one of the fundamental reasons why there is a credibility issue for the House on this issue.

Mr Carroll: The COVID-19 restrictions that we are being asked to sign off on today are largely redundant because the virus is, once again, out of control. A much more robust approach is needed. The fact that the regulations before us are so weak is symptomatic of the head-in-the-sand approach of the Executive to the surge of cases over the past few weeks. New cases, now in the thousands, are growing by the day, and these regulations are nowhere near close to the response that we need.

That is exasperating because, like others, I warned time and again that the virus would surge because of the actions of the Executive. I feel like a broken record, and I am sure that there are some in the Chamber who would

rather that I changed my tune, but a cursory glance at the number of occupied ICU beds is the vindication of what trade unions, workers, People Before Profit and others warned about. I did not want to be right when predicting that the virus would surge because the Executive prioritised getting people back to work before it was safe to do so. Nor did I want to be right when predicting that hospitality workers, artists, taxi drivers and others would be thrown under the bus by this Executive after they spent weeks crooning about the importance of saving jobs.

What about the jobs of hospitality workers now, who did everything that they could to keep themselves and their punters safe when the Executive promoted a return to pubs opening without even a proper, functioning test-and-trace system in place? What about the workers who will lose out on payments when furlough comes to an end, and those who were never furloughed in the first place because their jobs were not deemed viable enough to save or protect? They are now being forced into the situation that they faced in the spring.

Once again, they will have no work to go to, but this time, they will have even less financial support to avail themselves of.

6.45 pm

Where is the plan here? Where is the leadership that we urgently need? What we urgently need is an all-island, zero-COVID strategy that seeks to eliminate this virus. It is the only way to crush COVID-19 in the absence of a vaccine. Unfortunately, that means restrictions for a period. However, those absolutely must be accompanied by full financial support and emergency contingencies for vulnerable people and by cash injections into our health service to enable it to provide a COVID service and regular services. It means putting the focus on those who are in control of workplaces rather than an obsessional overemphasis on individual behaviour. It means promoting that strategy through education rather than the primary focus being on criminal deterrents. Those issues are important. The workplace issues are essential. Again today, my office has been contacted by workers in Bombardier — this is a bit of a déjà vu scenario — where there are serious health and safety concerns that appear not to be taken as seriously as they should be.

Instead, we are in a situation where it is an absolute shambles on the hill. There are those who cannot even get the message straight.

They openly call for profits to be prioritised over health, and they plead poverty when it comes to paying people through the crisis, but they do not hesitate to pay £4 million for a bump in their own expenses. There is another shambles in the South that is led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The Government in the South are very happy to use the border as an excuse not to take this virus as seriously as they should, and this Executive, or certainly some elements of the Executive, seem very happy to let them because of an irrational fear of an all-Ireland approach.

We need to get real here. This virus is taking lives because of the political decisions that have been made across this island over the past few months. The economy was rushed to open before it was safe to do so. This virus will emerge again and again if we do not get a handle on it. We cannot accept an endless cycle of a surge in cases and circuit breakers and a surge in cases and circuit breakers. We have already seen the impact that it has had on our life, our livelihood and our mental health.

Moreover, it is rich for some in the Chamber to suggest that we cannot afford a different approach because the economy will suffer and there is no magic money tree. I would like someone to tell me how exactly they expect any economy to recover if they are periodically shutting it down because they have lost control of the virus time and time again. As for the magic money tree, for the First Minister in particular, here are five headlines from the past few weeks:

"UK billionaires' wealth soars by 35% as tech and healthcare firms thrive in the pandemic"

"Sir Jim Ratcliffe, UK's richest person, moves to tax-free Monaco"

"Ireland's richest increase wealth by 7.3% in last 12 months"

"Billionaires' wealth reach record levels during Covid pandemic".

Just today, we had:

"Ireland's super rich own €93bn — and Covid-19 has made them even richer".

Not only is there a magic money tree, there is a forest full of them. Anyone who denies that, it appears to me, would rather see billionaires hoard the wealth that they built on the backs of ordinary people than bail out vulnerable people

at a time of crisis. Shame on them for backing that strategy.

There are other Members who, over the past week, have sought to suggest that the spread of COVID-19 is happening on one side of the community. One would imagine that they would hang their head in shame when, unsurprisingly, it emerged that this virus is spreading in working-class communities as a result of the Executive's approach. Past experience leaves me doubtful that any heads were hung in shame, such is their shamelessness. Let me say this: sectarianism is also a virus, and Edwin Poots is a superspreader.

I will end on this point, which I think many would benefit from hearing as a refreshing circuit breaker from the rank sectarianism that has poured from some in the Chamber over the past few weeks: there is a way out of this crisis, and it is not a pipe dream. When we look around the world at millions of people returning to life as normal, we can be hopeful of what is possible beyond this virus. Look to New Zealand and other islands around the world that have used to their advantage their ability to limit travel and implement post-travel quarantine while ensuring that a proper track-and-trace system is in place to track and trace the virus. They decided to slow their economies down to allow people to get well and have now successfully reopened, including holding big events in their countries. That is what is possible; it is time for us to do it.

Mr Kearney: I welcome the debate on amendments No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations and thank Members for their contributions. Their concerns, questions and observations play a key role not only in scrutinising the regulations that are under debate but in helping to inform policy development as we go forward in these most challenging of times.

I will now turn to some of the points that Members made during the debate. I intend to address those contributions that were specific to the regulations. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, in deference to the range of contributions, I will also acknowledge other Members and the commentary that they made during the debate.

Colm Gildernew outlined the wet pubs discussion that took place in the Health Committee and the Committee's discussions with the environmental health officer. He pointed out that the absence of criteria for

reopening wet pubs meant that the Committee formed no view on the amendments.

Pam Cameron highlighted the relevance of the collection of postcode details in the context of the amendments, as addressed in the Committee, as a more effective means by which track and trace could be taken forward.

Paul Bradshaw questioned the region-specific scientific analysis and data that underpins the amendments and, therefore, how we arrive at decisions about the type of restrictions that are placed on the hospitality sector. The scientific data is obtained from a variety of sources, including from the SAGE group, which the Chief Scientific Adviser attends. A range of other evidence is considered, including international experience and relevant scientific publications. However, I am aware that the Health Department is looking at how it can upscale the amount of scientific data, information and analysis on the dashboard so that there is a greater public circulation of that information.

Colin McGrath and Kellie Armstrong raised what I think we all already know. That was, as Kellie Armstrong described it, the negative resolution approach that is taken with the regulations. I have great sympathy for her critique and discussion of the lag with the regulations. Ministers have sought to address all those issues with greater energy and in a more systematic way through oral and written statements, but we can always try to improve how we manage the legislative process. For consideration, there may be merit in a discussion between the Speaker's Office and the Business Committee about how we could, perhaps, address that more effectively within the constraints with which we are expected to operate under.

Kellie Armstrong also urged that the extant regulations be expedited, and Matthew O'Toole supported that position.

Much was said in the debate that extended outwith the regulations. There was much commentary about the current situation and, in particular, the bringing forward of the new intervention that was announced by the joint First Minister in the Chamber last Wednesday. Many Members spoke about and commented on those matters. They are effectively outwith the specificity of the regulations under debate, but, nevertheless, colleagues made a range of observations.

Colin McGrath spoke about the naysayers and the dissenting voices, but he welcomed all the interventions to have the desired effects. He

and Matthew O'Toole appealed for more consistent processes to be adopted in how we all take forward our business.

Colm Gildernew commented on the linkage between the collection of information in the hospitality sector and the test, trace and track systems that we require to fight back against COVID-19.

Pam Cameron stressed the importance of letting our hospitality sector know when it can reopen, and that is because we have moved into a series of much more stringent restrictions, which have effectively overtaken the positions that are adapted by the amendments that are before us.

Doug Beattie and Steve Aiken emphasised very strongly the importance of fighting now to defeat COVID-19, and they called for a unity of purpose among all Members and parties that occupy this House.

Sinéad Ennis acknowledged the sacrifice that is being made within and by the hospitality industry.

Alan Chambers made the point that the evidence of this pandemic is found in our infection levels, our hospitals, our ICUs and, sadly, in the new wave of fatalities that are being recorded.

Mark Durkan and Martina Anderson spoke about their constituency context and the need for increased solidarity and financial supports for businesses. They made the point that the health emergency needs to be understood as interlinked with social disadvantage and that we all need to ensure that COVID-19 does not deepen the poverty trap. By way of information and to share it with those colleagues, it is important to note that, between April and August of this year, COVID discretionary support grants totalled £1.9 million and, in the same period, non-COVID discretionary support grants totalled £4.2 million. Those interventions need to continue into the future if we are to avoid COVID becoming a deepening poverty trap.

Kellie Armstrong called for enhanced messaging and communication, and Justin McNulty spoke about the importance of increased compliance.

Matthew O'Toole spoke from his experience and an economic perspective on the centrality of our hospitality industry.

Gerry Carroll and Jim Allister, once again, expressed their exasperation at the actions of the Executive.

I hope that I have responded to as many of the Members' queries, comments or questions that arose. We all have a responsibility to help to curb the spread of the virus, and we all know that; we have discussed it so many times. We can do that by complying with the restrictions that are in place and by following the health advice that we have. That extends to what we all already know: maintaining the social distancing that is required; good hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene; wearing face coverings and self-isolating immediately if we experience any symptoms, including a persistent cough, the loss of smell or taste or developing a fever; seeking a test if we experience any of those symptoms; and downloading the StopCOVID NI app. By following that advice, as we go about our daily lives, we can protect not only ourselves but others from serious illness. We can, crucially, protect our health service and, just as crucially, our economy, and we can help to avoid further, prolonged and more stringent restrictions.

A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, molaim an rún agus na rialacha don Tionól. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

Adjourned at 7.01 pm.

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