



Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 20 October 2020
Volume 132, No 2

Contents

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Second Stage..... 1

Oral Answers to Questions

Health 28

Infrastructure..... 36

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Second Stage (*Continued*)..... 46

Adjournment

Lack of Rail Connectivity in Foyle 81

Assembly Members

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

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 October 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The first item of business in the Order Paper is the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA Bill 09/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limits to this debate. I call on the Finance Minister to open the debate on the Bill. Iarraim ar an Aire Airgeadais an díospóireacht a oscailt ar an Bhille.

Mr Murphy: The Second Stage debate follows yesterday's approval by the Assembly of the Supply resolutions for the 2020-21 Main Estimates and the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses. Accelerated passage of the Bill is necessary in order to ensure Royal Assent before any Departments reach the cash limits for 2020-21 that were set in the Vote on Account. I am grateful to the Finance Committee for confirming that, in line with Standing Order 42, the Bill can proceed under accelerated passage. I thank the Committee for its work in agreeing to accelerated passage.

We all recognise that the situation this year is unprecedented and, as I explained in the debate yesterday, instead of bringing the Main Estimates to the Assembly in May, it was necessary at that time to seek the Assembly's approval for a further Vote on Account to provide authority for Departments to access the cash that they would require to continue to deliver services and to respond to the developing COVID situation until the autumn.

That requirement was passed by the Assembly in the Budget (No. 2) Act (NI) 2020.

The financial position now allows me to bring the Budget (No. 3) Bill to the Assembly to seek the legislative authority for the expenditure of the Departments and other bodies for the remainder of this financial year. That is based on the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans, including over £2.3 billion in additional resources and capital allocations, which they have made in response to the COVID emergency and for economic recovery.

Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate should be confined to the general principles of the Bill, and I shall endeavour to keep to that direction. The Bill will authorise the cash and use of resources on services to allow Departments and other bodies to operate for the remainder of the financial year, carrying out the functions and delivering the services that are set out in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill. The detail of how the cash and resources will be used is set out in the Main Estimates, and that document, together with the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses, was laid in the Assembly on 13 October.

The Bill will authorise the issue of the sum of £4,757,631,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources totalling £4,791,050,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2021 — this financial year.

The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column one of each schedule. These amounts are in addition to those previously authorised by the Assembly in the Budget Act (NI) 2020 in March and the Budget (No. 2) Act (NI) 2020 in June. They represent the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans and include the allocations agreed with the Executive in response to the COVID situation since the 2020-21 Budget was debated by the Assembly on 5 May. The Bill ensures that all Departments will have the statutory authority to spend cash and use the

resources required to deliver services for the remainder of the financial year.

Clause 2 provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department of £2,378,816,000. This is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 1 for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I stress that clause 2 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power. It enables my Department to run an effective and efficient cash management regime.

As Members will recall from the debate yesterday, as well as authorising the 2020-21 expenditure, the Bill regularises excess expenditure that occurred in 2016-17. Clauses 5 and 6 authorise the sum of £112,618,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources totalling £183,290,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 3 and 4 to the Bill for the year ending 31 March 2017. This is necessary to regularise the excess expenditure that was incurred by some Departments and other bodies as it was not possible to bring the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) and the associated Budget Bill to the Assembly at the end of the 2016-17 financial year. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) considered these 2016-17 excesses and recommended that they now be regularised through the Statement of Excesses and their inclusion in this Bill. The Bill also repeals a number of Budget Acts from 2016 and 2017. This is a normal process to remove legislation from the statute book once it is spent.

The numbers contained in the Budget Bill are significant, and I am sure that Members will agree that it is not an easy task to try to translate those figures into the delivery of public services on the ground. The reality is that the legislation is required to ensure that all public services can continue to be delivered for the remainder of this financial year. This means that we can support essential workers, such as our doctors, nurses and care workers, who continue to be on the front line dealing with COVID-19. It also means support for the businesses that are so vital for economic recovery. It means that all the day-to-day services on which we all rely can continue to be delivered to citizens.

On that note, I will conclude. I am happy to deal with any points of principle or detail of the Budget Bill that Members may wish to raise.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Paula Bradley.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Excuse me, sorry. My mistake. I call Steve Aiken, Chair of the Finance Committee. That was very remiss of me, Dr Aiken.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): Yes, well, I think that I am still the Chair of the Finance Committee. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his remarks so far.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I can confirm that you are. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Aiken: As outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources required to reflect the departmental spending plans in the 2020-21 Main Estimates. These are based on the Executive's Budget, which was approved by the Assembly earlier this year. The Bill also includes provisions for excess cash and resource requirements. The Committee noted that this matter has been considered by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and reported on by the Public Accounts Committee, which recommended that the necessary sums be provided by Excess Votes. The Committee had no observations on this recommendation.

As Members may recall, it was necessary to bring forward a further Vote on Account and associated Budget Bill to ensure that Departments incurring higher than anticipated spending as a result of the COVID pandemic would not exceed their voted limits. As with other Budget Bills, the Department of Finance highlighted the need for the Bill to progress by accelerated passage. As Members may be aware, the Committee has a unique role in determining whether a Budget Bill should proceed via accelerated passage. In this regard, the Committee, at its meeting last week, agreed to grant accelerated passage to the Bill under Standing Order 42(2) on the basis of having been consulted appropriately on the expenditure provisions within it, and I wrote to the Speaker to confirm this decision.

Traditionally, there seems to have been an assumption that the Committee for Finance will automatically grant accelerated passage to Budget Bills.

You might even say that the granting of accelerated passage has been taken for granted. The Department provided a very useful briefing paper to the Committee, but it contained one phrase of concern:

"The Committee for Finance has a vital role to play in ensuring the Accelerated Passage of the Bill".

I make it clear, once and for all, that that is not the case. The Department of Finance has a vital role in ensuring that the Committee for Finance has been appropriately consulted on the policy proposals contained in Budget Bills so that it is in a position to write to the Speaker to that effect and, thus, grant accelerated passage.

That stated, there has been suitable engagement with the Minister and departmental officials on budgetary matters since we have resumed business. I hope that we continue in that vein throughout the remainder of this mandate. That engagement has included advance pre-introductory briefings on any ministerial statements, engagement relating to the up-to-date positions on COVID allocations and the appearance of officials during formal Committee meetings. The provision of budgetary information is important both for the Finance Committee's strategic cross-cutting scrutiny role and for individual Statutory Committees to fulfil their role in monitoring and scrutinising progress at departmental level. The role of Statutory Committees in scrutinising departmental spending and monitoring savings, as well as service delivery, will, I am sure, only intensify, particularly as a result of the social and economic challenges that we all face and will continue to face in the future.

Thorough scrutiny can add real value, but, for it to be effective, the flow and timing of information is critical. Across government, there needs to be an acknowledgement and acceptance that scrutiny Committees must be afforded adequate time to enable them to contribute through constructive scrutiny to influence at the formative stages of the Budget process. Members of our Committee — and I, from my own personal perspective — never want to hear again a member of another Committee saying that they have not had adequate information, or an adequate flow of information, coming through. I understand, in particular, the concerns of the Justice Committee in that area. I hope, Minister, that we will emphasise to the rest of your Executive colleagues that the timely flow of information is vital if we are to conduct our roles effectively.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way. I thank him, in his role as Chair of the Committee, for the work that he carried out to facilitate the Justice Committee; we got information from his Committee as opposed to

the relevant Department. I am pleased to confirm that steps have been taken to address those matters, and there is now much better engagement coming from the Department of Justice directly to the Justice Committee. I put on record my thanks to the Finance Committee for its work in that regard.

Dr Aiken: Thank you.

Concerns have also been expressed by some other Statutory Committees about the flow and timing of information relating to budgetary matters, which makes it difficult for those Chairpersons to fully contribute to debates, such as this one on the Budget Bill. As I said during yesterday's Supply resolution debate, the Committee has, in the course of its work, taken a particular interest in black-box items. There are six items of expenditure for which the Assembly's approval is being sought today under sole authority of the Budget (No. 3) Bill. The Committee sought copies of the Department of Finance's approval letters for that expenditure. Those approval letters were received during yesterday's debate on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates and were circulated to Committee members in advance of today's debate. Although the Committee is yet to formally consider the content of those approvals, I am struck by the timing of some of them. The Main Estimates, which included those black-box items, and the associated Bill were formally laid in the Assembly on 13 October. As I highlighted during yesterday's debate, the Committee for Finance received advance copies of those, which were considered at its meeting on 6 October. It is therefore interesting to note the Department's approach: two formal Department of Finance approval letters were dated only last Friday, 16 October, which was after the Committee had asked to see them. In contrast, other approvals had been issued by email. I consider that to be an important point to note because, although the Department stated that verbal confirmation was provided to the two Departments concerned, the appropriate approvals were not formally in place at the time of the Estimates being laid.

Minister, it would therefore be helpful if you would clarify whether it is lawful for a Department to incur expenditure under sole authority prior to formal approval being given and whether Department of Finance approval can, indeed, be given retrospectively.

10.45 am

Those key questions need to be answered to provide the Assembly, and the wider public, with the necessary assurances that appropriate controls are in place to ensure that public money is used appropriately and that there are sufficient checks and balances to safeguard that. In the absence of Department of Finance approval, how can we, as an Assembly, draw confidence from the process if Departments can use public money under sole authority, without the necessary safeguards being observed? The Department must lead by example. It must ensure that the highest standards of financial accountability are adhered to across government to maintain the integrity of public-sector financial processes.

I acknowledge that the Department and the Minister have recognised that there has been inconsistency, and I have no doubt whatsoever that the Committee will wish to explore that with the Minister when it formally considers the issue at its meeting tomorrow.

Turning to the wider Budget process, I look forward to getting it on a level footing in future. I also look forward to a memorandum of understanding being agreed between the Assembly and the Executive so that we can all fully play our part in planning, monitoring and scrutinising Budgets, Estimates and Budget Bills.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motion.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Budget (No. 3) Bill and to highlight the areas of financial impact and concern that the Committee for Communities has been focusing on in recent months. In March, I assured the Minister of Finance that the Committee for Communities would work closely with the Department to achieve all that it could within its remit, whatever its budget allocation. That remains the Committee's position.

The Committee is fully supportive that the request for resources corresponds with the Department's main programmes: welfare, employment, local government, housing regeneration, culture, arts and sports. However, the Committee does not just want to press for more money for each and every area without understanding the underlying issues and pressures and looking at costed options. To that end, the Committee started this term with a strategic planning day to refocus its efforts on where, within its substantial remit, it can make most impact. In the coming months, it will

support and scrutinise the Department as it is faced with the prospect of prioritising expenditure across a multitude of areas, all crying out for resources.

The Committee has worked closely with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) over the past six months to better understand the extreme financial concerns of our local councils as they struggle to continue to deliver essential services in this financial year and beyond and to maintain jobs and leisure, sports, community and arts services. The Committee was pleased to hear from SOLACE of the good working relationship between councils and the Executive and that financial packages of well over £60 million have been secured to date from DFC alone in respect of lost income and emergency expenditure. The Committee also supports the call for a sustainable, co-designed financial model for local government so that councils can be part of the COVID-19 recovery in all our communities.

Throughout the pandemic, the Committee has heard and seen the difference that arts, culture and sports, and the opportunity to take part in them, make in our communities. It is focusing its efforts on supporting those sectors to survive the crisis so that they can thrive again and continue to play their part in the overall well-being of our society. The Committee has pushed hard for financial support to help the culture, arts, heritage and sports sector. Recently, we were delighted to help to secure the remaining £29 million of the arts package. The Committee now wants to see that money spent quickly to support venues and performers.

However, just last week, the Committee was alarmed to hear of the looming financial crisis facing our football league clubs. They are employers, from footballers to coaches, to administrators and more; they are also community and social hubs that have played a vital role in the COVID-19 community response. The Committee supports their call for an emergency hardship fund for such clubs.

On 30 September, the Committee had a very informative briefing from departmental officials on COVID allocations, the October monitoring round and the Budget 2021-24 exercise. Affordable housing is an ongoing concern for the Committee, as it is for all of us, and we were pleased to note that the legislation to reverse the decision of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to classify housing associations as public bodies gained Royal Assent on 28 August. That will allow the

Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to again qualify for financial transactions capital (FTC) funding, and it has been agreed with the Department of Finance that the Department for Communities will bid for £13 million FTC as part of the October monitoring exercise. The Committee fully supports that bid to facilitate the purchase of an additional 500 homes in order to meet the increased demand for the co-ownership scheme. However, I have heard informally that the October monitoring round is delayed. If that is the case, I ask the Minister where that leaves the funding for co-ownership housing.

I cannot speak without highlighting the Committee's concern over the predicted 100,000 job losses as a result of the pandemic and the huge number of people who might soon find themselves in receipt of universal credit (UC). Indeed, the UC caseload has doubled so far, and the Department is employing close to 1,000 fixed-term contract staff to deal with the increase in social welfare claimants. Sadly, we are creating new jobs in DFC to deal with the massive unemployment that is predicted to result from COVID.

The Committee expressed concern recently about lack of sufficient funds for labour market interventions. That brings me to the new welfare reform mitigations. The Committee noted the very large sums of money that the Department put down in its budget for each of the three years of the 2021-24 exercise. There is over £147 million per year as a place finder for new welfare mitigations. The Committee looks forward to hearing from the Minister soon on the review of welfare mitigations and those spending plans.

Although the COVID response has taken much of the Committee's time, it is keen to pursue the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments and has been keeping in regular contact with the Minister on key NDNA priorities; for example, the regional and subregional stadia programmes and the development of social strategies. The Committee is, naturally, a great supporter of the proposed social strategies and would like to see the required funding to ensure that they are developed as soon as possible.

We should not show lack of ambition in our planning, but, regrettably, our ambition has been tempered by our finances and the primacy of the ongoing COVID crisis. In addition, the elephant in the room is the absence of a draft Programme for Government. Ultimately, we need a draft Programme for Government so that we can consider the link between the

proposed outcomes and the budgets that are allocated against them. Without that, we stand accused of a lack of strategy and vision and of reacting rather than planning.

I will make a few remarks as the Communities spokesperson for my party that I have not already made in my Committee speech. I will make just two points. The first is on the Supporting People budget. The Minister is well aware, as are Members, of the good work that is done through that for our older people, those with disabilities and those with mental health and homelessness problems. During the worst months of the COVID pandemic, the Supporting People scheme went over and above in the work that it did. The Committee received a briefing on homelessness, and it was able to say in the Assembly that no one was homeless. That was very much down to those agencies and groups that work under Supporting People. We have not seen an uplift in the Supporting People budget that matches inflation in many years. The Minister is well aware of that, as are Members. Every time that we have a Budget debate and I have to speak, I always mention Supporting People and the need for an uplift for it.

We talked about strategies, and another issue that I want to mention before closing is the sign language strategy. I know that it is some way away because we have to go through it in great detail.

However, we can do something: the video relay service (VRS). The Department for Communities is trying to make headway with the video relay service. In June 2019, Scotland launched VRS For All, which means that it does not matter whether it is the public sector, the third sector or the private sector; every person who has a hearing or speech impairment can access the VRS. I ask the Minister to progress that, because people with a hearing or speech impairment are being discriminated against every single day in Northern Ireland because they do not have access to that service.

Mr Gildernew: Having addressed Committee issues yesterday, I speak today in my role as Sinn Féin's spokesperson for health in order to address health inequality issues of which we are all conscious. Health inequalities can be adequately addressed only by focusing our actions and our allocation of financial resources on the wider social, economic and environmental determinants of health across various Departments. Health inequality here remains a costly scourge on our health services and our communities, and it must be tackled through targeted funding and programmes that

will enhance the health of all our people. Tackling health inequality must be central to any forward planning to rebuild our health services in the North. Poor health limits people's ability to develop life skills through education, careers and professional development. Various public health studies have found that health is strongly linked to education, employment, housing and income.

In my comments, I am merely trying to provide a snapshot of the health inequalities experienced by different communities across the North. Men and women in more affluent areas can, on average, expect to live longer than their peers in more deprived areas. Those living in the most deprived areas have about 60% to 80% more heart and respiratory disease and strokes, a twofold excess of accidents and a threefold excess of lung cancer. Across the North, there are alarming levels of disparity in incidences of infant mortality, childhood obesity, oral ill health, pulmonary and respiratory disease, substance abuse and addiction, and mental health and well-being between the most and least deprived communities. Large inequalities continue in mental health indicators, with rates of suicide and self-harm almost three and a half times higher in the most deprived areas. Prescription rates for depression and anxiety are relatively high across the entire North, although the rate in deprived areas remains two thirds higher than in the least deprived areas.

The 'Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability' found that poor mental health affects one in every four citizens here. The review concluded that there is clear evidence of inequalities in the investment associated with mental health and learning disability over many years compared with England, Scotland and Wales, despite higher levels of mental ill health in the North. Those living in the most deprived areas have about 60% to 80% more heart and respiratory disease and strokes. In addition to that, significant alcohol, smoking and drug-related inequalities continue to plague the North: for example, alcohol mortality and alcohol-related hospital admissions in the most deprived areas are four times that of the least deprived areas. We are all aware of the famous study that demonstrated that you can board a bus in Belfast, travel a short journey across the city and expect to live a significant number of years longer and more healthily as a result of where you live. Those issues must be tackled.

According to the Office for National Statistics, patterns of death from COVID-19 also correspond with patterns of deprivation, with

deaths in more deprived communities more than double those in the least deprived communities. The ONS data shows that differences in risk of death from COVID-19 are partly the result of socio-economic disadvantage and other unexplained factors. Department of Health figures reveal that the infection rate in the 10% most deprived communities is one fifth higher than the 10% least deprived communities and that the infection rate among those aged over 65 is almost two fifths higher in deprived areas. That amounts to 1,027 per 100,000 versus 750 per 100,000 population between the most and least deprived areas.

11.00 am

The COVID pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups. Recent statistics from the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC), including data from England, Wales and the North, show that, since the start of September, 38.6% of individuals who are critically ill in intensive care with COVID are from BAME backgrounds. Individuals from those groups are also more likely to face housing challenges, which may exacerbate COVID-19 transmission, morbidity and mortality. They are also more likely to work in key worker jobs with a higher risk of exposure and to report being more likely to use public transport to reach their place of work.

Carers are also hugely important in our society. They provide support, often on an unpaid basis, for thousands of older people and those with disabilities. Carers suffer higher levels of ill health. Almost one in five carers provides substantial care of over 50 hours per week and feels that they are in poor health, as compared with 14% of the non-carer population. It is remarkable and disgraceful that carers are one of the few groups in our society that have received no additional support to date throughout the pandemic. I know that you are prepared to look at that issue, Minister. Today, I appeal directly to the Minister of Health to bring forward measures, as a priority, that will make a real difference for carers right now and in the weeks and months ahead.

I move on to transformation. Michael Marmot, in his famous report on health inequalities, stated that:

"Realizing health equity requires empowering people, particularly socially disadvantaged groups, to exercise

increased collective control over the factors that shape their health."

The ambition of Delivering Together is to guarantee that the user of the health and social care system is listened to as they play a central role in developing and implementing new services and care pathways. Any serious effort to transform our health and social care services must be thorough and must be resourced. There can be no satisfactory health and social care transformation process unless the deep and lasting health inequalities across the North are tackled. With nearly half of the Executive's Budget being spent on health, it is vital that we ensure value for money. In health, value for money must be about reducing health inequalities, improving life expectancy and improving the quality of life. A little well spent goes a long way. Proactive spending on preventative programmes such as smoking cessation, early childhood intervention and health education are cost-effective measures, as they save significant amounts of money further down the line.

Previously, Sinn Féin asked for the population needs assessment across a range of areas. We received a high-level needs report that did not tell us much about the particular needs of people. Without knowing what those needs are and without some idea of where we can get the best outcomes, there is a real possibility that money will not be spent effectively. The central question, for me, when devising a health budget is this: does the budget address the prevailing and persistent issue of health inequalities?

Everyone is entitled to good physical and mental well-being. Our role and responsibility in the Assembly and in the various Departments through which we work is to improve outcomes, including health outcomes, for all.

Mr O'Toole: Yesterday, I spoke about some of the short-term issues facing our economic recovery from COVID, as it related to the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates. Today, I will talk more generally about our long-term budgeting processes and how they can be improved but specifically as they relate to this Budget Bill.

First, of course, my party supports the Budget (No. 3) Bill, as it is required to authorise the £4 billion spend set out by the Minister that is required to keep our public services running and to maintain the response to COVID-19. It is, however, worth saying that, unfortunately, the volume of Budget debates in the Assembly since we returned in January has been in inverse proportion to the quality of the scrutiny

and, at times, the quality of the information that we have had. As I said yesterday, that is not said for the purpose of having a dig at the Department or the Ministers — much of that is the product of the crisis that we have faced — but it is important that we set down some key principles for our long-term budgeting, how we want it to improve and what we want to see from the Executive going forward, much of which was set out in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

It is now around 10 months since the reformation of the Assembly and the Executive. We are — optimistically, probably — facing another six months in which COVID, in addition to Brexit, unfortunately, is the dominant financial focus of our institutions. It would be useful to hear from the Minister about whether he sees the end of this financial year as an inflection point for our planning around COVID. Does he think that, by spring of next year, we will be in a slightly different place with our response? One would hope so. It is also a little more than 18 months until the end of the mandate and the next election. As I said yesterday, it is becoming ever more difficult to see a detailed and meaningful Programme for Government being agreed by the Executive and brought to the Assembly. That is not to say that I do not want one or that anyone here does not want one; it is just a statement of hard fact.

COVID has created monumental challenges for our public services and our economy — that is clear — but it has also ruthlessly exposed weaknesses that we have procrastinated over for too long, and some of those weaknesses are key to the Budget process and how we deal with it. As I have said before, the Northern Ireland economy has had major and well-known structural flaws for years, but successive Executives including all parties have failed to deal with them. A long-term budgeting process will be critical to dealing with those challenges. We are among the most unproductive regions in these islands; in fact, I think that we are the most unproductive region in these islands. Our education system too often produces poor outcomes for far too many, especially those from the least advantaged backgrounds. We export too high a proportion of school-leavers and graduates, and, of those whom we export, a depressingly small number return here. As a result, our skills base is low, and the cycle is reinforced by our tendency to settle for low value-adding foreign direct investment (FDI). As a result, we will need to take a fresh look at our long-term economic and Budget planning once we are through this crisis.

We need to take a fresh look at how we organise our public services and our economy. That will require taking a fresh look at our fiscal position. In addition, one of the points that I made yesterday is that, in the short- to medium-term response to COVID-19, it would be helpful to see more ambition in how we use the fiscal levers that are open to us, whether it be reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing — there is significant headroom for that this year — financial transactions capital or, indeed, conventional capital. I know that the Minister is appealing to the Treasury for more flexibility in how those allocations are used — I support him in that — but it would be helpful to see as much ambition as possible. We should pull every lever that is available to us.

Our budgeting process has traditionally been somewhat opaque. Married with the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scandal, it has contributed to the fraying of public confidence in these institutions. There is significant confusion over our budgeting processes, so, in addition to greater and more consistent long-term budgeting, we need greater public engagement and awareness. We need to introduce much greater clarity into Budget processes than exists at present. I acknowledge that the actions of this UK Government have thrown a spanner in the works and made the job of the Finance Minister more difficult this year, as they have delayed and avoided a comprehensive spending review (CSR), but failures of long-term financial planning are not new to this place. Westminster is partly but not solely to blame for them. We need to take a long, hard look at how we get out of the challenge of short-term budgeting even when the Treasury is unwilling to provide us with the clear, long-term budgetary horizon that we need. I urge the Finance Minister to bring forward plans for the fiscal council that was pledged in 'New Decade, New Approach' and for the fiscal commission that he himself has suggested. I wholeheartedly agree with him on the need to have both institutions in order for them to take a long, hard look at how we fund ourselves here and how we make our institutions more self-sustaining.

Also, if we are able to demonstrate in the short term that we can use to the maximum some of the levers, limited and small though they are, that exist now — for example, our RRI borrowing power — that would surely make the case that more of that fiscal autonomy would be good for how we do government here and how we deliver for our people.

As I have said, we need to be creative with the fiscal tools that are available to us. Borrowing costs are at an historic low globally. As I said

yesterday, the International Monetary Fund is telling Governments around the world not to be shy about making maximum use of their borrowing potential. Though we are not a sovereign borrower, as it were, we should not be shy about using those tools.

It would be helpful to get an update from the Minister on financial transactions capital in-year and what specifically is being done. We talked about that yesterday, but I do not think that there was a specific update on it. It would be really helpful to know what is happening so that we do not hand back any of that money or financing, as it were. I recognise that it is not straightforward funding. It is financing; it is financial transactions that have to be paid back. We should use that allocation, given the severity of the situation facing our businesses and our workers in the months to come. We should not leave money unallocated or, as I said, be conservative in accessing the limited borrowing powers that we have.

Today, as we discuss passing the third Budget Bill of the year, it is worth recognising that we face probably the gravest winter, in public health terms and economic terms, that many of us have lived through. While we welcome the passing of the Budget, because it will enable our public sector to spend money and the Departments to keep our public services going and to respond to the fiscal crisis, let us hope that, in future Budget Bills, we are able to debate not just longer-term, multi-year Budgets but more ambitious use of our fiscal powers to deliver better outcomes for the people whom we serve.

Mr Muir: This is the first time in this unprecedented year that I have risen to support a Budget Bill on behalf of the Alliance Party. The Bill is necessary to allow Northern Ireland Departments to continue to carry out their functions and to respond to the pandemic in the difficult months ahead.

When the Assembly was restored in January, we expected our main areas of budgetary focus to be on preparing for the impact of Brexit and implementing New Decade, New Approach commitments. It has not worked out that way. New Decade, New Approach has taken a back seat as we respond to the enormous challenges placed on people's everyday lives by COVID-19. For the remainder of this financial year, there is little doubt that COVID-19 will continue to dominate all aspects of the Executive's finances and, perhaps, our lives. The most important area of focus now is that all the money allocated is spent wisely. For the Executive to hand back Barnett consequentials

at the end of this year or to have to spend a substantial amount of money on non-priority areas at the last minute would be a real scandal, given the circumstances and the challenges that people face.

Numerous MLAs have expressed disappointment in previous debates at the lack of a detailed, meaningful COVID-19 economic response strategy. I share those concerns. We really need to have a better understanding of how the Executive intend to allocate the remainder of the £2.4 billion that they have already received. We know, for example, that £600 million has been set aside for the health service, but the Department of Health has not informed us of the amount required that can be spent in this financial year. I accept that the future remains highly uncertain in the midst of a public health emergency where we have to prepare for the worst. However, at this stage, we really need to have some idea of whether part of that £600 million might become available to other sectors of society that are also in desperate need of support. It is likely to be too late to provide meaningful support in January or February, if there is money still left on the table.

Furthermore, I ask the Minister of Finance to clarify whether he expects additional Barnett consequentialia beyond the £2.4 billion already received. Earlier this year, the Treasury took the unprecedented step of allocating Northern Ireland £600 million in consequentialia in advance — a bit like a Barnett guarantee. We now need to know whether further announcements made in England will lead to additional Barnett consequentialia for Northern Ireland. We just do not know how the £600 million tott up.

11.15 am

While many of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach have necessarily been delayed, it is crucial that they are not forgotten. Key amongst them is the establishment of a fiscal council. Producing a multi-year Budget in 2021 seems increasingly less likely the longer the UK spending review is delayed, but that alone is no reason to delay the establishment of a fiscal council for Northern Ireland, which is critical for better medium- to long-term economic planning and for the budget discipline that has been so often lacking in the past. It is essential and a step in the right direction to giving Northern Ireland greater borrowing and tax-varying powers. I urge the Minister of Finance to ensure that it is in place by the time of the next Budget Bill.

Nor can we ignore the financial reforms that Northern Ireland has needed for so long and which are commitments in New Decade, New Approach. Bengoa must be implemented to ensure that we have a sustainable, fit-for-purpose health service that does not leave people stranded on waiting lists for years, not weeks or months. Putting the health service back to the way it was before the pandemic just does not make sense. A full review of our education system is also required so that our schools are properly funded and duplication eliminated. We must never again return to a situation where teachers have to ask parents to donate toilet roll.

We must finally get serious about the cost of division in Northern Ireland: over half a billion pounds a year that could be much better spent on other public services. In addition, we must start utilising capital spending to support a medium- to long-term infrastructure strategy developed by an infrastructure commission for Northern Ireland. Infrastructure investment must be at the heart of a green recovery in tackling the climate emergency that we face.

Over the next few months, the Executive must meet the twin challenges of responding quickly and strategically to the ongoing pandemic whilst making progress on the systemic challenges that have plagued us for too long and which are key parts of New Decade, New Approach.

I agree with Colm Gildernew's comments on social deprivation and how that has an impact on people's lives. From the evidence presented, it is clear that COVID-19 does not discriminate on the basis of religion or political opinion but that it certainly does on the basis of poverty and social deprivation.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I will speak first as Chair of the Committee and then make some remarks in my capacity as an MLA.

I will deal with the justice-related issues first. The 2020-21 Budget announced by the Minister of Finance on 31 March 2020 included allocations of £1,111,200,000 resource DEL and £88.1 million capital DEL for the Department of Justice. Although this was an increase of 6.3% resource DEL, the Committee was told that this included ring-fenced funding for a number of matters. The Department therefore advised that the allocation was not adequate to maintain current services and that the Minister of Justice had raised her concerns with the Finance Minister.

As I am sure was the case for most Departments, the Department of Justice's budget planning took place before the COVID-19 pandemic materialised. The Committee recognises that this has had a significant impact on the delivery of services and budget planning across the justice sector, and it has resulted in a number of COVID-19 reprioritisation exercises to try to assess requirements and align resources to deal with the emerging pressures.

I understand that the Main Estimates that were agreed yesterday and which will be given effect by this Bill incorporate changes to budgets in the June monitoring round. Based on the June monitoring round, the Department's 2020-21 budget is now £1,143,600,000 of non-ring-fenced DEL, and that includes £25.2 million of non-recurrent resource funding allocated by the Executive for COVID-19 pressures. The extra is made up of £76.9 million of ring-fenced resource DEL and £88.1 million of capital DEL.

The Department had originally submitted a bid of £38.8 million for COVID-19 pressures and received an allocation of £12.4 million resource DEL as part of the June monitoring round. This included £4 million to the Police Service, £1.9 million to the Prison Service, £1.6 million towards the temporary resting place and £4.9 million towards PPE across the justice sector. Subsequent bids totalling £17.3 million were submitted, and the Executive have allocated a further £13.5 million. This left the Department with a £3.78 million pressure to manage at that time. Further bids for £5.6 million of resource and £1 million of capital were then made, though those were unsuccessful. Since then, the Department has continued to examine its COVID-19 pressures, including as part of the October monitoring round. The Department has advised that several identified pressures were reduced and other new areas emerged. However, at this stage, it is expected that those will be managed by internal reallocations, and no further bids are, therefore, needed at this time. COVID-19 has also had an impact on capital spend, with the Department of Justice declaring a reduced requirement of £5.5 million as part of the October monitoring round. That relates mainly to issues within the police supply chain and the reduced capacity to deliver new vehicles.

Moving away from COVID-19, the Committee was advised at June monitoring of a £4.5 million requirement for the PSNI in respect of EU exit. That relates to funding for 308 officers and staff who are already employed and for whom funding was received last year. The Department has advised the Committee that

work is ongoing between the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury on that matter. In addition, £1 million of capital is required for the PSNI for EU exit, which the Committee has also been advised is being dealt with separately through the Treasury as it relates to the cost of the Northern Ireland protocol. The Committee has asked the Department to provide information on budget planning or scoping exercises to identify additional costs that arise from both a deal and a no-deal scenario at the end of the EU exit transition period.

One of the issues that is of great importance to the Committee at present is the funding for the victims' pension scheme. The Executive made available £2.5 million as part of the June monitoring round to support the implementation costs for the scheme. However, the source of funding for payment of the pensions is yet to be finalised. The First Minister, deputy First Minister and Minister of Justice have advised the Committee that there is a shared view that adequate funding for the duration of the scheme should come from Westminster and that they, along with the Finance Minister, are seeking an urgent meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss the way forward. I urge Ministers to continue to press for this matter to be resolved in order to avoid any further delays in getting payments to victims. Perhaps, when the Minister responds later, he can update the House on progressing that issue.

Other key issues that have been discussed with officials and which the Committee will continue to monitor include legal aid costs; funding for tackling paramilitarism; funding for the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach commitments, which includes the cost of increasing the number of police officers to 7,500; and the costs of maintaining the temporary resting place. It is clear that a number of uncertainties remain for the rest of the financial year, not least because of COVID-19 and the European Union exit, and that departmental budgets will remain in a state of flux. Overall, however, at this stage, the Department of Justice is advising of a break-even position for the 2020-21 financial year.

In its response to the Budget earlier this year, the Committee set out concerns that full funding requirements on a number of issues had not been provided, and that, as a consequence, it felt unable to fully assess the Department's budgetary position. Since then, the Department provided information on a number of those matters and set out the rationale for the figures that are still not available. The Department has sought to keep the Committee apprised of the

position in respect of a range of financial matters through oral and written briefings. That has ranged from the more routine monitoring rounds and COVID-19 reprioritisation exercises to the position in respect of the Department's annual report and accounts and the wider review of the financial process. In early November, the Committee will receive an oral briefing from the Department's officials on planning for the forthcoming multi-year Budget, which will be of particular importance for the Department's longer-term strategic planning. The Committee looks forward to that oral briefing and to ongoing engagement with the Department on budgetary and financial matters.

That concludes my remarks in my role as Chair of the Justice Committee. I want to move on and make some remarks now in my capacity as a Member for Lagan Valley. These comments will relate very much to the expenditure on COVID and the impact that the Executive's response to it has had on public finances and wider society. We can see in the Budget (No. 3) Bill that, across a wide range of Departments, there is expenditure that relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Budget (No. 3) Bill is, therefore, heavily predicated on that expenditure, and Departments' normal expenditure has been impacted as a result of how the Executive and wider society have had to grapple with the issue.

Undoubtedly, coronavirus is serious, and measures are required to mitigate the risks that it presents. At the start of the pandemic, there were warnings that up to 14,000 people could die. There was huge coverage of the Armageddon to come upon us. Thankfully, that did not happen. However, that in no way diminishes the loss and pain of those who have lost their lives. I have said it before, and I put on record my sympathy for them and offer my prayers for them in having to deal with that situation. However, Mr Allister pointed out in a questioning session that, during that same period, 2,300 people passed away due to cancer; we can also consider the number of people who have died from heart disease, obesity and alcohol abuse. Those are all tragic circumstances facing our country. We have to weigh that up alongside the response of the Executive and this place when we deal with fatalities in other areas.

At the start of the pandemic, there was a great unknown. We could see the carnage coming across Europe like a tidal wave. A fear beset everybody. Measures had to be taken, and were taken, in order to deal with something that was unknown and which gripped our community with fear. Fortunately, we have a

much better understanding now of the impact of coronavirus, so we need to weigh up the measures being taken by Stormont so that they are proportional to the impact associated with the virus. The measures taken now cannot be the same as those taken at the start of the pandemic. If the approach that was taken at the start is taken now, there will not be the same buy-in from society. That is evident from the resistance that we see to what is taking place.

We now have the police raiding small barns in the countryside. There was one such instance in my constituency when 20 people had gathered for a birthday party, in a socially distanced manner. They should not have done it — it was against the rules — but that is where we have placed the police. They are now raiding sheds in Lagan Valley, as opposed to sheds in which something very serious could be going on. Crime is back up at its normal levels, but we are deflecting the police from core crime activity to move into this. We have to weigh up the impact on the enforcement measures that we are asking the police to take with the resistance from the community. I know people who, normally, could be trusted to use their common sense and act responsibly, but I fear that they are resisting because they have not bought into the measures being taken by the Government. That problem faces all Governments across the globe.

The financial support schemes in place at the start of the pandemic are no longer there. The Executive do not have the fire power to provide the kind of financial support that our businesses need. They are being asked to carry this burden. If we are all in it together, I ask you to look at the cost to the hospitality industry and the financial pain being inflicted on people. We think about businesses, but it is not just about businesses. It is about staff in low-paid jobs who, come 1 November, if they qualify for furlough, will get only two thirds of their pay because the business will not have to make up the difference. I have spoken to employers in my constituency whose staff in low-paid jobs are pleading with them, "What are we going to do?" and "How am I going to manage?" The mental strain on business owners and staff is immense. For every action taken there is a reaction. Measures taken in good faith that, it is believed, will have the right outcome need to be assessed and analysed. Are they having the right outcome, or are they counterproductive? Are we forcing people out of controlled environments and putting them into uncontrolled environments?

On Friday night, I went for a walk in my constituency, having left my children off at my

church's young people's meeting, which, fortunately, can still take place.

As I went for a walk for that hour around that immediate community, it was scary to see the number of young people who were gathered drinking and sitting on top of each other in a subway that people in that part of Lisburn will know. Yet we push them out of schools and out of controlled environments, and they go into that kind of uncontrolled environment.

11.30 am

Serious questions need to be asked, and there needs to be an interrogation of the evidence base that is being presented. The measures that were brought in through the legislation, which, everyone in the House has accepted, is draconian, are now not subject to democratic scrutiny by this place. The legislation was brought in and took effect last week. We will come to the Chamber in maybe three weeks' time, when it should, hopefully, conclude. We handed over those democratic powers because, at the time, we did not know what was coming and a fear gripped us. We now know, and we now need to ask ourselves whether the level of democratic oversight is proportionate. When we consider the tragic deaths that have happened as a result of COVID, when I think of friends who have had COVID and long COVID and I see them and hear their laboured breathing and see the impact that it has on them, I weigh up the calls and engagement that I have with people who are their wits' end. When BT28 was put under restrictive measures, a constituent of mine took her own life. She was subject to severe mental health problems and had suicidal ideation. The measures in BT28 tipped her over the edge, and she took her own life. Whenever we think about measures to protect people with coronavirus, we also need to think about the other measures and find a way that can protect all of us.

We are having to weigh up incredibly difficult issues in order to get the right outcome, and we need to ask those questions. Not asking the questions is a failure and a dereliction of our duty to interrogate the evidence base for what is being done, and it should not be said to those who do that somehow they do not care about people who have coronavirus. Not true. Good friends of mine have it and have suffered from it, and I have seen it at first hand. They have been let down by some of the actions that have been taken by other people and by the failure to provide the support that should have been provided at the start of the pandemic. We had

the debacle of not getting PPE on time and the promises that were made and not kept. I have spoken to nursing homes that did not get the support from the Department of Health that they should have got at the start of the pandemic. They have told me directly that they felt abandoned. Where were the most vulnerable people? In our nursing homes. Where were the casualties? In our nursing homes. Where was the financial support? We are now catching up, and they have said to me that it is better, but we need to consider all these measures in a balanced way.

I think about the financial impact that this has had on our education establishments. I sit on the board of governors of three schools, and they have over 2,000 children between them. I have a real sense of responsibility to the teaching staff and to those children to provide for their safety. In one of those schools, a third of the children did not engage in any form of remote learning. They came back to school, and we carried out assessments and found that they are well behind. They are now catching up. Those children are some of the brightest in the school and some of the most disadvantaged. This does not have any boundaries in class or creed, but its impact has been devastating. Those children are missing out on life chances. That is why I am so frustrated that some Members of the Executive wanted to shut our schools for six weeks and then for four weeks. Let me tell you this: I am looking at the impact that this has on children. What has taken place is child abuse, and they are using children in the most appalling way. I will tell you why I say that. Members might not like what I am saying and might think, "Is he going too far?". I have met the Chief Medical Officer, and I have asked the question: "Give me the evidential basis for why schools are being closed". It is not because of what happens in the school: the concerns are about what goes on at the gate and on the buses. Also — this alarms me even more — closing our schools has a wider behavioural impact on society, and that should be taken seriously.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member acknowledge that a Minister from his party shared in the Chamber yesterday the information that there have been 1,500 positive cases in schools?

Mr Givan: I heard the Minister's response on this. I am giving the Member opposite the Chief Medical Officer's advice to me.

I then asked myself, "What has been the Department for Infrastructure's response?". This Minister of Finance has been able to tell me that £90 million has had to go to Translink because our buses and trains are empty. At a time when schoolchildren are being packed onto buses, which has been identified as a problem, have we utilised the private sector? Have we tried to help our coach industry, which is on its knees? No. It has not happened, yet we are expending a huge amount of money on Translink, subsidising an organisation that is running empty buses.

Before we close down schools and before someone comes with another recommendation to close down schools, Members need to consider this question: what other financial support can be given to different sectors of our economy that can ameliorate the situation with our schools and protect them? Even the Republic of Ireland has not decided to close schools for the next six weeks, but this Executive have decided to close schools.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way in a moment. I have more to say and elaborate on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind the Member to contextualise this within the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I will come back to it.

We have put tens of millions of pounds into our schools to keep them open. Despite the measures that have been taken to keep them open, there are some in the Chamber who advocated the closure of our schools for a four- or six-week period. I am thankful for what our Executive Ministers have done. I appreciate, as the First Minister has said, that, if this were a DUP-only Executive, there would have been a different outcome. We have had to ameliorate some of the actions that other Executive Ministers have wanted to take, and I appreciate their work on that.

I look at the health impact. The financial resources that we are putting into the Department of Health are hugely significant — rightly so — so that we can provide the kind of support that is being provided. Yesterday, the Minister outlined that the Department of Health may have to return some of the money. Maybe he can elaborate on how much, as I may have missed that yesterday. The public will find it

strange that the Department of Health is having to return money when it needs even more capacity.

I think of the cost that will come to our community through missed appointments and missed surgeries. How many mothers will sadly no longer be with us five or 10 years down the line because their tests were cancelled through the actions that have been taken? I understand the arguments, but there are consequences and impacts. A constituent of mine who had cancer requiring surgery was in Belfast City Hospital on the day that it turned into a Nightingale facility. It was the eighth surgery that the individual had to go through. He had been prepped and was coming down in the lift when the decision was taken: "No more routine surgeries. We have to prepare for what is coming". He waited another three months and was red-flagged twice. Thankfully, he got the operation that he needed. He was told, "You were at death's door, had you not come through". That is one individual who, I know, was saved, but there are others for whom, sadly, that has not been the case.

My colleague Pam Cameron rightly highlighted the inability to provide support in pregnancy. There is the issue of visitation at end of life. I think about the cruelty that is being inflicted in the end-of-life situation, where people are unable to hold the hand of their loved one. Yes, the Minister of Health has said that no one will die without someone being there: that is of absolutely no comfort to families who are not able to be there. I speak in a personal capacity. My 99-year-old grandmother through marriage is in hospital and is not well at all. She was left into hospital by a relative at the weekend. She is unable to have anybody come in to visit and is pleading to come home. Where is the humanity in some of the actions that are being taken and in some of the decisions that people are grappling with?

We then think of the mental, health and financial impacts that will flow from all the decisions that are coming. We see that in the Budget Bill. Some of the financial impacts are huge, and we will not have the funding in the future. How will we deal with that?

I look at the Department for Communities and the Budget Bill and see the additional funding that will have to go to that Department. I commend that Department's Minister. I have met her. She has been in my constituency with charities, and support has been put in place for charities. However, I have met representatives of those charities, and they are on their knees and are closing down. We know that the

resources that the Executive have been able to give have not been able to save some of those organisations. The sports clubs that my colleague Paula Bradley spoke about are closing their doors. Then, to add insult to injury, while there is nothing in the law to prevent you going to events, which are socially distanced and on which a huge amount of resource has been spent, the Minister tells people, "Don't go". Is it any wonder that the public get so frustrated with regulations? They are interpreted and added to in ways that do not have any legal force.

I also look at the impact on our councils. The financial support that we have given to our councils is hugely significant, but it does not meet the deficit. Members will all know that from speaking to their colleagues. I know it from speaking to members of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. LeisurePlex, one of Northern Ireland's best facilities, is down £1 million of income and is projected to be down by £5 million. That is one council facility. Dundonald International Ice Bowl is in the other part of the council area in east Belfast. The council has received £2 million of support from Stormont, and, while it appreciates that, it does not compensate for those losses, and part-time, low-paid workers and young people are unemployed as a result of the downturn. I understand some of the rationale for the decision, but there are financial consequences.

The Department for Communities also made a fund available to churches because of the impact that some of the measures have had on them. I know that that was appreciated and that some churches have been able to get support through that. I then look at the regulations and see that only 25 people are allowed at a funeral. I was at my church on Sunday, and in the region of 120 people attended.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Could the Member bring us back to the Budget Bill, please?

Mr Givan: I will. My point relates to the financial support that the Executive give to churches. The fact that churches have limitations placed on them has an impact on the ask.

I look at the regulations on churches and see that 25 people are allowed to attend a funeral. I was at church on Sunday, and approximately 130 or 140 of us were there. It is a large building, we were all socially distanced, and it was all properly managed. Some 24 hours later, only 25 people were allowed in for the funeral of one of the members of our congregation. Where is the logic? And you wonder why the

public struggle to come with the regulations. The financial impact on the churches in my constituency whose representatives I have spoken to is huge. Yet, those churches provide a place of solace and comfort and the ability, within the restrictive measures, to get support.

I asked my colleagues on the Executive about the measures that were taken on churches, only to be told that there was a recommendation to close churches, which our party resisted. There was a recommendation to close churches. I asked for the evidence from the Chief Medical Officer on the transmission rate in churches: 1%. It was 1%, and, on that basis, some Executive members wanted to close down our churches. Where was the thought of the financial impact, as well as of the rights and wrongs and the logic for that? When we think about the Executive's financial resources and what we ask people to do, we cannot keep asking them to take those measures. We have to think of the consequences and to weigh up the proportionality.

With the financial support that was given to businesses as part of the previous measures in March and July, we did what we could. Not everybody was included in that.

The Minister has been meeting those from Excluded NI and has made his position clear. It is a position that I support. Not everyone was able to be included.

11.45 am

The Minister for the Economy has done a sterling job of trying to identify schemes to get moneys out, but not everybody gets that money as quickly as they would like, and that can be hugely frustrating. We therefore need to be asking questions about the Executive processes when it comes to the administration of schemes. Ministers take decisions that then need to be implemented, and questions are being raised about the capacity of the Civil Service to implement those decisions. I know that we are in very difficult times, but we have been in this position for six months, so the latitude that was there back in March and April is not there for the current scenarios. We need to find a better way of doing things.

People in the hospitality sector and others involved in close contact have made it abundantly clear to me that they very much feel like the scapegoat. They feel as though they are being punished without being given the appropriate financial support to compensate

them for having to close. The failure of others in our society to comply has resulted in those in hospitality being punished. They have systems in place. Some have spent tens of thousands of pounds to regulate their environment, yet they are now in a position in which they have had to close. In my constituency, some businesses in the hospitality sector closed in April and did not reopen. Businesses closed, and jobs were lost. What is the financial impact on our Executive when that happens? It means a reduced rates base, less income for Stormont and less income for our local authorities.

I have outlined a number of areas of concern, to which people will rightly respond, "What would you do? It is easy for you to get up here and ask these questions". That is the job of an MLA: to ask questions and to challenge. The new normal cannot be about closing down our society. It just cannot be, because it is not working, and the devastating impact that it is having is leading a lot of people to believe that doing so is disproportionate to the risk associated with what is happening.

We therefore need to look at finding a way in which to have an accreditation process for businesses that are deemed to be doing everything by the book. If they are doing it by the book, they are mitigating the risk as far as possible, so we need to see financial support going into a system of accreditation for aspects of our different public services and for the private sector. We need to have greater compliance checks. It is important that we have compliance. We therefore need more investment in how we marshal our society and try to help and advise it. I often find that working with and encouraging people can get them to a better place without a need for the big stick to be used, even if it always has to be there for the minority that refuses to comply. I do not believe that using the big stick on the broader population is a sustainable way forward, however. We need to have increased democratic oversight when it comes to the regulations. They were brought in under unique circumstances, but we need to find a different way for the regulations to become law and take effect.

We also need to get to a place in which there is recognition from all the parties on the Executive that, when they create these laws, the Executive's integrity is compromised. That creates a reaction, because the public are then less likely to follow the Executive's rules. I listened to Members speak yesterday about —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to return to the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Givan: I will. All these comments relate to the financial impact in the round, Mr Deputy Speaker. The situation is having a huge impact on the financial situation that we are facing as a society.

I listened to Members speak yesterday, and there were even references made to it today, about my constituency colleague Edwin Poots's remarks. They were remarks that were made in a very sensible manner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, but we are discussing the Budget Bill and not the remarks that someone made outwith the House.

Mr Givan: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker, but this is connected —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, but I have already said that we are discussing the Budget Bill and not someone else's remarks, please.

Mr Givan: The Budget Bill has implications for the financial impact of decisions that are being taken. I appreciate that not everyone is going to agree with what I have been saying, but the integrity of our Government is being called into question. Those who make accusations about colleagues are blinded by their own catastrophic failures when it comes to how this issue has been managed. The funeral issue has been well-documented. There is an inability to recognise that the rate has been higher — this is what my colleague outlined — in those areas where the party opposite has greater political support. *[Interruption.]* There has been no mention anywhere of religion; it has not been mentioned in any form.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We are discussing the Budget Bill. I have allowed you a fair bit of latitude —

Mr Givan: Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — but I will not endure any more of it.

Mr Givan: I appreciate your ruling on that, Deputy Speaker.

The decision has been taken by the Executive, and it is having an impact, but there are serious questions being asked about the evidence base on which it was formed.

Mr Chambers: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I am concluding.

I am highlighting the wider impact that that is having on our financial sustainability and ability to deliver services across our public sector, the huge impact it has had on people's livelihoods, and the consequences for people's welfare and health, including mental health, beyond the COVID-19 issue.

The Executive will have very serious work to do when it comes to the next set of decisions to be taken. I do not envy them, but we cannot have an unsustainable way forward when it comes to dealing with this. I want us to get to a place where we are protecting all lives and every aspect of our society. My party and I will continue to chart a path that we believe to be reasonable and proportionate. We will challenge where we need to and use every opportunity that we have to do that so that we get to a better place than where we are currently.

Mr McAleer: I am speaking in my capacity as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs, having spoken yesterday on behalf of the Committee during the debate on the Supply resolution motion.

We have been looking at the budget for DAERA since the Assembly reconvened at the start of the year. At that stage, we could never have anticipated that a crisis like COVID and its impacts on all parts of society would come upon us. All parts of society have been impacted, none more so than our farmers and the agri-food sector.

During the lockdown and all of the challenges that we have faced, the farmers and food producers kept going, kept the shelves in our shops stocked and kept food on our dinner tables during the worst days of the lockdown. It is important that we recognise our front-line farmers and agri-food producers for keeping going in the most difficult of circumstances. It has not been easy for them, and the lockdown of the food service sector — the hotels and the restaurants — has resulted in a drop in demand for steaks and other things that people normally eat out. That has resulted in a carcass imbalance, which has an impact through a collapse in farm-gate prices and the prices that farmers get at the factory.

We very much welcomed the decision of the Finance Minister to award £25 million to DAERA to help the sector mitigate some of the losses that it has incurred. We took a special

interest on that in the Committee, even having our own short inquiry in which we took evidence from some stakeholders to see how that money should be spent. We want the money to be distributed quickly and fairly and be targeted towards those who suffered most and who need it most. As Members will be aware, the bulk of the money — £21.4 million — has been allocated, mostly across the dairy, beef, sheep, potato and horticulture sectors. Other sectors are coming forward for help. For example, wool producers have come forward, having suffered from prices dropping greatly. Indeed, a LeasCheann Comhairle, you will be interested in the impact on eel fishing in Lough Neagh. We need to look at how that industry can be supported now that it has obtained official recognition.

We still have concerns about whether there was enough funding for beef cattle farmers and sheep farmers. As I said, we have been lobbied quite heavily by the wool industry. While we welcome the fact that suckler beef farmers have been included in the scheme, one of our concerns is that the 30 June slaughter date criterion has an impact on farmers who got a bad price for their animals in the ring during March, when prices collapsed. Farmers are not entitled to compensation for animals that were not slaughtered by 30 June. Hopefully, the Minister will look at the issue of farmers who endured a loss during lockdown but who do not qualify for compensation.

A related concern is the future of the market, and the British market in particular. On three successive occasions, the British Government have pushed back important amendments to incorporate minimum food standards into the British Agriculture Bill. That is despite the potentially devastating impact that that would have on farmers here and across the water in Britain. A petition to include those amendments, launched by farming unions here and in Britain, was signed by over a million people. Nevertheless, the amendments were pushed back, and, unfortunately, it looks as though that opens the way for international trade deals with other countries whose environmental and animal welfare standards are not as good as those that we are used to. That is regrettable, and it is, potentially, a serious blow to the industry here.

The financial impact on DAERA of delivering Brexit is also a huge issue that exercises us. We know from evidence gathered by the Committee that the Department needs an additional 456 staff to support Brexit delivery and is working to fill those positions. Under the terms of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act

and the protocol, DAERA is required to implement the EU official controls regulations, which include sanitary and phytosanitary checks.

One of our big concerns is that we are only months away from the end of the transition period, and there has not been a great deal of progress on planning. We are talking about a £35 million infrastructure project, and the Department is still engaging with planners. I know that a lot of it can be carried out under permitted development but there are site constraints. In Warrenpoint, for example, an adjacent area of special scientific interest (ASSI) could affect expansion at the port there.

There are issues with IT systems, and we heard evidence last week that the HMRC's goods vehicle movement service (GVMS) is not in place and cannot be tested until the transition period is over. That is a major concern for businesses that will have to pre-register in order to enable seamless east-west movement.

I turn to trade across the Irish Sea. We have a concern about our state of readiness. A programme assurance review (PAR) of the Department's readiness was carried out in August and resulted in a red assessment. The definition of a red delivery status is as follows:

"Successful delivery of the project/programme appears to be unachievable. There are major issues which at this stage do not appear to be manageable or resolvable. The project/programme may need rebaselining and/or overall viability re-assessed."

Given an amber/red assessment in June, that was a red flag, and it is causing a bit of concern. The cost of getting our ports and airports ready is predicted to be in the region of £45 million, comprising £38 million in capital expenditure and £6 million in revenue costs. Again, that will involve the recruitment and training of additional staff, so it is a serious capital project. We are still, essentially, at the planning stage, and infrastructure expansion is not yet on the ground.

12.00 noon

Another huge issue that is related to EU exit is the future funding that will replace current EU funding. As Members will be aware, the bulk of the EU funding that comes to DAERA is paid out as direct payments to farmers and rural communities, who benefit greatly under the rural development programme. Over the current

2014-20 EU funding period, we have benefited from funding from the EU totalling €3.6 billion across various programmes. That is a huge amount of funding that comes here. The fear that we have is about whether that level of funding will be replaced, and, if not, what the impact will be on farmers, rural communities and food production.

Whilst we welcome the fact that £293 million has been secured for the single farm payment for this year, we are very concerned about what will happen next year and in future years. The single farm payments began to be issued to farmers on Friday, with £265.7 million paid out on the first day. It is important to recognise that that is a good news story, and I commend the Department and officials for getting those payments out. Those payments will include a 4.3% increase to the basic payment entitlements, which is also welcomed by the vast majority of farmers. It is important to point out that the Minister's decision to stop the transition towards a flat rate at the fifth year of a seven-year transition period has surprised many farmers who are below the regional average of anticipated 14% this year and next year. This mostly impacts on the ANC (areas of natural constraint) beef and sheep suckler farmers who are labouring with the loss of the ANC payment, which I hope the Minister will consider reintroducing.

We in the Committee have also expressed concern about the replacement funding for the rural development programme that comes from the CAP pillar 2. As a consequence of our leaving the EU rural development programme because of Brexit, it is important that we develop our own policy in the North. Anyone who represents rural communities will know that the rural development programme has been a very important building block in our communities over the last number of decades. It has provided funding for the development of community centres, community halls, hubs, village renewals and many small businesses and employment opportunities.

In recent correspondence, the Minister indicated to me that almost a thousand jobs have been created to date in the current rural development programme that will run out by 2023. We know the importance of our village and community hubs, halls and church halls and how important they are at all times, but particularly in the community sector, where they became a base for the distribution of aid packages to people who were isolating and who were in need. It is important in the time ahead that we have a replacement programme that will ultimately be funded out of Treasury money,

because the European funding will not be available.

I have been lobbying the AERA Minister and the Finance Minister in relation to the replacement of the programme. Whilst it will be going out for public consultation very soon, I am glad to note that the Minister has indicated that the new programme that will be coming in here will incorporate many of the overarching goals and objectives of the EU rural development programme. However, the lack of progress on the UK shared prosperity fund is a cause for concern, because it is anticipated that that will fund the new rural programme here which will be the successor to the EU rural development programme. I know from questioning the Finance Minister recently that there has been very little progress on that. I appreciate that COVID and many other issues have come into the equation, but it is still really important to have a well-funded and -supported rural development programme in looking ahead to facilitate the social and economic needs of our communities.

I am also keen that the Minister incorporate the LEADER methodology in delivering the new policy. Over many years, the local action groups — we have two local action groups. Many Members are, or possibly were, members of the local action groups that worked along with social partners to identify local needs and to develop projects at grassroots level. It is important that that LEADER approach is continued in the implementation of a new rural policy to make sure that the programmes fit and meet the needs of local communities. The policy must be effective and tailored to meet the social and economic needs of our rural communities. I use this platform to encourage rural dwellers and local groups to have their say on our new rural policy when the consultation opens in the very near future.

The Committee, and my party, anticipates that the UK shared prosperity fund will replace the lost EU funding, but the lack of progress is very concerning. Clarity on the shared prosperity fund is long overdue. It is something that we will continue to press the Finance Minister and the AERA Minister on in the time ahead.

During the past number of months, COVID and Brexit have presented huge challenges to our farmers and rural communities. I am certain that the agri-food and community sectors will survive, just as they have survived many other challenges and crises in the past, but there will be tough and straitened times ahead, and they will need our ongoing support.

Mrs Cameron: I do not think that any of us could ever have imagined the situation that we find ourselves in, in terms of the threat of the virus and the subsequent financial pressures associated with it; it is truly unprecedented. Our health service, throughout this year, has been on the front line in the battle to save lives and to make budgets work. The strain on the health service funding envelope has left it coming apart at the seams. To meet the demand, we all need to recognise that we would not be able to face the pandemic without the financial support and monetary might of our Government at Westminster. If there were ever a time to acknowledge the benefits of the Union, it is now. In the context of rising case numbers and increased hospitalisation, we take comfort in the fact that, in this corner of the Union, we will be supported by our Government. It is not ourselves alone.

The Health funding before us here today meets the need and pressures that have been prioritised by the Minister. The Department is expected to spend over £7 billion this year. That is an incredible sum. What is clear now more than ever — it has been clear for some time — is that we need the much talked about reform of our health service if we are to protect our NHS and the service that it provides, free at the point of delivery. The Health Minister has, understandably, been preoccupied with COVID, but I encourage him to press ahead with reform as a way of responding to COVID. COVID is not going away. We cannot continue to spend the vast sums that we have been in the short term. We need to adapt, find efficiencies, restructure and be innovative. We also need to, dare I say it, look at ways of raising revenue. We ought to look at how our GP services are provided, whether reform can make that service better, and examine what positive role pharmacy and our allied health professionals can play in transformation.

These difficult days need to be met with resolve, and the resolve that our front-line nurses and healthcare staff have shown should be an example to us. We need to look at pay again. Nurses need the recognition that they deserve. In the context of public-sector pay scales, they deserve a fairer deal. Indeed, we need more nurses and doctors. Key to achieving that will be funding, but also pay that makes foreign climes less enticing. We need to keep our front-line medical staff here to serve their community.

There are a number of additional funding areas that the Minister should prioritise. As Members know, I recently held a public consultation on autism. It garnered the largest ever response

for a private Member's Bill in the House. That reflects the depth of need and the cry for help from so many people across our society. It is a public priority; it ought to be a departmental priority, too. I trust that the Health Minister will look at behavioural intervention, speech and language therapy, and at training and appropriate support services. There is so little provision for the need.

We must never forget the challenges of an ageing population. We need to ensure that lung health is addressed, for example, and that an NI strategy is developed, especially now, given the added impact of COVID-19 and the long-term effects that we now know come with that disease. We have issues with care and supported living and with tackling issues such as dementia. Those must be looked at seriously now. Domestic violence and support for victims' families are also acute issues, and they need to be analysed and the needs for them met.

There will also be a legacy from COVID for cancer care, treating heart disease and mental health to name but a few vital areas. That will take significant resource, but we need to recognise that the longer we close services now, the bigger the ticking time bomb. The reality is that early intervention for many will be missed. We need to ramp this up.

Connected to that is the need for support for charities, particularly those for people facing a health crisis. Those charities include Macmillan, Marie Curie, the British Heart Foundation and Chest, Heart and Stroke. Those charities are on their knees, but they provide advice, support and care that we cannot manage without. I urge the Minister to see what he can do to support them at this time in order to ensure that their services are funded and sustainable into the future. I also urge the House to ensure that the test, trace, protect programme for COVID is receiving the resource needed to deal with the demand that is faced by the Public Health Agency (PHA).

I back the call from the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland to increase the frequency of testing in our care settings. We owe it to our elderly population to give them every protection. We also need to ensure that resources are made available to allow safe visitation in those settings. We know the positive impact on mental health, emotional well-being and people's life that visitation from family members can have. We also understand that many of the people who are in care homes are not there for many years but sometimes for quite short periods. We owe it to them to ensure

that the time that they have in their life is of good quality.

Those are our challenges today, and a united approach across this House can meet them.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I will speak first as the Chair of the Economy Committee.

This is now almost a cliché, but we are living in unprecedented times and are likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The Economy Committee has been consistent in its message over the past number of months that these times call for a creative and brave approach.

The Department for the Economy is at the centre of the response to COVID-19, and, as a result, the Committee has found itself at the very heart of scrutinising the Minister's and, indeed, the Executive's economic response to the crisis. As well as receiving regular updates on the budget flows to and from the Economy Department, the Committee has spent a great deal of time engaging closely with its wide range of stakeholders in order to seek their views and to relay them back to the Minister and the Executive.

The Committee has been assiduous in its scrutiny of the Department's response to the crisis and of its input, including bids, to the various monitoring rounds and the Department of Finance's summer exercise. The Committee has also been dedicated in its challenge function regarding the Department's budgeting and response to the COVID crisis, holding a significant number of briefing sessions. I will not take up valuable time by recounting those sessions in detail or by going through the minutiae of the DFE budget.

The Department's most significant spend area during the crisis has been assistance to business. The Committee is agreed that it is vital to ensure that our economy is protected, and members are supportive of the wide range of measures and supports that have been put in place. However, the Committee has called a number of times for the creation of a support fund that is directed to the many individuals, businesses and sectors that have received no support as yet — the so-called excluded. Mechanisms to process support to those who need it have already been developed, and criteria need to be widened in order to ensure that the assistance reaches more people and is more equitable.

The Committee has made the observation that many of those businesses are still viable and need support in the interim until economic conditions return to a greater degree of normality. Additionally, the Committee has written to the British Chancellor to advocate greater cooperation on the part of Treasury officials to develop mechanisms to help.

The Committee is very supportive of the budget bids that the Department has made for skills. Those are funding a range of programmes that include supporting businesses to bring back and recruit new apprentices, as well as other training, upskilling and reskilling programmes. The Committee has urged the Department to make every effort to ensure that apprenticeships and training schemes are available to those above the age of 24 and that more support for reskilling be made available to those who have lost their jobs.

12.15 pm

The Committee has engaged heavily with the further and higher education sectors, including student and lecturer representatives, to understand their needs better during the crisis. It has corresponded with the Department and reflected those needs, including support for students who are isolating and those trapped in contracts for accommodation that they can no longer afford or do not need.

The Committee has worked closely with the hospitality and tourism sector, which is one of the sectors that has been worst hit by the crisis, to ensure that members understand the support that it requires and communicate that to the Executive.

The Committee has urged the Department to bring forward projects and programmes that will create jobs and those where there is capital spend. Greater efforts must be made to utilise FTC to support jobs. In addition to that, the Committee has identified the importance of Project Stratum to widen access to high-speed broadband in the context of increased working from home and the ongoing issue of digital poverty.

The Committee is conscious that the current crisis allows us to consider how to do things better, and members advocate that that be part of the Minister's and the Executive's thinking in seeking to rebuild our economy.

The Committee is looking at the benefits of investing in green industries and jobs, and in building and capitalising on the local community

efforts that have got us through this crisis. Where possible, localisation rather than globalisation must surely represent the way forward. Our communities have shown themselves to be resourceful and innovative. Businesses have been repurposed, and social enterprise is clearly the way forward in so many sectors and for so many businesses.

The Committee understands that the Budget envelope that the Executive have at their disposal is finite. However, members have heard from many stakeholders about the ways in which we can and should use it better and more sustainably.

The Committee is acutely aware that we are nearing the end of the EU exit transition period. Businesses are urging the Committee to seek certainty on the rules under which they will operate. The Committee has communicated this to the Minister, the Executive and British Ministers. It is clear to the Committee that it will be important to budget for support for businesses not just to respond to COVID-19 but to respond to the situation that they will face at the end of transition, potentially under WTO rules.

In short, the Committee believes that the role of the Department for the Economy is pivotal in the responses to COVID and Brexit. It is therefore imperative that the Department is at the heart of the Budget process and that its bids are seen against the backdrop of the uncertain times in which we live.

The Committee will continue to engage with stakeholders over the next number of weeks and months to come through a series of mini inquiries, which will be conducted via virtual discussion forums. The Committee intends to use those to respond to the Economy Minister's invitation to help to shape her Department's and the Executive's response to the crisis. Moreover, the Committee seeks to use those to help to shape the forthcoming Programme for Government and the economic and investment strategies.

The Committee has listened to the Economy Department's officials' concerns that money made available for the response to COVID must be allocated and spent quickly, as there is an ever-narrowing window of opportunity to spend funds within the current financial year. It is therefore imperative that the Executive act not only bravely but quickly.

I will make some remarks in my role as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. I addressed a number of points in the debate on the Estimates

yesterday, so I will not repeat them. However, I want to touch on a few issues, following Members' contributions.

It is clear that there is broad support across parties and Members — I mentioned it previously in relation to the Committee — that those excluded from schemes to date should have support extended to them. I have been contacted by many business owners and individuals in my capacity as an MLA for East Derry and also as Chair of the Economy Committee. Many have had no support and are in real financial difficulty, and at this point they feel let down, frustrated and angry. It is vital that Ministers with responsibilities bring forward proposals as quickly as possible to protect jobs, workers and families. It is clear that many businesses are trying to survive. In this crisis, we are still very much at the mitigation stage. We are trying to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on our economy, and that is where funding needs to be directed. Those businesses were viable and functioning, prior to COVID-19, and were supporting jobs. They deserve to have the opportunity to recover, to keep those jobs and to create new ones.

I will not repeat all that I said yesterday, but, as many Members have said, the furlough scheme should not be ending at the end of this month. Elsewhere in Europe, equivalent schemes are continuing into next year. The job support scheme and the extended job support scheme offer only limited support. Unfortunately, we face tens of thousands of redundancies at a time when job opportunities are very limited and active economic recovery is some way off. It is critical that workers and their families have incomes and that people are not forced to choose between their health and putting food on the table. Core to limiting the spread of the virus is test, trace and isolate, and people need to be able to afford to isolate.

I urge the Minister to keep the pressure on the British Government for supports designed to protect jobs and incomes. I urge all other parties to support him in that, because there is strong support across the political spectrum in Britain on this too. Andy Burnham, for example, in Manchester, is making the case to protect and support low-paid workers. It is important that the case is made loud and clear on that.

We need to look towards our economic recovery and having a recovery strategy that is multi-layered and phased. Businesses impacted by restrictions need to be supported. Many have already put in place health and safety measures; they take public health responsibilities very seriously, and that needs to

be recognised. We also need to support new ways of working. We all want to get our economy open and working, so there needs to be a focus in this period on planning the way forward for reopening and living with the virus.

Mr Givan has left the Chamber, but there is no place for finger-pointing at sections of our communities, so let us not muddy the waters with mixed messaging and scapegoating people. People want and respond to leadership and a united message from the Executive. We should all be very mindful of our words in respect of that. In the past number of months, there was strong community solidarity and buy-in, and that collective effort got us to the point where we were able to reopen; we need to get back to that.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. She is correct that words are important, but so are deeds. Does she accept that the actions of her party, in attending the Bobby Storey funeral, paid great damage to that message and the attitude of the population?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind all Members that the debate is about the Budget Bill.

Dr Archibald: I thank the LeasCheann Comhairle for that. We all need to look at how we move forward and, collectively, take responsibility and put our efforts towards getting the virus back under control.

On our economic recovery, some sectors have continued to operate and have expanded during the crisis. They need to be supported and encouraged to be innovative and flexible, where they can be, and to develop new talent and create jobs. I spoke yesterday about the need to look at the role of Invest NI and how the economic development agency needs to be at the core of our economic recovery — driving our recovery, supporting SMEs and entrepreneurs and supply chain diversification and innovation. Invest NI should be key in delivering the programmes that support recovery, but there needs to be a change of focus from prioritising FDI and helping a select few to addressing all sectors of the economy and all areas across the North, particularly those that have suffered from underinvestment and economic inequalities.

There is a role for the Executive too in expediting, where possible, capital infrastructure projects and building an economic recovery on the basis of green energy projects and infrastructure. I have said before that a

retrofitting programme is one example of how we can meet multiple priorities and highlights where there are real benefits from true, cross-departmental working.

That brings me to my final point. We are limited due to a lack of fiscal and borrowing powers. Investing in capital infrastructure and skills development can be big drivers for our recovery. Much discussion is taking place in monitoring institutions about the role of the state in recovery. It is no surprise that I think that that is a positive discussion and one that we should seek to develop because of the huge economic challenges that we face and the need to encourage and drive a recovery that serves all our citizens. The Minister has spoken about putting a fiscal commission in place, and he has made representations on increased borrowing powers to the British Government. Those things are no-brainers, and it is vital that the Executive are given some levers to try to shape our recovery.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I call the next Member to speak, I highlight to Members the need for social distancing while in the Chamber.

Mr Catney: I know that there is social distancing, but I am disappointed, after what I had to listen to from my fellow MLA from Lagan Valley, that there were only three on the DUP Benches as I rose to speak. His party's name has "Democratic" in its title, and that will inform part of my speech, if you will bear with me, Mr Deputy Speaker. I may not agree with everything that he said, but, as a democrat, I believe that he should at least have had the decency to stay and listen to our answers.

I wanted to be positive today. I wanted to start this speech in a positive way. I know that our people want our Executive — note the word "our" — to be united and to stand together and for us to show them as much support as we possibly can as they make difficult decisions. I am not privy to the goings-on at the Executive, but I know that, during the pandemic and with this Budget, the community wants us to have a united voice. I am afraid that a united voice has not been shown to me today. What I heard was destructive and dangerous.

As with the pandemic and these budgetary measures, what the Agriculture Minister came out with shows no united voice. I do not want to play orange and green politics.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, but, as I said earlier —

Mr Catney: I know. I am sorry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — I am not getting into —

Mr Catney: Yes, I understand, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — a narrative that is outwith —

Mr Catney: I set out last night —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member resume his seat? As I said earlier, and I am being consistent, we are not getting into a narrative on something that is outwith the Chamber. We are sticking to the content to the Budget Bill today. Thank you.

Mr Catney: Last night, I wanted to make a really positive speech today. I did not want to go over things that have already been debated and points that have already been well made.

Suffice it to say that no one could ever have imagined a year ago the position that we are in today, with the dire facts of the pandemic and the threat of no trade agreement with the European Union looming. I want to consider the opportunities we will have in the future, however. It is apparent that the Treasury is in no rush to act in the interests of the devolved Administrations, so it is up to us to find flexibilities in our Budget to best support the economy and public services here.

I note that 500 additional Translink buses were provided for schools. Minister Nichola Mallon wrote to Minister Weir about using private buses. He has not come back to her on that, and he has not acted. School transport is a decision for an Education Minister to take. He perhaps needs to speak to his party colleagues about that.

We need to continue to do work to establish an effective fiscal council that will provide extra scrutiny of our Budgets and help the House provide more effective funding to our Departments.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned private coach hire and its ability to help with the social-distancing problem in getting to school. Will he accept that the private coach industry has been badly let down by the failure of the Infrastructure Minister to provide adequate funding for those businesses that are

about to go out of business? They are on a lifeline as it is, and they have been failed. There has been much bluster in this Chamber about what can be done, but the help has not been forthcoming.

Mr Catney: Thank you. Speak to the Economy Minister. I agree that the private bus sector should be redeployed to help, but ask Minister Weir to do it. That is his job. That is his role. Look, I want to be productive and talk about what we are meant to be talking about.

We must continue to look at how extra budgetary mechanisms can be used to tackle effectively the issues of today. There is still at least a £70 million shortfall in the uptake of FTC funding. That is an issue that comes up every year. Furthermore, we must find ways of harnessing our borrowing powers to best serve our community. Those are only two areas in which we can make big changes.

It seems that more and more Governments are beginning to realise the benefits of the green economy and green infrastructure. In my area, great work has been done to bring forward plans for the Knockmore halt and to facilitate the extension of the train station and pathways in Moira.

With proper funding, we can turn that into a first-class transport system that will ease road network pressures and help us to reduce our emissions. If we could look at combining that with an extension to the bus rapid transit (BRT), we could have a sustainable, economic reduction in cars on our roads and effective and affordable transport for the entire area.

12.30 pm

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Several DUP Members have intervened. One Member who has left the Chamber now — Pam Cameron — said that one of the issues in relation to the Budget Bill was the need to keep healthcare staff in Northern Ireland. Does the Member agree that one of the biggest drivers of people leaving Northern Ireland is rancid sectarianism? If DUP Members want to keep people in Northern Ireland and bring people back here, they should speak to their colleagues about lurid displays of sectarianism *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will not have any commentary from a seated position *[Interruption.]* Will the Member —

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member for South Belfast makes outrageous allegations about "rancid sectarianism". The Member needs to explain what he is trying to say if he is going to use that kind of language in the debate, lowering the tone, heading into the gutters. It is no surprise from the Member for South Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Order. I believe that —

Mr Givan: Disgraceful comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — is not a point of order nor is it material to the debate. We will bring the focus back to the debate, which is the Budget (No. 3) Bill. I ask Mr Catney to resume.

Mr Catney: Thank you. Work has already been done on creating and improving greenways, particularly the new one at Blaris. I am lucky to have a number of great cycle paths in my area. However, work and funding are needed to connect them to improve our cycle network so that it provides a viable alternative transport option.

Work must also continue to secure the use of Lagan Valley Hospital in a modern and effective health service. I welcome recent announcements on the use of that site. We now need to look at the access to the site and how it can be made fit for purpose to improve availability for patients in the future.

One of the biggest questions that we will face over the next 18 months is how we can secure jobs, innovation and enterprise in the face of the pandemic. Members will all be shocked to learn that there are 350 acres of prime land in my constituency with the possibility of securing 5,000 jobs and delivering more than £300 million of investment. After years of indecision and countless millions squandered on plans that could not be agreed, surely now is the time to deliver at Maze/Long Kesh and create some prosperity for Northern Ireland — the place that we call "home".

Mr Beattie: I shall be mercifully brief. I have always been told to raise two or three points and nothing more or lose your audience, so I shall try to keep it to two or three points. That is not to say that they may not be contentious.

It is difficult to overplay the financial pressures that we are under regarding COVID and Brexit. We have had to redirect funds from various areas to support our public services and our

economy and to shore up our NHS. It is difficult for anybody in the House to say that that is not the right thing to do. It is absolutely the right thing to do. Yet, as we salami-slice our Budget, at times, we are still like children in a sweetie shop. We see everything around us and we want it all. We are like the consumer who gets his first credit card and spends and spends and does not realise that, eventually, he will have to pay for what he has spent.

I have concerns regarding how we scrutinise costed outputs from one Department and costed outputs from another Department. What I am really trying to say is that one Department can have an output and there are costed moneys for it, which is right and proper, only for another Department to do something that is completely at odds with it. I will try to explain what I mean. Money is set aside in the Budget to deal with communities in transition and tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. That money is to stop paramilitaries destroying our communities and to treat them as the criminals they are by putting them through the justice system and putting them behind bars. We spend £8 million on that each year, and the Westminster Government give us another £8 million. That is money well spent. It takes the "brigadier" tag off those people, calls them "criminals", puts them through the justice system, which does not give them that huge tag, and puts them in jail. Then we spend up to £2.5 million every year on a separated prison regime, giving the "brigadier" tag back to them. We simply give it back. We spend nearly half a million pounds on accommodation for three people. I live in a three-bedroom house that cost £125,000. You could have built three of them, and they could have had a house each. The big issue is that, having spent money on transition, on supporting our communities and on getting those people off the community's back, we put them in a separated regime and give them back that tag. When released, they go back into the community, and we are back to community transition> All the money that we spent has to be spent all over again. That is ridiculous, but we can stop it.

As an Assembly and Executive, we can come together and say that it is time to move on and that we will not pay for a separated regime any more. Some £2.5 million is spent on 40 individuals. Who is suffering? The other 1,500 prisoners suffer because the resources are not there for them. Prison staff suffer because, when money goes to a separated prison regime, staff numbers reduce. When staff numbers reduce, the workload increases. When the workload increases, the mental health of

staff suffers. Imagine £2.5 million a year going to the Prison Service to address the mental health of prisoners and prison officers. It would be absolutely transformational.

Mr Muir was absolutely right: we are spending money on division. We deliberately spend money on division, and we continue to forecast that we will spend money on division. We need to stop. We need to be robust. We need to make difficult decisions about division in our prisons and in our communities. If we stand together, we can do it. Who will be the first Minister to bring that forward? That is the point. Who will be the Minister to dare to take that to the table and say, "I will make a change"?

Minister, I also have concerns about the financing of legal aid in Northern Ireland. As it stands, legal aid spend in Northern Ireland is, per head of population, three times that in Scotland. I am not saying that we just reduce it. The important thing is to make sure that legal aid gets to the people who need it. Access to justice is incredibly important, so I am not saying that we should just cut our legal aid budget. The reality, however, is this: our legal aid budget is so high because justice takes such a long time to deliver. We must reduce how long it takes to deliver justice in Northern Ireland. It is extraordinary how long it takes some cases to come to fruition and how high the bills associated with those cases are. If we can speed up justice, we can reduce that bill. It is incumbent on the Finance Minister, as our money buffalo, to ask the people concerned, "What are you doing to fix this?". For the last 10 years, our legal aid accounts have been qualified because of fraud and error — 10 years. Somebody has to ask, "What are you doing to fix it, and, when you have fixed it, when will we see the outcome of a reduced bill for legal aid?".

There are many other issues, known and unknown, that we will have to deal with in the coming months and years beyond COVID. Life does not stop at COVID. The implementation of the Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms has not been costed into the future. I put it on record now — other people have said differently — that the Ulster Unionist Party does not support it, but it is there, others supported it and it needs to be costed. Likewise, the victims' payment scheme and the institutional abuse scheme need to be costed into the future.

The issue here, as many have said, is how we scrutinise a Budget. If it is a one-year Budget, we scrutinise a one-year Budget, but what we really need to do is to scrutinise the Budget

next year and the year after and the year after that. We need to look at five-year Budgets.

What am I really saying? We need to prioritise our spend. In justice, we have to reduce wastage. In the Executive, we have to prioritise outcomes. What we cannot do is spend money doing one thing, only to spend more money to undo what we have done. That makes absolutely no sense.

Mr Newton: I speak as a member of the Education Committee and will make some remarks about my constituency.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill is coming forward in probably the most challenging and difficult economic circumstances that we have faced for many years — possibly for generations. The budget pressures that are on the Minister and the Executive are enormous. We do not know what is coming down the line to hit us, perhaps in the near future. In saying that, I understand the frustration of the Chair of the Finance Committee, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, in carrying out his responsibilities and his scrutiny of the work of the Finance Minister. I also understand Mr Matthew O'Toole's position on long-term budgeting and, indeed, financial planning. He described it as "multi-year budgeting". That seems to be just common sense. As a member of Belfast City Council, I found that, in the rates-setting process, instead of looking a few months down the line when you have to set the rate, you look two or three years down the line and try to plan for what is coming.

Mr Girvan, in his wide-ranging remarks, seemed to touch a few nerves. I do not want to comment except on the education end. He spoke passionately about the need to educate our children, to invest in our children and to ensure that our children attend school. I think that that is what we all want to do, regardless of the situation that we find ourselves in: invest in our children at school. I agree with Mr Catney, although he took exception. He said that he wanted to be positive, and I agree that that is where we should go. We should be positive about how we handle our education system. As a member of the Education Committee, I pay tribute to my party colleague Peter Weir as Minister. He has given generously of his time to attend the Committee and, indeed, to clarify, outline and detail actions, as well as answering questions from the Committee.

In speaking on education and the Budget Estimates, I want to dwell for a few moments on the value of education and what we are investing in.

We should never think of education as a cost; it is an investment in the future of all of us. There is an absolute requirement to invest in education. There is also the requirement to revise education investment. In the Budget, it is appropriate that we look at each element of education investment, scrutinise where we are and, indeed, measure the outcomes and success of where we invest and support our education professionals and appreciate our teaching and teaching-support staff. We must recognise the valuable contribution that our principals have made in the health crisis and understand that education is a building block for the future of everything: the economy, health, communities, the arts and every other sector.

12.45 pm

Education is not just the three Rs. I look at the analysis of education spend under "Subhead Detail and Resource to Cash Reconciliation": what do we get for that investment?

"Ensuring that all young people, through participation at school, reach the highest possible standards of educational achievement":

that is number one. It is why they go to school. However, for a rounded education, we also want to give them

"a secure foundation for lifelong learning and employment".

We are looking at the opportunity to

"develop the values and attitudes appropriate to citizenship".

Our schools have a responsibility to turn out good citizens. That is what we ask them to do; that is what we invest in. Through our Youth Service and our children's services, we aim to assist our young people to

"gain knowledge, skills and experience to reach their full potential as valued individuals [and to encourage] children and young people to develop mutual understanding"

across communities, with respect for the opinions of other people, and, indeed, to respect

"cultural diversity, human rights, equality of opportunity and social inclusion."

It is not just about the three Rs; we are investing in a swathe of issues in our education system.

With regard to the schedule detail on resource cash allocation, I want to mention two items that are relatively small in the Department's overall spend. It is appropriate that, as we look at the Budget and look forward, we should, at least, pay tribute to a man who has invested his own money in our education system: Chuck Feeney, a billionaire who, I understand, has now reached the end of the process of giving away £8 billion. He invested in Northern Ireland's education system.

The other area relates to the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. I am not a European in the sense that I want to be part of Europe, but, like many other people, I want to share with Europe what we have here and what Europe has. I have some experience. I will use this expression and hope that I do not offend anyone by it. When I was working for a living, before I became a politician, I spent a lot of my energies on European funding programmes that provided young people from Northern Ireland — not just those at school level, but up to postgraduate level — with opportunities to enjoy, learn from and acquire skills from an experience in Europe. I had the privilege of working around Lake Como for most of it. Members will understand that it was difficult being in Lake Como. We need to find a way to support the European initiatives that will come forward.

I represent a constituency that has excellent schools. It has high-achieving schools that offer a wide curriculum. Some of them can touch every part of what the Department sets out to do, and they produce excellent results. They are oversubscribed and difficult to get into, and they turn out young people who are mentally and physically well-rounded and well-resourced. They are schools that have a long history of providing young people with opportunities and encouraging them to go to university. However, many of them require investment. Classrooms are draughty, and roofs have been leaking. They go on from one year to another, and, historically, the money has not been there to address those issues. We cannot allow the principals and teachers to work in such facilities. It was said to me by a teacher at one time, "If I was not in school but in industry, I would not be able to use this classroom, because it is not fit for purpose". I do not know whether that was true, but she said it. That is how many schoolteachers feel.

I want to talk about some of the primary schools. I know that this is not particular to my East Belfast constituency, but many primary schools are in historic buildings or buildings that, by today's standards, are not fit for purpose. They are in buildings, particularly in inner city areas, where principals and teachers can face many difficulties through challenging behaviour. In that situation, money needs to be set aside for the principals and teachers who face the challenges of some pupils' behaviour. As Ms Cameron mentioned, there should be a joined-upness between the Department of Health and the other Departments. If we do not address challenging behaviour at primary level, we run the risk of those behaviours becoming more and more intense and costing us the whole way through the system.

I thank the teachers. Many of them are dedicated. I am often surprised at the number of teachers who dedicate themselves and work well beyond the school hours, although perhaps not so much today, when we have somewhat restricted views.

I appeal to the Finance Minister. COVID-19 has been challenging. There is no doubt, Minister, that, as the Budget is rolled out, there will be times when school principals and school boards will need specific support to address COVID-19 issues. It has been said, "It hasn't gone away, you know". It has not gone away, you know, and there is an ongoing need for investment in this area. Perhaps, as Mr Girvan said, we need to learn how to live with COVID-19, but that, Minister, will require further investment in our schools.

I welcome Peter Weir's initiative in tackling underachievement. In my office, I have seven or eight local studies on tackling underachievement. Some were done by individuals or groups, and some were done professionally. We need to invest in tackling underachievement, whatever budget is determined on the initiative coming out of the Minister's work. It is always said that, if you do not tackle issues at the beginning of a process, you pay five or six times for them down the line. Tackling underachievement is a priority for the Minister. He has set up an expert group. I have no doubt that it will receive the support of the Education Committee and, I hope, the support of the Chamber. That is likely to reveal that Education on its own cannot address the issue; other Departments will need to be involved, particularly the Department of Health. I think more of the joined-upness of Education and Health via family intervention teams, which deal with —

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

Mr Newton: I will give way.

2.00 pm

Mr Allen: The Member mentions the joined-up approach in supporting children in the education system. Does he agree that Communities also has a vital role to play in providing quality and affordable social housing? In many properties across Northern Ireland, children live in conditions that would be described as unacceptable, and that can have a knock-on effect on the education system.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I indicate to the Member that the intention is to suspend the Assembly in about two minutes' time. We can continue with your contribution after Question Time, if you want to give a quick answer.

Mr Newton: I agree with Mr Allen. I know that, particularly over the COVID-19 lockdown period, children who lived in overcrowded houses suffered most.

I will leave it at that, if that suits, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thanks very much. That is a bit of experience coming through.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. We will resume the debate after Question Time with the present contributor, followed by Mr Maoliosa McHugh.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59 pm.

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

Mr Speaker: Questions 5 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Outpatient Waiting Lists

1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health how he plans to address outpatient waiting lists. (AQO 935/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Member for his question. I fully appreciate that every patient should be able to avail themselves of the best treatment that the health service can provide, and in a timely manner. It is regrettable that any patient has to wait longer than is clinically appropriate for outpatient assessment. I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort.

I assure you that waiting times for elective care remain a key priority for the health service in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, elective care activity had to be reduced during the first wave of the pandemic as medical staff were redeployed to treat COVID-19 patients. That inevitably had an adverse impact on outpatient waiting times, which were already unacceptable prior to the pandemic.

As part of the process to rebuild health and social care (HSC) services in the wake of the first wave of COVID-19, I published the 'Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services Strategic Framework' in June. The framework outlines HSC's plans to rebuild services and sets out the approach of resetting elective activity in an environment that is safe for staff and patients, while planning for a second wave of COVID-19.

In developing those plans, trusts have taken account of the new innovative practices that were introduced during the first wave of the pandemic. For example, trusts have adopted the use of technology such as telephone and virtual clinics to a much greater extent. Outpatient appointments have, where possible and where appropriate, moved to telephone appointments. In addition, a growing number of specialties are adopting virtual clinics using videoconferencing. Embedding those recent innovations will be essential to maximising outpatient activity during a second wave of the pandemic.

It is important to emphasise that the impact of COVID-19 on elective care services will be profound and long-lasting. It has been acknowledged that services will not be able to resume as normal for some time due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19, including social distancing and the use of PPE. The increasing prevalence of COVID-19-positive cases in the community and our hospitals in recent weeks is impacting on the rebuilding of elective services. Staff are being redirected to respond to those pressures or are required to self-isolate, and, as a consequence, some cancellations have been required. That may continue in the short to medium term. It will inevitably have an adverse impact on outpatient waiting times for some time to come.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I remind the Minister that he has two minutes to answer a question. If the Minister believes that he needs extra time, he can get an extra minute, but we have to try to keep this consistent for all the Departments.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Even before COVID and even before his time, waiting lists were a disaster for absolutely ages. Does the Minister agree that it will be incredibly hard to get the waiting lists down, especially when we do not have enough nurses or doctors? Even with independent sector providers' help, the waiting lists were hardly moving before this. What more can we do collectively to try to get waiting lists down once we get through the COVID pandemic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary. Mr Speaker, before I move on to answering it, may I thank Mr Easton for his service on the Health Committee? I am led to believe that he will be moving to another, more important Committee some time in the next weeks. He has served on the Committee since 2007, and I thank him for his service, dedication and detailed knowledge, which we heard in the question that he just asked.

He is right. The lack of nurses and doctors in our current system is a subject that he has often raised. When this place came back on 11 January, one of our big achievements was to put in place 300 nursing training places every year for the next three years. The Member has highlighted many times that that would not even fill our current gap. So, it is about filling the gap in the staffing vacancies but also embedding the creative and innovative solutions that we have seen, such as the establishment of the elective care centre in Lagan Valley, the orthopaedics network and the cancer reset cell.

It is about looking outside of what has been the norm in our health service. It is about breaking down the silos that were not intentionally but artificially created in the system, when we did not look across all our trusts and services to see how we could react collectively to challenge waiting lists. It is also about challenging surgeons, doctors and other health professionals to travel to other sites. Out of a meeting with the Royal College of Surgeons and other health professionals last week, there was an indication that they are prepared to do that in order to get to grips with our waiting times.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, are you aware that over 100 people were waiting in the emergency departments of Craigavon Area Hospital and, I understand, Daisy Hill Hospital last night? Have you done any evaluation of that? People are finding it hard to contact their GP and are again choosing to use emergency departments instead of outpatient services or their GP. That is happening because of the breakdown across the system or the difficulties that each area is experiencing.

Mr Swann: The pressures on our emergency departments are historical. A piece of work was done to review emergency departments, and I announced on Friday that that is now available on the Department's website. It is about how we look at the reformation of our emergency care services. Doing that will be a challenge, especially at this time. Something that we are doing through our COVID-19 urgent emergency care action plan, 'No More Silos', is looking at how we can work across all our services. We have seen over the past six months how primary and secondary care have really come together to work collaboratively. That was demonstrated in our COVID centres, and it is vital that that continue in this next phase.

Ten key actions are set out in 'No More Silos', including:

"Keeping Emergency Departments for Emergencies ... Rapid Access Assessment and Treatment Services ... 24/7 Telephone Clinical Assessment Service — 'Phone First'".

We have seen some of those things introduced in Daisy Hill Hospital as its emergency care provision has reopened.

It is about how we utilise a very limited number of staff on a smaller footprint because of social distancing. It is also about making sure that we

can get patients seen by the right person at the right time in the right place.

Mr Sheehan: Many people are very concerned about the cancellation or pausing of outpatient services. Will the Minister tell us how he will prioritise pressing and urgent cases, particularly in neurology and pain clinics?

Mr Swann: I am sure that the Member is aware that a number of medical royal colleges issued a joint press statement this morning. I and officials from the Department have met representatives of the colleges and discussed with them how we can re-engage and make sure that some of the services that we put in place in our surge plans can continue. Those include pain and neurology clinics, as well as urgent flags for cancer. Services will be dependent on the availability of staff and premises, however.

In their press release this morning, the royal colleges summed it up better than any of us can when they stated:

"Pressures on services are already growing rapidly, and GP surgeries and Emergency Departments are coming under increasing strain to safely meet demand from patients. With elective care waiting lists at unacceptable levels already, it is essential that every single person in Northern Ireland complies with the government guidance to help stop the virus from spreading, so staffing and financial resources aren't pulled from routine operations and treatment."

That also responds to what the Member asked. The more of our health professionals that we can keep concentrating on their specialties without needing to divert them to COVID services, the better that it will be for the people of Northern Ireland. As the royal colleges asked for in their press release, it is vital that the people of Northern Ireland respond and react to the asks in the government guidance so that we can drive down the spread of COVID-19.

Diagnostic and Cancer Treatment Services

2. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health whether diagnostic and cancer treatment services will be protected and delivered during the surge planning period. (AQO 936/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. COVID-19 has undoubtedly had a severe impact on diagnostic treatment services.

However, urgent cancer diagnostics and treatments were delivered during the first wave, and they will continue to be delivered during the second surge, as safely as possible, in COVID-19 safe spaces and using the independent sector hospitals where it is appropriate. The COVID-19 surge planning strategic framework provides the overall structure and parameters within the HSC trusts, and they will develop further plans for managing the response, in the event of further waves of COVID-19. The framework can be viewed on the Department's website.

Lessons learned from a first surge of coronavirus combined with the aforementioned regional approach have the potential to continue to improve resilience against COVID-19. However, we should be under no illusion that there are challenging times ahead. Services are already coming under pressure, and if the number of COVID-positive inpatients increases, that will have a negative impact on the ability to maintain other services. One of my primary aims in the difficult weeks ahead will be to ensure the continued delivery of high-quality diagnosis and cancer services, provided, of course, that it is safe to do so.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, there are chinks of light amid all the doom and gloom, and the reopening of breast cancer surgery in Daisy Hill Hospital for the first time in 10 years and the reopening of our emergency department (ED), notwithstanding the issues around queueing experienced last night, are to be hugely celebrated.

Minister, I declare an interest, and I have been in touch with you before about this, as my aunt has had her life-changing operation postponed twice, just a matter of days before her operation. She is not the only one in that boat, as there are multiple women and men, waiting at home, who are scared that their operation is going to be, or has already been, postponed. What comfort or reassurance can you give them, Minister? What support has been provided to your Department from the Department of Finance to make sure that you have all the resources in place to ensure that nobody is waiting at home, that no more operations are postponed, and that the diagnostics are in place to ensure that there is not a future pandemic as a result of this pandemic?

Mr Swann: The Member articulates that sense of frustration, hurt and anxiety that many families across the province have been feeling since we had to cancel surgeries, diagnosis and screening programmes. However, it is not

simply, at this moment, about throwing money at my Department. I need the nurses, staff and trained clinicians. One of the largest impacts that we have is that the more people we have going into ICU, the more need we have of anaesthetists, who are moving from theatres to support people who are being put onto ventilators. Highly skilled theatre nurses are then transformed and transposed to support additional ICU beds as well. Every ICU bed that we have to open and support through staff has that knock-on effect.

The Member mentioned the surgeries that are potentially going to be taking place in Daisy Hill Hospital, and that is where we look to our proactive and reactive service so that we start to utilise our footprint around the Province, no matter where it is. It used to be the case, when I came into this place, that the biggest cry was that patients would not travel; they always wanted the service on their doorstep. Patients are now willing to travel, as are our surgeons and nurses, but I really want to stop the travel to stop the spread and contamination of COVID-19 in this society. Doing that will allow me to release more of those front-line and critical service health workers back to the jobs and the service delivery and the likes of the services for your aunt, which is where they should be.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister update the House on cancer screening programmes?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for raising that point because it is one of the more challenging aspects, especially with regard to where we were in the first wave. The bowel, breast and cervical cancer-screening programmes were paused from mid-March to the end of June 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. All paused screening programmes have recommenced. The immediate priority is to clear the backlog of patients who are waiting for diagnostic procedures and to issue invitations to those whose screening opportunities were paused. This has been happening over the summer, and good progress has been made.

A key aim over the coming month is to develop a screening contingency plan, and that will outline the measures and steps that are necessary to maintain population screening during a resurgence of COVID over the months ahead. It is likely to take some time for screening services to return to pre-COVID levels, and, inevitably, the pace of rebuilding will be influenced by the progress of the pandemic.

The need to maintain social distancing in clinical settings, the implementation of enhanced infection control measures and the continued requirement for personal protective equipment will also present challenges for service restoration.

2.15 pm

Dealing with the pandemic continues to create additional pressures on health services. However, the recovery and restoration of screening services remain a priority. It is vital that anyone who has experienced any of the symptoms associated with early-stage cancer contact their doctor rather than waiting for a screening test.

Ms Bradshaw: Given how critical time is with cancer, does the Minister intend to use the independent sector more in the winter to bring down waiting lists and waiting times?

Mr Swann: We utilised the independent sector during the first wave, and it is my intention to do so again. The impact of COVID-19 on HSC's operating capacity and the significant reduction in productivity that resulted from that mean that HSC has continued to require access to the independent sector's capacity to deliver core services.

The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), on behalf of HSC, entered into contracts with three independent hospital providers from 1 April to 29 June. The contracts were agreed on a not-for-profit and full cost-recovery basis, and they provided trusts with full access to those independent sector hospital facilities. That arrangement ceased on 29 June as the independent sector moved to restart its services for privately funded patients.

Theatre capacity was prioritised for category 2 cancer patients from 29 June to 20 September. In addition, £12.1 million of non-recurring funding has been made available for 2021 for elective care and has been targeted in the first instance at patients with the highest clinical risk who are waiting for a diagnostic test, including those with suspected or confirmed cancer. In the main, that activity will be undertaken by the independent sector providers.

Mr Buckley: Data and evidence are important. The Minister may be aware that figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that non-COVID deaths in England soared between March and September, with diabetic deaths up by 86%, prostate cancer deaths up by 53% and

breast cancer deaths up by 47%. Sadly and undoubtedly, COVID kills, but so does lockdown. Does the Minister have any data relating to the non-COVID impact on Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point and welcome him to the Health Committee, where he has, I think, taken over from Mr Easton.

The Member will be aware that, every Friday, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) produces a weekly update on excess deaths, including those from cancer. NISRA is the official recorder of statistics in Northern Ireland, and, using the information recorded on death certificates, it provides a breakdown of additional deaths and their causes. NISRA provides that data to my Department.

Cataract Surgery: Waiting Lists

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to reduce the 48-month waiting time for cataract surgery. (AQO 937/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Demographic pressures and a misalignment of demand against funded capacity have created challenges across many aspects of elective surgery, including the requirement for cataract surgery. It was for that reason that the Department moved to establish elective care centres, which are now called day-procedure centres. Working across traditional trust boundaries and acting as a resource for the region to improve access and reduce waiting lists, these centres will provide high-volume, non-complex surgical treatments and procedures.

Cataract surgery was identified as a prototype model, and three elective care centres for cataract surgery were established in December 2018, offering assessments and treatments at the Downe Hospital, the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the South Tyrone Hospital. The centres are designed to improve flow whilst maintaining quality and safety, with the efficiencies gained aimed at improving productivity and reducing waiting lists. Inevitably, COVID has impacted on that performance, although the centres remain open for business.

A combination of reduced capacity due to workforce shortages and infection control measures, including social distancing and the use of PPE, has impacted on the service

delivery. In addition, the redeployment of theatre, medical and nursing teams, patient cancellations and the need for patient testing prior to surgery have further reduced performance delivery.

As a second COVID surge and associated winter pressures continue to have an impact on all areas of service delivery, the cataract day-procedure centres will continue to play their part in reducing waiting lists. It is anticipated that, where other elective surgeries may need to be downturned in acute hospital sites during the second surge, the day-procedure units will continue to act as a resource for the region.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. I am sure that he will agree with me that four years' waiting time for cataract surgery is totally unacceptable.

Mr Swann: I do. I have said that many times about the length of our waiting lists across all sectors in the health service. I said that when I took over as Minister. That is why it was important that New Decade, New Approach, pre-COVID, assigned £50 million to tackling waiting lists, and cataract services was one of those key priorities. COVID overtook that, but so did the underfunding of the health service over the past number of years, which left us in a position where we were seeing ever-increasing waiting lists due to an ever-decreasing availability of staff and a reduction in staff numbers.

Ms Sugden: I wrote to the Minister recently about clinical placements for optometrists in independent prescribing, and I understand that there is an issue with securing such placements across all the professions. Is he able to give me an update on that, and is there a way to take that forward? I believe that it could have an impact on waiting lists in a positive way.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. She wrote to me with a suggestion that was not about a complaint or what we are doing, but actually offered a solution or a different way to look at things. I know that her offer on behalf of that client body has been taken forward and is being advanced in the Department.

Mr McGrath: Does the Minister agree that the ability of the Downe Hospital to deliver cataract services is a fantastic success story? Will he undertake a quick review to see whether there are any additional cataract services that could be delivered on the site? The staff are willing and ready to deliver the service and, if it can be

done, they would love to be able to do that for the people of the North.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member and welcome him to his usual place as the champion of the Downe Hospital. He never misses an opportunity in the House to extol the skill set and dedication of the staff, of which I am highly appreciative. As I said in an earlier answer, as we get into the second surge over the next couple of months we will continue to look at where we can deliver services safely. If the Downe Hospital's footprint is one that we can use, I am sure that it will be explored.

Ventilator Capacity

4. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health for an update on current ventilator capacity compared to March 2020. (AQO 938/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Since March 2020, the critical care network has procured 180 intensive care ventilators and 24 advanced patient transport ventilators to supplement the existing devices in the treatment of the most sick patients. Of those orders, 124 ventilators have been received, allocated and commissioned for use across our trusts. The remaining 80 ventilators are awaited from the supplier, with the order due to be fulfilled by the end of this month. An additional 145 non-invasive ventilation devices have been procured for use by respiratory services in the region, along with 300 high-flow oxygen devices. On 6 October, I published individual trust surge plans alongside the Department's surge planning strategic framework. The regional inventory of 348 invasive ventilation devices, which included the 80 ventilators that are expected by the end of October, exceeds the currently anticipated demand.

Whilst it is vital that we have the necessary ventilators and other equipment in place to meet the needs of patients, that equipment is unlikely to be a limiting factor in the provision of critical care to patients in Northern Ireland. The most considerable stress across the health and social care system comes from pressures on staff resources, including those staff contracting, or self-isolating because of, COVID. That is why there is no room for complacency and we must all play our part in the efforts to control the virus.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answer. I, too, would like to acknowledge the commitment and work of Alex Easton on the Health Committee, and I welcome Jonathan Buckley to the Committee. The situation today

is that we have now had 624 deaths as a result of COVID. I want to pass on our condolences to each and every family that has lost a loved one as a result of the virus. I am acutely conscious that, as we stand here today, we are now at 95% occupancy rate in the hospital system and that we have only 16 ICU beds available. Given the importance of access to vital equipment, including ventilators and extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) machines, with all the adequately trained staff that are required to operate that equipment and to deliver that care, can the Minister outline how he intends to ensure accessibility to this vital equipment and care as we move into the second surge?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. It was a challenge. However, one of the inbuilt solutions that we produced, during the first wave, was the Nightingale facility at the Belfast City Hospital tower. During the first wave of COVID-19, detailed plans were developed to increase our ICU surge capacity at incremental stages, producing a regional model for those patients who needed intensive care and ventilation. It used the Belfast City Hospital tower and the regional ICU Nightingale facility. That will continue and has been stood up to be available during future stages.

The introduction of social distancing and other measures to control the spread of infection ensured that the number of patients in Northern Ireland using this facility did not get close to full capacity in the first wave. The ICU bed usage reached a peak of 96 occupied beds in total. That included 57 COVID-19 patients. However, maintaining services at that level was challenging for ICU staff and required significant redeployment from other services. During future surges, I will not hesitate to recommend proposals to the Executive on reinforcing control measures where necessary to ensure that the HSC does not become overwhelmed.

The revised regional ICU surge plan provides the ability to flex capacity to a maximum of 158 ICU beds. It is important to note that the level of staffing required to deliver that level of ICU capacity would be impossible to sustain for long and would have a major impact on other services, including complex elective surgery.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Minister, no matter how many ventilators you have on order or receive, it does not appear that you have enough trained staff to operate them. Have you asked for army medical assistance, should that be necessary,

in order to keep people alive on those ventilators during the worst of this wave?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I have said in the House before that, when I need to, I will not hesitate to ask for help, no matter what source it comes from, as it would be a dereliction of my duty as Health Minister not to do that.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that we are at the bottom of the global league table for ICU capacity and that warnings were made prior to COVID-19, does the Minister agree with me that more needed to be done prior to COVID-19, and now, to increase our ICU capacity?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I keep referring to the Nightingale facility at the Belfast City Hospital tower. When other places looked to build temporary hospitals, we utilised the footprint that we had. We utilised the staff that we had and we produced that on a regional basis. The surge capacity is still there in that facility to go up to 158 ICU beds incrementally. If we were not utilising those ICU beds for COVID-19 patients, we could be using them for something else or for somebody who needed elective surgery or who needed to use that facility. The fewer COVID-19 patients we have coming through, the more our service can do.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister. I make the Member aware that we have very limited time.

Mr Allister: Thank you. When this is over and it comes to reviewing how things went, will it include a review of how well, over previous years, the Department prepared for a pandemic? Will it include a truthful review of how many hospital beds, including ICU beds, were removed from our system over the years?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. It is something that I have said in previous answers, even here today. It was the reduction of the staff — not the beds — who could maintain the beds and who could look after the patients who needed to utilise those beds.

This place has to be honest and open about what that review looks like and the questions that it asks. It needs to see what more we could do for our National Health Service. No matter how many people try to denigrate some of the service and some of our delivery, I maintain that the National Health Service that we have in Northern Ireland and the people who work in it

is something that we all should be proud of and be behind.

2.30 pm

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

Schools: PHA Support

T1. Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health whether he recognises the figure that fewer than 10 schools have required Public Health Agency (PHA) contact-tracing support for two or more incidents of COVID-19. (AQT 561/17-22)

Mr Swann: Some of the support mechanisms that the PHA put in place to support our schools and allow them to keep open and the collaborative approach between us in the Health Department, the Department of Education and the Public Health Agency have demonstrated that, although the Education Minister reported that there were 1,500 positive cases, such joint working was a benefit and showed how Departments worked well in a short space of time to ensure that the schools could remain open and that we could support the staff and pupils who tested positive and who were contacted.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. That figure was reported by the Education Minister, but it does not reflect what I know to be the case in Derry. I contacted post-primary schools in the city and found that six of them had contacted the PHA 55 times between them, with 50 confirmed cases. They also reported to me that 1,242 pupils were self-isolating, yet I could not get that detail. Minister, can you tell me who is responsible for contact tracing in schools?

Mr Swann: A joint piece of work was done in which schools supported the contact-tracing programme within schools, supplemented by the Public Health Agency. The Public Health Agency, as far as I am aware, supplied information to the Department of Education and the Education Authority on the number of positive cases and the number of outbreaks, and that allowed the Education Minister to provide that information yesterday.

In regard to the specific details of how contact tracing works in schools, intensive work needs to be done during this two-week period to make sure that we provide a safe space for our schools to get back and support the principals

and teachers who want to get back and educate our children in a safe environment.

COVID-19: Nationalist/Unionist Spread

T2. Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health whether there is any evidence to show that the virus is more likely to be spread in nationalist areas than it is in unionist areas. (AQT 562/17-22)

Mr Swann: That is not evidence that we hold in the Department. What we look at and provide is a breakdown of incidence per council area and now by postcode. We do not ask anybody who has contracted COVID-19 about their political or religious affiliations.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that retaining public confidence in such a crisis is essential and that, at times such as this, all Ministers should ensure that, when they speak in public, they do so on the basis of fact rather than generalisations?

Mr Givan: He did.

Mr Butler: I am asking the Minister.

Mr Swann: One of the things that we all have to do — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Just a wee second, Minister. I remind Members that everybody has to be treated with respect. There is to be no talking from a sedentary position. The Minister is on his feet. Have respect and let the Minister respond to the Member's question.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The crucial point that he got to was that, for Northern Ireland to get back to where we were after the first surge of COVID-19, we have to do it jointly. We have to do it as one society, one Assembly and one Executive. It is vital that the health message that is put out is consistent. Any weakening or undermining of that message gives succour to those who do not believe it, do not want to believe it or want to undermine it for the sake of undermining it. It is a vital message. We have to come together to support our health service and the front-line workers as they support patients who contract COVID. Our nursing staff, doctors and hospital porters do not care about the religion or political affiliation of their patients, and nor does COVID. The critical point that we need to get through to anyone listening is that the virus is no respecter of political persuasion,

religious belief or economic or social background. As our party leader said, it is an equal opportunities killer.

COVID-19: Scientific Data

T3. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Health, in the light of the huge demand, whether he will provide the House and the wider public with the crucial, factual data regarding transmission spread across hospitality and other close-contact services, given the huge impact that lockdown and the restriction measures have had on livelihoods across Northern Ireland and the fact that it is only right that those whom we are asking to face the brunt of the restrictions be provided with the evidence that led to them. (AQT 563/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. This afternoon, there will be a section on my Department's website that publishes data and scientific evidence that we have received and that we have provided to the Executive. That will be supplemented and updated with a more detailed breakdown as time goes on.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is important that the House gets that information as soon as possible to help to inform the general public.

Does the Minister share the concerns of many working people across the country who fear the loss of their jobs and businesses and the knock-on effects on their mental, personal and physical well-being during the crisis?

Mr Swann: I do, and I not think that that should even be questioned. I welcomed and highlighted it when the Executive unanimously endorsed the steps that we took on restrictions for four weeks and the extended two-week holiday for schools. It was a unanimous Executive decision because we recognised the difficulties that taking those steps and making those decisions had across Northern Ireland society, whether it was the impact of COVID-19 on our health service, the economy and even on social interactions among children and in wider society. The Executive did not take the decision lightly, but it was unanimous. The First Minister made a statement here last Wednesday on behalf of the Executive. I was in the Chamber to support her in making those recommendations because, as an Executive, we realised what had to be done. What we did last week has now been proven correct, and other areas are following us. We have seen the actions taken in the Republic of Ireland, in Wales and in large parts of England. I am sure

that Scotland will shortly take steps in the same direction. What Northern Ireland cannot afford is what we see elsewhere across Europe. The Health Minister in Belgium has, I think, said that coronavirus is now out of control in that country. As Health Minister here, I do not want to have to stand up and say that.

COVID-19 Regulations: Delay

T4. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to explain the regrettable delay behind the fact that the health protection regulations that govern the newest restrictions were commenced at 10.30 pm on Friday, four and a half hours later than they were due to come into effect, even though the First Minister had announced them two days previously. (AQT 564/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member asks a valid question. I shall answer simply: the regulations supported a five-party agreement and plan that had come together earlier in the week. The implementation, drafting and detail of the regulations was, as anybody who has had experience of drafting regulations will know, more complicated, diverse and intricate than first envisaged because they were not a simple copy and paste of the first lockdown restrictions. They were more detailed, nuanced and targeted on the areas where, we thought, action needed to be taken.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. Information appeared on the nidirect and Department of Health websites that bowling alleys had to close as well as the other listed businesses. However, the statutory rules that were published on Friday night and the regulations published on Sunday night make no mention of that. Will the Minister put on record whether bowling alleys have to close as part of the new restrictions so that I can advise my constituents?

Mr Swann: My understanding is that the restrictions include bowling alleys, but I will get that in writing to the Member, so that she has it not just in Hansard but in writing.

COVID-19: Health Service Workforce

T5. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Health whether he is satisfied that we have the doctors, nurses, anaesthetists and wider workforce to deal with COVID-19 admissions, given that, in recent weeks, we have seen an increase in the number of patients admitted to hospitals and ICUs. (AQT 565/17-22)

Mr Swann: We have that workforce but only because we take it from elsewhere. It is not readily available. We cannot simply divert people from a standing stock of health service professionals who are waiting.

We have put out our workforce appeal again, asking anybody who holds those skill sets to come forward. They would be more than happily accepted into the workforce. We published that appeal a couple of weeks ago, and, so far, over 1,700 people have been successful in their application for work. Of those 1,700, nearly 900 have been appointed. They are deployed in the service, on standby or on bank jobs.

Mr Allen: As you highlighted, Minister, we are seeing an increase in hospital and ICU admissions. That puts pressure on the health service and impacts on other services. Do you agree that the appalling actions of some should not be a benchmark for wider society?

Mr Swann: I very much agree. I can say as much as I want from the Dispatch Box in that regard, but, when you speak to someone who has suffered from COVID-19 or has lost someone to it, they give the most powerful testimony of the effect of the virus and its impact on our health service. One of the most moving and realistic stories of the experience of people who have had to utilise ICU and ventilation was a testimony given by the Member himself as someone who had experienced it and come through it. With his experience, he would not want anyone in Northern Ireland to have to go through that. That is especially the case with what is termed "long COVID" and the after-effects of infection.

COVID-19: Test-and-trace System

T6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health whether he has established an effective, fit-for-purpose COVID test-and-trace system, with adequate backward-tracing capacity, for the people of Northern Ireland. (AQT 566/17-22)

Mr Swann: The test-and-trace facility that we have in place is always subject to review and improvement. We introduced "Digital First" in the last number of weeks, which involves sending text messages to those who have tested positive. That was followed up by being able to do a self-certification using an on-site website. We have established the StopCOVID NI app, which puts out data as well. We have the ability to go back 48 hours. The Member's party leader and the health spokesperson have

brought to our attention the usefulness of going back seven days, rather than 48 hours. We have run a pilot, and, as we strengthen the service that our test-and-trace facility provides, we look to introduce and embed that.

Mr Speaker: We have a minute left.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Health Minister accept that a failure to establish adequate backward-tracing capacity in the test-and-trace system costs Northern Ireland increased transmission and infection?

Mr Swann: I think that I have answered that. It is something that was raised by the Member's party leader and health spokesperson, and we have looked at going back not just 48 hours but seven days.

One of the challenges is people's ability to remember where they were seven days previously and whom they were in contact with. Those are the additional challenges for the programme as we expand backward-tracing. We saw that our online system is easier to use because you sit in front of a computer and can come back to it several times, rather than simply doing it through a single telephone call.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two while we prepare the Chamber.

Infrastructure

Mr Speaker: We now move on to questions to the Minister for Infrastructure. Question 3 and topical question 9 have been withdrawn.

A1 Upgrade: Update

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A1 upgrade. (AQO 950/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I recognise that many in the local community support the safety improvements that are being proposed along the A1 between Hillsborough roundabout and Loughbrickland. In particular, I am very aware of how important the A1 improvements are for the many people who have expressed their support for them, especially those who have lost loved ones.

A public inquiry into the A1 junctions phase 2 road improvement scheme was held from the 11 March until 13 March 2020. Following the inquiry, the inspector undertook a number of site meetings to ensure that he gave full consideration to all the issues raised. Although those site meetings were delayed by COVID-19 restrictions, they have now been completed. The inspector issued his report to the Department yesterday. My officials will require some time to consider fully the inspector's proposals and recommendations. When I have been apprised of the findings, I will consider them carefully and decide on the next steps for this important scheme. I am keen to progress the A1 junctions phase 2 road improvement project to the next stage as quickly as possible, once all the necessary statutory processes have been completed and the necessary funding has been secured.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the Minister's answer. She is well aware that many people who use the road daily are keen to have the improvements put in place, especially for road safety. Can she give the House any indication of when the scheme will commence to improve safety on the road?

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member on the importance of road safety. The A1 is also important for connectivity, given its strategic importance. I assure him that I am keen to progress the scheme to the next stage as quickly as possible. The precise timescale for that will depend on the outcome of the public inquiry and consideration of the report. I recognise the road's importance. I met Mr and Mrs Heaney, who tragically lost their son, Karl, and gave them my commitment to move forward with the scheme as quickly as is practically possible, and I will keep Members updated.

Miss McIlveen: The safety of all road users should be a priority. The Minister will be aware of the work of the Motorcycle Action Group (MAG) in highlighting the hazard that wire rope-style crash barriers present to motorcyclists in the event of a collision with one. Will the Minister give a commitment to meet MAG, with a view to working with it to look at alternative barriers for schemes such as the A1?

Ms Mallon: I recognise the concern that motorcyclists have about wire rope barriers and that the issue exists in many countries. My Department is currently working to the standards that are applied across Europe. Impacts with safety barriers, of any type, represent a very small proportion of road

collision statistics for motorcyclists. For all existing motorways and high-flow dual carriageways, my Department specifies concrete barriers for the central reserves as part of any road upgrades and when existing barriers need to be replaced. My officials are currently considering the ongoing maintenance costs for wire-rope safety barriers in comparison with non-tension systems, and this may change the way the Department specifies safety barriers in the future. I will be happy to meet the delegation and the Member.

Mr Beattie: My supplementary question has been asked. Thank you.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister, for your answers so far. Can you provide an update not just on the A1 but on the A5 and the A6 flagship projects, please?

Ms Mallon: Yes, and I thank the Member for her interest. The A6 project is progressing well. We had anticipated some impact and delay due to COVID, but construction has progressed very quickly on the site, and we are advancing. I was able to make a bid for capital money during the recent monitoring round.

The A5 was subject to a public inquiry. The report has been passed to my Department. My officials are giving the report careful consideration and obtaining legal advice before submitting the report to me to decide the next steps. Again, this is another strategic project that is of critical importance, not least, to address the regional imbalance in Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her continued commitment to the long-awaited A1 upgrade project. How does she hope and plan to communicate the next stage of the project to the public, as that is very important?

Ms Mallon: I agree that there is huge interest in the project, not just inside the House but outside it. There is a great will and enthusiasm to see the project progress. As I have said, my Department received the report from the public inquiry just yesterday, and we are giving it careful consideration. I have asked my officials to ensure that any communications from my Department are maximised to reach members of the public as well as Members of the House who are also keen to see that project delivered.

Driving Tests: Backlog

2. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she intends to address the increasing backlog in driving test appointments. (AQO 951/17-22)

13. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, subsequent to the reopening of online booking services for driving tests on 5 October, for her assessment of the backlog in applications from learner drivers with provisional licences. (AQO 962/17-22)

Ms Mallon: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 13 together.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October, and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time, the DVA has not released any driving test slots beyond January 2021.

As Members will be aware, driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Following that Executive decision, driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by the new restrictions. The booking service is now closed, and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them on how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity, the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for the impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. The slots, when they are released, will also be available only to the impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public-facing services, the COVID-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely, and it asks customers for their patience at this difficult time.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe, and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr McCann: I thank the Minister for her answer to that question. Can she tell me in detail how many additional test slots the DVA is providing to address the enormous and growing backlog of driving test appointments?

Ms Mallon: I can confirm to the Member that, prior to the new restrictions and their impact on driving tests, we were working very hard to increase capacity. We are recruiting 27 extra examiners, three of whom have already been recruited. Twelve temporary and 12 permanent examiners are in the process of being recruited. We are offering driving tests on Saturdays and, while ensuring road safety, exploring the option of Sundays.

Mr Beggs: I am pleased that motorcycle tests will continue, given that the instructor follows in another vehicle. I welcome that. The Minister indicated that there will be no tests for this four-week period. Likewise, instructors will not be able to train students. What compensation package will be available to them? They do not have a rateable property and may not have fitted into many of the other schemes that have been presented to date.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his very important question. He is right about the impact of the restrictions on driving instructors. They have been asked to close their businesses, so there is an onus and a responsibility on the Executive to ensure that they receive financial support.

The Member is right to highlight that, in many instances, driving instructors will not qualify for the Department of Finance scheme because they do not have rateable premises. However, the Minister for the Economy is working on a hardship scheme that will include businesses that have been affected by closure. My understanding is that the scheme will include those businesses and the self-employed, who are also impacted because their business relies very much on businesses that have been forced to close as a result of our restrictions.

Ms Bunting: Will the Minister confirm whether employees who have had a dual role, as driving examiner and vehicle tester, will now move back to vehicle testing to help with the number of MOTs being conducted?

Ms Mallon: There are 37 driving examiners. During this period, some will continue to conduct motorcycle tests, and others will be redeployed to other areas and duties, as she highlighted. Some will be offered the

opportunity to take annual leave before the services resume.

Ms Hunter: I am grateful that the Minister has provided clarity on the Executive's decision to add driving instructors to the list of close contacts. As a result, driving tests have had to cease to protect public health. When will the Minister's Executive colleagues bring forward support for the industry?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The Minister for the Economy and her officials are working very hard on this matter. It was discussed at the Executive on Friday, and I understand that the Minister and her officials have been working diligently since then to try to bring forward a scheme that will set out very clearly the eligibility criteria that will ensure that people who were excluded previously are not excluded as we learn to cope with the next four weeks and the new restrictions imposed by the Executive.

Compensation Claims

4. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the compensation claims paid by her Department, due to road or street defects, since 2015. (AQO 953/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Before I address the Member's specific question, it is important to explain that, although my Department has a statutory duty under article 8 of the Roads Order to maintain public roads, there is no automatic entitlement to compensation for road users. My Department investigates and defends public liability claims, with every case turning on its own facts. In cases where my officials consider the Department can raise a legal defence, claims will be repudiated.

Turning to the Member's specific question, I can confirm that, during the six full financial years from 2014-15 to 2019-2020, £13.1 million in roads-related public liability compensation was paid in claims for vehicle damage, personal injury and property damage. During the same period, the Department received 18,452 public liability compensation claims and paid compensation in 10,453 cases. However, I wish to make it clear that claims received in one financial year are not always concluded within that financial year. Therefore, the figures that I have provided for cases where compensation was paid out, as well as the compensation amount, will include details for claims received in prior financial years.

It has been independently established that, at today's prices, some £143 million is needed to maintain the structural integrity of Northern Ireland's road network. However, due to budget constraints, that amount has not been available over the period in question.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister gave a startling figure, and I appreciate her referring to it. Minister, what is the Department's average response time to a reported defect? Does the Department hold any information on claims made in the window between a defect being reported and repaired?

3.00 pm

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that, during that period, the breakdown of compensation payments was as follows: £2 million was paid out for vehicle damage; £10.7 million was paid out in compensation for personal injury; and £410,000 was paid out for property damage claims. The average timescale for a decision in respect of vehicle damage is four months. For personal injury and property damage, the average waiting time for a decision is six months.

Mr Clarke: Given the substantial amount of money that is being spent on compensation, has your Department done any work to find out about the recurring costs of damage in the same areas, as opposed to just providing that global figure of £13 million? Many of us will know that there are accident black spots and particular defects on roads that still go unchecked even after compensation has been paid.

Ms Mallon: For investment in our roads and structural maintenance, my officials use and apply a matrix that is to do with the volume of traffic and defects on a road. We will never have a situation where the Department is not in receipt of compensation claims. The challenge here is that we have systematically underinvested in our road structure, and, unfortunately, this is one of the outworkings of that. I will continue to make representations to the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues to ensure that we can get the funding that we need to bring our roads up to a much better and much more improved standard.

Mr Muir: The Minister's responses are perhaps reflective of an endemic lack of investment in roads maintenance. Can she outline why only £1 million for additional roads maintenance was bid for in the October monitoring round? I have a list the length of my arm of roads in the North

Down constituency that require repair and maintenance, and yet people are being told to wait.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. To my recollection, in the October monitoring round, I made a capital bid for £5.5 million, and just over £4 million of that was for structural maintenance. I can clarify those figures, and if they are not the most up-to-date figures, I can provide you with the revised figures. Please be assured that, where there is any opportunity to bid for additional moneys that I can ensure will be spent, I will continue to do that and to make those representations to Executive colleagues.

Ms Kimmins: Compensation figures suggest that my area of Newry and the surrounding areas are among those with the highest number of claims, suggesting that the roads there have the worst defects. Can the Minister outline how she intends to address the issues in the worst-affected areas?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. In this year's annual budget, I allocated £75 million towards structural maintenance, which was in line with last year. I also created a £10 million rural roads fund, because I very much recognise that our rural roads are under pressure and that we need to do more to try to improve them. I assure the Member that I will continue to make representations to secure the necessary funding so that her constituency and other constituencies can see the significant road improvements that they need and deserve.

NSMC Transport Sectoral Meeting

5. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) on transport. (AQO 954/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The NSMC transport sectoral meeting on Wednesday 7 October was conducted via videoconference due to current COVID restrictions. Eamon Ryan TD, Irish Transport Minister, Gordon Lyons MLA, as accompanying Minister, and I attended the meeting. I will make a statement on the meeting in the Assembly on 2 November, but I can report that it was hugely positive, and a lot of progress was made.

I can confirm that a number of issues were discussed and agreed at the meeting. These included the implications of Brexit for our island. An agreement was reached on continued

cooperation on transport issues in the coming months. Our response to COVID-19 in relation to transport services and operations was discussed, as was the latest EU funding position, including the potential loss of some opportunities due to Brexit and the implications for communities here and our shared New Decade, New Approach commitments.

Importantly, we agreed that the high-speed rail feasibility study would be extended to Derry and Limerick. Minister Ryan and I took that decision because we recognise that the north-west has, for too long, suffered from underinvestment in rail. We are both committed to addressing regional imbalance across the island. We also reiterated our commitment to progressing the A5, the Narrow Water bridge, renewed air services and cross-border greenways.

During the meeting, I also raised the issue of the withdrawal of the Bus Éireann service between Dublin and Belfast. Minister Ryan and I have held a number of bilateral meetings, and we continue to engage positively on how we can work together collaboratively to deliver for citizens and communities across our island.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for her clear commitment to the Narrow Water bridge project. In particular, I thank her for visiting Warrenpoint and meeting the Narrow Water bridge community network. What discussions has the Minister had with the Irish Government on progressing this much needed and highly significant project, not just for south Down but for the whole island of Ireland?

Ms Mallon: As the Member rightly says, I recently met her and representatives from the Narrow Water bridge community network. I know the local passion that her late father had for this project, which she has, and I know that those right across the local community share that passion for this transformative project. I assure her that I share that passion, and all my conversations to date with the Irish Government have been positive about delivering together on this all-island, New Decade, New Approach commitment. At the NSMC, and separately, I have engaged with Minister Ryan on progressing this important project. We will be working closely together in the next few months, and I will keep Members updated on progress.

Dr Aiken: One of the issues that the Minister will have discussed is the importance of North/South communications and trade and the vital need for the York Street interchange to be built as quickly as possible. Can the Minister

reflect on where we are with the York Street interchange and on the importance that it has for all-island and, indeed, all-islands communications and logistics?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, the York Street interchange project is critically important. It is a strategic road project, but it also presents an opportunity to have a properly future-proofed design to ensure that it is inclusive of the communities that live around it and that not only does it meet the objectives that we have as an Executive but it meets the objectives of a Belfast agenda. It is also an important way forward in tackling the climate emergency. The Member will know that I initiated a short, sharp external review to make sure that we were future-proofing the project, and I hope to receive that report after engagement with stakeholders around December time.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, considering the South's recent budget announcement for funding North/South projects, can we expect an acceleration of the A5 construction process and for two phases to commence simultaneously?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I very much welcomed the announcement by the Irish Government of €500 million for infrastructure projects, as it is a huge opportunity for greater collaborative working and to see real delivery on the ground. The Member will know that the A5 was subject to a public inquiry. The report has been submitted, and my officials are carefully considering its findings while obtaining legal advice. When they make the submission to me, and I can give it my consideration, I will decide on the next steps. I want to reassure the Member that I recognise the importance of the A5 project. Subject to the completion of all the statutory processes, I will be keen to move on it as quickly as possible. I will, of course, look to the Irish Government to play their part, given their financial commitment to the project.

Road Network: Congestion

6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the three most congested points in the road network that have been identified by her Department. (AQO 955/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise the need for improved interconnectivity between our towns and key gateways and a desire to reduce congestion at key points. The term "most congested" is a

subjective one and will often be dependent on the season, the time of day and ongoing events. As such, it is not possible to compile a ranked list of the worst congestion points. I am mindful, however, that we cannot simply look to build our way out of congestion by creating more and more roads. Rather, I am determined to offer real alternatives to reduce our dependence on private car use and reduce emissions, including a drive towards modal shift through improved public transport and active travel options.

That does not mean that certain parts of our road network cannot benefit from major works projects. In line with the Executive's commitment to flagship schemes in their Programme for Government and, indeed, the British and Irish Governments' commitments in New Decade New Approach, my Department is advancing major road improvement schemes on the A5, A6, and at the York Street interchange to alleviate congestion and increase journey time reliability. In addition, major works on the A1 are being developed to improve road safety. Those strategically important schemes have been identified as having the ability to deliver for communities and to help to address regional imbalance while supporting connectivity and economic growth.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for her response. I think that if a survey were done of motorists and road users, commercial and private, they would probably identify the York Street junction as the busiest junction in Northern Ireland. It causes delay to hauliers, and standing traffic causes a lot of pollution in the area. I know that the planning process for the interchange has been completed. However, the Minister has paused development, and she referred to that in her answer to the previous question. Can she suggest a timescale for when that link between the M1, M2 and my North Down constituency will be built?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I know that he has huge interest in the project. As I said, it is a strategic road improvement scheme that will provide a fully grade separated interchange to replace the existing at-grade signal-controlled junction of the A12, Westlink, M2 and M3. I recognise the strategic importance of that project. Its inclusion in the New Decade, New Approach agreement is further indication of its significance to economic and societal well-being, and I am determined to see it delivered.

In advance of the next stage of the scheme and in line with good practice, as I said, I have commissioned that short, sharp external review.

It is being informed by stakeholders and specialists to ensure that any scheme is fit for purpose, and it will be completed by the end of the year. We will then move through the statutory processes. I am keen to move this project forward in the right way, ensuring that it is the right project, fit for purpose and future-proofed. I am keen to see delivery of it as quickly as possible for a number of the reasons that the Member highlighted.

Mr Sheehan: Air pollution is a serious issue in the North, particularly in Belfast, where one in every 24 deaths is linked to long-term exposure to air pollution. Given the seriousness of that and that transport is massively responsible for a lot of that air pollution, what is the Department's overarching strategy to deal with air pollution and to make cities cleaner, healthier places to live in?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My starting point is that everybody has the right to not have the air that is around them polluted. There is a social justice element to that. I can think even of my own constituency of North Belfast. Inner-city parts of North Belfast have the greatest levels of air pollution and, by no coincidence, the highest level of respiratory illnesses among children and, basically, residents of all ages. I agree with the Member that it is an absolute priority.

I am trying to address it through a number of ways: park-and-ride services to reduce private car use; promoting active travel, particularly in and around our schools, with young people; and looking at the development of quiet streets in those inner-city neighbourhoods so that the area is not dominated by vehicles but is actually for children and play. The Member will be aware that Translink also has a strategy on zero-emission and low-emission buses. I have given a significant financial contribution to that in my allocation this year. I am very keen to do what we can to promote active travel and greater use of our public transport network. I am also keen to work with ministerial colleagues, including the Environment Minister, as we try to improve the air quality of all our citizens.

Mr Speaker: There are two minutes left. I call Pat Catney.

Mr Catney: Park-and-rides are one way to remove congestion. The Minister has already done great work to bring forward new services. Can she give an update on her consideration of a park-and-ride at Moira?

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member that park-and-rides have an important role to play in tackling traffic congestion, promoting cleaner air and tackling the climate emergency. That is why I was delighted to announce £2.8 million in investment in park-and-rides earlier this year.

The Member is a real champion for Moira. I know that he is determined to see that park-and-ride facility delivered. I assure him that I am too. I hope to be in a position very soon to announce another tranche of funding in the coming months. Yes, subject to all processes being satisfied, my hope is that Moira can be included to help to ensure that his constituents have access to cleaner, greener travel.

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

3.15 pm

Infrastructure Projects: Dublin Government Funding

T1. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having listened to her answer about funding from the Dublin Government for infrastructure projects and agreeing that that commitment should be honoured, specifically on the construction of the A5, whether, following the Dublin Government's announcement about North/South projects, we have been given an indication of when that funding will be available (AQT 571/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As he rightly points out, New Decade, New Approach is the basis on which all parties are around the Executive table. We signed up to it in good faith. The agreement contains a number of commitments that need to be honoured: commitments from the Irish Government, the British Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

I welcomed the announcement of the €500 million, and I am keen to work with colleagues across the island to see delivery on that. I will push through on infrastructure in my engagement at the North/South Ministerial Council meetings and in my individual engagements with Minister Ryan and the Taoiseach. I am sure that that is the same approach that will be adopted by all our ministerial colleagues.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Minister for that. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. On

the subject of all-island connectivity, will the Minister comment on the recent North/South Ministerial Council and specifically on whether the indefinite suspension of the Bus Éireann service between Dublin and Belfast got a mention?

Ms Mallon: In my answer to a question from Sinéad Bradley, I indicated that I had raised the issue of Bus Éireann. Bus Éireann is a commercial service, and it has announced its intention to cease services on 15 November. I am committed to maximising public transport, ensuring that we have all-island connectivity and, in particular, to ensuring that people are able to access public transport, North and South. I am, therefore, working with Translink to see what we can do not only to ensure the protection of the services that we provide but to explore what opportunities there may be for growth. I am due to engage in a number of bilaterals with the Finance Minister in the coming weeks and hope to discuss the matter further with him.

Driving Tests

T2. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there is an opportunity to bring driving tests forward sooner, given that, in a previous answer, she said that she will try to facilitate driving tests for those people who had to cancel and rebook during the restriction period and she plans to look at cancellations, albeit that there could potentially be a three-month wait for some people who might have been doing a test today. (AQT 572/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I agree that this is a hugely frustrating situation for learner drivers and driving instructors. The Executive did not take this decision lightly. We were already at a difficult starting point. It is a high-demand service that was closed for five to six months, but we are trying to minimise disruption. We will bring additional slots online through November and December, and, as I said, we are recruiting 27 new examiners. We are also looking to see whether we can enhance testing at weekends, subject to road safety conditions. I am also keen that we try to minimise the disruption to this group of learner drivers. That is why the slots that will be opened in February will be exclusively for those candidates and pupils who have had their test cancelled during this four-week period.

I apologise to learner drivers and driving instructors. I do not want to see them in this situation, but we are in a pandemic. It is a public-facing service, and it has been impacted.

I want to do what I can to ensure the safety of all involved and to get the service back up and running as quickly as possible.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate the Minister's attention to the matter, and I see that she is trying to bring things forward as quickly as possible. I am also glad that she is thinking outside of a nine to five, Monday to Friday week. We need to do that across all Civil Service and public-sector services. I want to go back to the question on providing financial support for driving instructors. All MLAs, including my constituency colleague Cara Hunter, have been inundated on the matter. Does the Minister have any role in supporting the Minister for the Economy in bringing forward such a scheme so that we can ensure that driving instructors will get financial support, hopefully by the weekend?

Ms Mallon: When the matter was discussed in the Executive meeting on Friday, I assured the Economy Minister of my support by offering my officials, and I followed up on that assurance in writing. I am mindful of the fact that the Department for the Economy is under immense pressure. We have information relating to driving instructors that I would be willing to share. I am keen to work with all Executive colleagues to ensure that the driving instructors get the financial support that they deserve, given that it is the Executive's restrictions that have closed their businesses.

Transport Sector: Financial Assistance

T3. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on action that is being taken to provide financial assistance to the transport sector, including coach and taxi operators and hauliers. (AQT 573/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. From the onset of the pandemic, I have said consistently that I do not have the powers to create financial hardship schemes. I was not saying that to be obstructive. I was saying it because it was the truth. That fact was recognised when the First Minister and deputy First Minister wrote to me to say that they were considering giving me new powers under the Financial Assistance Act.

Following that, I have engaged closely with the sectors. They have worked with my officials in providing the evidence required by the legislation, which has to determine that exceptional circumstances apply. I set a deadline of 6 October for receipt of that

evidence. The sector asked for an extension, which we granted because we want to make sure that we have robust evidence. The extension was until Friday past. I met the First Minister and deputy First Minister yesterday. My intention is to write to them this week to set out the exceptional circumstances, while my officials are actively considering what schemes we can bring forward as required.

I am mindful that people in those sectors were excluded from previous schemes and are experiencing real financial hardship. I am committed to doing what I can, as quickly as possible, to make sure that they get financial assistance. I am as frustrated as them that they have had to wait several months. My view is that we could have included them in some previous schemes. However, we are where we are, and I will do what I can to help them as quickly as possible.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answer. I have two points. First, I believe that some coach operators have offered up plans and solutions, and those need to be looked at. There will not be a perfect answer for everybody in the industry, and we should not wait until we have the perfect answer. We need to deliver for them and deliver for them now.

Secondly, can you give us a timeline of when they will get financial assistance? I accept that you needed the special powers, but am I not right in saying that the Finance Minister used those special powers to turn around within days financial assistance for those in Derry who came under restrictions just two weeks ago?

Ms Mallon: You are right in respect of the Finance Minister, but he had an existing scheme that was, in essence, straightforward because it relied on Land and Property Services (LPS) to identify businesses of rateable value.

The haulage sector, the bus and private-operator sector, and the taxi sector are diverse. You have the self-employed and companies with multiple employees, so they are two very different schemes. You are right to say that private bus and coach operators provided good analysis and ideas for schemes. In fact, those are the basis on which my officials are working.

I am not in a position to give a definitive timescale now because people need honesty. We need to be open and honest in our engagement with them and in the management of their expectations. My officials were in contact with them as recently as last night, and we will work as quickly as possible to get the

money out, because we recognise that time is of the essence.

Derry to Belfast Railway

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after stating that he very much welcomes the fact that we finally have a Minister who will include Derry and the north-west, for an update on her work with Into the West to get the work on phase 3 of the Derry to Belfast line, which was halted by her predecessor, Chris Hazzard, back on track, particularly because she mentioned her work with her counterpart Minister Ryan on moving forward all-island rail. (AQT 574/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. In December 2016, the then Infrastructure Minister, Chris Hazzard, announced that the planned phase 3 works were not to be carried out within the Budget period 2017-2021 but would remain on Translink's longer-term infrastructure strategy. However, in line with my commitment to improve connectivity with the north-west, I am determined to bring that project back on track. That is why I announced, on 10 June, that I have made funding available for an updated feasibility study for phase 3 of the Derry/Coleraine rail line. While an updated feasibility study is necessary after almost 10 years of delay, I am fully committed to getting the work done at pace and to making progress for the people of the north-west, who have waited too long for action to address regional imbalance and better connection for them as a community.

Mr Durkan: Thank you for that positive answer, Minister. It will be very well received in my constituency. Is there any update on the feasibility study out of the positive discussions that have been ongoing?

Ms Mallon: Last month, I held a second and very constructive meeting with representatives of the rail lobby group Into the West. Following my request to Translink for it to re-examine the timeline for completion of the feasibility study and associated business case, I am pleased to announce that the timeline has now been reduced by six months and the work should therefore be completed in early 2022. I will, of course, continue to do all that I can to make sure that we continue to move forward with the project at pace.

Arc21: Planning Application

T5. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how we are getting on with the decision-making process around Arc21's "RHI 2" incinerator at Hightown. (AQT 575/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He never misses an opportunity. My response, as it has been before, is that all planning applications have to be processed following the right statutory processes. When those processes are completed, and planning officials have fully considered them, a recommendation will come up to me. As planning Minister, I will ensure that all the statutory processes are followed for all applications on which I have to take decisions.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her response. We will continue to spar on this for a very long time and until "RHI 2" is put where it belongs: nowhere.

There is a significant issue here that I would like the Minister to consider. Will she consider commissioning an independent review of the business case from Arc21, bearing in mind the disquiet among people in Northern Ireland over the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme and, indeed, the renewables obligation (RO) scheme? We do not want to find ourselves in a position in which, yet again, we are subsidising something that will not support the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that, as the Minister with responsibility for planning, I have very clear processes to follow. I will, of course, fully consider any applications that come before me.

Mr Speaker: I call Colin McGrath.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I ask the Minister for an update —.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Mr McGrath. Members, have a wee bit of respect. A Member is on his feet.

Flood Alleviation Scheme: Newcastle

T6. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the flood alleviation scheme that is required in Newcastle after the dreadful flooding that took place there in August. (AQT 576/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Having gone down and been with

residents and having seen the devastation and damage caused by the flooding, I gave a commitment to the residents that I will do everything that I can to see the flood alleviation scheme accelerated. Having been there too, the Member will be aware of that. Work is ongoing. We are moving to the procurement of contractors. Officials are working to a timeline in which construction will begin in early 2021. As I have said to officials and elected representatives there, I have asked my officials to ensure that everything that can be done is being done to accelerate this project.

Mr McGrath: I welcome those comments. As the Minister said, we were there that day and saw the devastation that was caused to people's houses, gardens and streets. Much of that devastation occurred because this work has not taken place. It has been lying around for many years waiting to be delivered. I ask the Minister to reiterate the personal commitment that was given to those residents on that day that the scheme will be delivered and that as soon as it can start, it will start. That is what people want to hear.

Ms Mallon: I very much appreciate that, when your home has been flooded, you will not be satisfied by warm words. As Minister, I will be judged on my actions when it comes to this project. I have given a personal commitment to it. I have asked my officials to give me regular updates on it. I have sent a very clear message to my officials that I want the scheme to be accelerated. There were land issues, which we are working to resolve very quickly. The Member will be aware that we also set up a community resilience group in the area so that we can work collectively to try to protect homes until we get to a point at which we have the flood alleviation scheme in place to provide the prevention measures required.

Mr Speaker: I call Joanne Bunting. There will not be time for a supplementary.

Ms Bunting: I will bundle them together. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

DFI Roads: Response Times

T7. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will know from previous experience that the standard response time to elected representatives from DFI Roads is 28 days, and that she may also be aware that, when a reminder is sent to chase the response, a further 28 days is added to the tally, and further given that some issues are urgent and some are time-bound, whether she

has considered, or will consider, a dedicated email address or telephone number for elected representatives to allow them to pursue matters of urgency in a more efficient and effective manner. (AQT 577/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I receive mixed feedback on that, and a number of Members, across the House, have told me that they receive a very effective and efficient response. If Members feel that they are not getting a satisfactory response, I encourage them to contact my private office, and I will look into it. I will take the issue that Member has raised away and consider it carefully, but if you are not getting a satisfactory response, please contact me directly through my private office.

3.30 pm

Dr Aiken: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to apologise for chuntering from a sedentary position. I may have sounded a bit like an honourable Member from South Belfast, but I apologise profusely.

Mr Speaker: I thought that you sounded like a Member from South Antrim [*Laughter.*] Anyway, thank you very much for that point of order.

I ask Members to take their ease.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA Bill 09/17-22] be agreed. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Newton: I want to begin with an apology to my colleague Mr Paul Givan, who, I understand, I referred to as Mr Paul Girvan. As we know, Paul Girvan is in another place, so I apologise to Mr Givan.

Mr Durkan: You should be apologising to Mr Girvan. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Newton: In the debate, Andy Allen asked a question as I was talking about the Minister's initiative to tackle underachievement. He, very rightly, asked about housing and whether it was a factor in underachievement. Indeed, I would make the point that, as the Minister develops the initiative on underachievement, I believe that two things will come out of it. I say to the Minister of Finance that we need to address urgently the issue of poor-quality and overcrowded housing, not just in my constituency but where it exists across Northern Ireland. Not to do so would be shameful for the future.

The work on underachievement will also require a need to work in partnership with the Health Department, and I believe that that will be in the report of the expert group on underachievement that the Minister has established.

My specific experience is around family intervention teams (FITs): helping families who are finding it difficult to cope, for whatever reason, and children who are finding it difficult to gain the benefit of education. Teachers are spending more and more time on social issues than on education. In that respect, Minister, I believe that tackling underachievement needs a partnership approach.

Budget line A-19 shows that the Budget will support the Middletown Centre for Autism. The Education Committee is aware of the major problems that parents have experienced when having children assessed. Assessment was a long process that frustrated families. We are investing — I cannot remember the figure — in Middletown, but the Education Authority needs

to invest further in the diagnosis of and support around autism.

One of the Committee's first informal meetings was with a leadership group of principals from special educational needs schools. It will come as no shock to the Minister that I came away from the meeting feeling quite emotional about the work that they were doing and the circumstances in which some were having to do it. Even though some schools were in fairly modern buildings, the increasing number of pupils meant that they had outgrown them, and facilities such as store rooms had been changed into classrooms. I welcome the work that is being done on special educational needs. However, that is another area that deserves and needs investment.

It is very difficult when you have lost your momentum from the morning session to come back with the same momentum in the afternoon, but it is my intention to finish with this point. Emerging nations and economies across the world recognise the need to be educated, for the sake of the economy, their people and the health of their people. In developing countries, across the board, primary education tends to be the number one investment priority. Many highly skilled teachers from Northern Ireland are working in schools in developing countries, and, in many cases, they are much better rewarded there than they would be in Northern Ireland. That indicates the value of people who are from here. They could make a very positive contribution to the holistic education and wealth of Northern Ireland, and they are out there doing that. That is not a criticism; in many ways, it is a compliment.

We have got to recognise that education is not just about reading, writing and arithmetic; it is about much more than that. It is not about the cost of education; it is about us investing in education. Matthew O'Toole talked this morning about the need for the Budget to not just be looked at annually and said that there would be much better financial planning with a two-, three- or four-year cycle. I wholeheartedly agree with that, because the various Departments will then know what to expect further down the line, rather than just this annual cycle — in fact, we are not even in an annual cycle at this stage, but generally speaking — of investment.

Obviously, I support the Budget, with all the caveats and requests that I have made over that short period.

Mr McHugh: Whenever one thinks about Budgets, one immediately tends to think of

measures that ask us to tighten the belts. Whilst this Bill is not in the same context as other Budget Bills, it is worth reminding ourselves that this is not the time for austerity. I highlighted yesterday the need for funding to be delivered to industry, to education, to meet the needs of our more deprived citizens and, in particular, to our health service. Alarming, it was announced today that our health service is almost at saturation point, with 1,700 staff off because of COVID.

In the past, our services have suffered from austerity measures, as the Minister stated himself. Those measures were implemented by successive Tory Governments after broken promises from the same Tory Governments. It is at a time like this that one can identify the benefit of the ability to control our own Budget. We should have the power to borrow or, indeed, the power to raise our own taxes. As a legislature, we should take control of our own finances. In many ways, we would be much better placed to handle many of the problems and difficulties that we face if we were in a position to do that.

Many other Members have noted their areas of concern, maybe ones that they have raised at different times, and I would like to diverge for a second into one area of concern that I have. This is an opportune time, with this new Budget, to seriously address those who have fallen through the net. That is a term that we often use, but yet and all they still seem to be there and, from March through to today, they do not seem to have been provided for adequately. I think of a free local newspaper in my area that operates from a private dwelling and whose workers are self-employed. That business depends on advertising, which is now greatly reduced as a result of businesses closing down, for its revenue and is unable to avail itself of any current grant. It is units like that that provide a community service and deserve our support. I am sure that there are many similar types of unit that are in the same situation. I hope that those responsible for designing the schemes that do not meet the needs of such businesses will make an effort to ensure that they are brought under the umbrella of support.

Yesterday, I noted that the virus knows no borders or boundaries. I note that, today, the Ibec-CBI NI Joint Business Council released a statement on the growing importance of collaboration, North and South, not only to combat the virus but to address the collective challenges in our economies; collaboration in relation to connectivity, the environment and investment, especially in the face of Brexit, should there be a deal or not.

Given the statements on the news last night, it seems that there is movement, slowly but surely, in the direction of a deal. It would be better for all our citizens that a deal is reached before they get to the stage of a crash-out, which is of benefit to absolutely no one.

3.45 pm

Finally, I would like to reiterate the comments of my colleague, Colm Gildernew, this morning when he highlighted areas of social deprivation that required continuing and additional support, as they are the areas with the highest levels of contagion of the virus. While I accept that there are lies, damned lies and statistics, I suggest that therein — social deprivation — is a much more reasonable explanation for higher rates of infection than that offered by others. On that basis, resources should be applied to those areas, not only to attack the virus but to ensure that deprivation is addressed.

In Irish, we have a seanfhocal, which is a proverb. A proverb reflects the wisdom of a race or people. There is a seanfhocal that, I am sure, people in here have heard of, and it was mentioned on television last night:

"Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireas na daoine."

It means, "In one another's shadow, we all survive". That is as true today as it was when it was first stated as a seanfhocal. We live in one another's shadow, and we truly depend on one another. We are in this together, and we hope that our Budget will embrace all our people and, in particular, all those in need.

Ms Armstrong: I start by thanking the Minister and his staff for what must have been a very interesting year working on budgets, since every week brought new amounts of money to their table. The Budget comes during COVID-19, and we can say with certainty that no sector, Department or family has been left untouched but that certain groups will bear a disproportionate impact of the virus. Unfortunately, this Budget will not address that.

One of things that I have noticed since joining the Communities Committee — the Infrastructure Committee is happy that I have shifted to Communities — is that we are failing young people under the age of 25. I refer particularly to labour market interventions. The Executive received Barnett consequential of £6.116 million of resource DEL in 2020-21 to support the Communities Jobstart programme,

which was announced on 8 July and is due to commence in November, only a few days away.

The Minister confirmed that she had bid for £4.8 million for labour market interventions in 2020-21 but, to date, had received no Executive allocation. Her Department is now seeking to manage that pressure internally through reprioritisation and the reallocation of funds. She intends to make a further bid in the January monitoring round for any pressure that remains in her Department for that matter through to 31 March.

I would like to draw everyone's attention to a very interesting Ulster University report, entitled 'Labour market implications of COVID-19'. It confirms that one in four say that COVID-19 is impacting on their household finance; 75% say that they face reduced income. Ulster University estimates that 258,000 people have been furloughed or laid off — 30% of all those employed here. People who work in the food sector, in retail, in elementary admin and services have experienced the most severe impact. Furlough saved their jobs, but it comes to an end on 31 October.

There will be a huge upsurge in applications for universal credit. Those most affected are people under the age of 25 who work in those areas. Thirty-six per cent of people who are employed in the accommodation and food sectors are under 25. Under-25s represent one tenth — 12% — of the total employment in Northern Ireland. Therefore, without a commitment to labour market interventions, we are leaving a generation of young people without a job or any hope of getting one for some time to come.

This so-called scarring effect will hurt us for a long time. We may see young people moving away from Northern Ireland because there are no options here for them. Young people and the least well off are more likely to lose jobs and to suffer from reduced income during this COVID crisis. It is worth noting that 57% of those furloughed are men and 43% are women. We need to consider the age profile of those who have been furloughed or who have lost their job. While I mentioned the under-25s, we have to consider that the apprenticeship scheme that has been brought forward by the Economy Minister needs to extend to older people too, because that is an age group of people who are losing jobs and who will not be employed again unless we give them support.

Departments have received a huge amount of money. There is a huge amount of money for the Department of Finance to work through this

year, but I have to ask this: is there any headroom? I know that we have not seen the October monitoring round so far, but will all the unhypothecated amounts of money that have been given out be spent by each of the Departments? Will there be losers? The losers seem to be the under-25s and those over-55s who will lose their job as a result of the impact of COVID on our economy.

We need to support the so-called scarred youth. We need to support our unpaid carers, who are at breaking point at this stage. We need to support house building in order to meet the growing list of people who do not have a home. Short-term investment in Communities is needed in order to fund the 900 staff that will have to be taken on to address the number of universal credit applications that are just about to hit the Department.

We need investment in real-time monitoring. It is critical for us to understand the impacts. We need to plan ahead for the issues that may be coming because of COVID. For example, has anyone here thought to look at their pension fund and at how much the investment has been hit because of COVID? There are a lot of people in our community who are citizens who have worked all their life and paid into a pension fund and who may now find that it has been impacted because of investments that have been hurt as a result of the global economic crisis. That will be an important determinant of when they can retire.

I do not think that there is any safety net in this Budget, but I think that there is headroom. Health, for instance, has £600 million set aside. None of us in the House would deny Health money, but there is very little time left until the end of March. If any Department has any money that they can give to and share with where there are pressures in other Departments, I ask them to please do so.

Minister, are you investigating in depth whether all the money in all the Departments will be spent, and, if not, are you recalling it? I seriously hope that in the October monitoring round we have some good news for those who are under the age of 25 and those who are unemployed.

As I said, there is no safety net. This is a crisis Budget, but the crisis is not over yet, and we may have much worse to come.

That is all that I want to say on this. I will not take up too much time, because many people have spoken about the Budget and it was debated yesterday. A lot of money is knocking

about in Northern Ireland. There are a lot of people who have not got that money, and there are a lot of people who are depending on it. We need to get it out the door quickly, and we need those Departments that are sitting on it and expecting to spend it to look to see whether there is an underspend so that they can share it out.

Mr Buckley: I rise to speak in my capacity as a Member of the Legislative Assembly for Upper Bann. Like other Members who commented on the Budget, including Ms Armstrong, who just spoke, I am afraid that the picture is bleak. There is no doubting that. Just like COVID-19 has infected every element and sector of our society, every page of the Budget Bill is riddled with COVID-19 and its consequences. I do not say that lightly. I do not say that with glee. I say that with some concern about what the outlook is. While I stand here to say that I support the Budget Bill, and I agree with the Member that it gives us some financial headroom to face the immediate challenges, I have to say that it is all in front of us.

Does the Budget give us certainty as we face into the second wave? The £600 million for Health gives us breathing space, but the societal, mental and economic impacts of COVID will last longer than the money that has been put aside for us. We all know that; we all know the challenges that we face. Unforeseen circumstances have changed the financial landscape and will continue to for many years to come. I said earlier to a colleague that we are facing the bleakest economic period of my lifetime. I think that many Members will concur. COVID allocations have meant that there is a greater need than ever to scrutinise where money is spent and where it will be needed. That goes to the very heart of what Ms Armstrong said.

The very fact that, potentially, we have money in the system that is not being spent and returned to the centre will come as a shock to many Members and the wider public in Northern Ireland. Maybe that is testimony to some of our antiquated systems and financial arrangements. However, at a time when we are stripping money away from businesses as a result of the restrictions that are in place, the public will rightly ask why we cannot even spend the money that we have allocated in Northern Ireland.

As was mentioned by, I think, Mr O'Toole — it has been mentioned by others in the Chamber — there is a real need for long-term financial planning. I have no doubt that there will be multi-year Budgets in the future, but I have

sympathy with the Finance Minister and the Executive on that point. Every time that we come to this place to discuss financial matters, we all agree that the idea of multi-year Budgets or otherwise is a good thing, but every time that we get round to preparing the road for an approach like that, we are hit with another crisis or circumstance that requires quick action. I have a lot of sympathy in that regard.

I will touch on a number of Committees on which the Budget has an immediate impact and some consequences that will cause us much concern on the road ahead. I speak, first, as a member of the Communities Committee, and I will focus on the level of need in our society for financial help. The Budget goes some way to addressing that in the short term, but we know that, in the long term, it is only scratching the surface. Other Committee members will agree that we have heard weekly cries for financial help, whether from the arts sector, charities or those who need social security payments. We recognise that those will only increase as we look ahead to potential redundancies and other potential impacts of COVID in the future. We also look at local government. Many of us can bear testimony to the work of local government in dealing with the COVID-19 response. Its Budget allocations, and what the Budget will mean for it in the future, will concern local government. Its services have been impacted like never before. COVID-19 has been a disruptor in every aspect of our life.

I will talk briefly about sport. Many members of the Committee will have heard me saying that I have serious concerns about the financial future of many of our sporting clubs across all sectors in the wake of COVID-19 and as we deal with the immediate pressures. We heard from the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL), the Irish Football Association (IFA) and any organisations that wanted to put their concerns to the Committee about how concerned they are about their financial future. We have called for money to be allocated to those sectors. Grants of £1,000 or £2,000 will never cut it. We know that. Their long-term financial viability stands in the balance of the financial packages that the Executive, particularly the Communities Minister, working alongside the Finance Minister, provide to those sporting organisations. It caused me great concern that, at the weekend, hours before the Irish League was due to start, we had mixed messaging. The Communities Minister said that spectators would not be allowed in the club grounds.

They have no idea of the confusion and chaos that that causes for those in that sector as they attempt to do their best in difficult

circumstances. The majority of their income is based on ticket sales. They have had no support from the Executive for the loss of money at the gates. We must react positively or we will not have a sporting future in this country. I say that with regret, but that is what they face.

4.00 pm

I turn briefly to education. I know that, regardless of party, Members place the education of our young people at the very heart of our economic and societal future. Whatever it might be, it starts with education. To say that COVID-19 has placed challenges on them would be an understatement. School closures have placed the school estate and individual schools under pressure that they have never experienced before. Funding is required for essential infrastructure. We know that. A couple of weeks ago, I had an Adjournment debate in the House about the school estate in Upper Bann. It would scare you to look into the school estate — I am sure that any Member could do that in their constituency — and see the need for investment and what is required, but the money is simply not there.

Budgets are about planning ahead, being prudent and providing a sound financial basis for the future, but let us face it: this Budget, as a result of COVID-19 and some actions by the Executive in placing restrictions on schools, is not providing the sound basis on which our children can look to the future with hope. Investing in their future is having them in the classroom being taught directly. That gets to the heart of the impact that this Budget will have. While we can throw money at online learning — we need to — there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction with a teacher in the classroom.

Do you know something, Mr Deputy Speaker? As you probably have, I have heard many criticise the teachers across this country who now face more time out of the classroom. Many of those schoolteachers are absolutely horrified that they are not in the classroom teaching pupils. They fear for them and for their economic future. They are fearful about the short-term impacts, whether it is being at home and away from the classroom or the complex needs at home.

They have absolutely got this wrong, in my opinion. Schools should be open because —.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I will, shortly. Schools should be open because it is a controlled environment and there is very little scientific data available that shows that schools are the cause of the transmission. I really feel in my heart, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, if we are serious about the economic viability and are serious about Budget allocations to education, we must act with common sense and put the protections in place, whether for the avoidance of transmission at the gate, or whatever is needed, to allow our children to have a future. I believe that that happens in the classroom.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Obviously, everybody agrees about the importance of education and it being face to face. Does the Member have any concern about today's reports that there are at least 1,500 cases of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools? That would warrant some action being taken by the Health Department and the Executive. He seems to be suggesting either no action whatsoever or very limited action in schools. That is concerning and may be in line with the Education Minister's approach.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not shrug away what the Member said about the cases in schools, but what I am told and what I see is that there is very little impact in relation to transmissions in the wider school population. I say to the Member that, if the problem is not as outlined by the Chief Medical Officer in a meeting that I had with him, and if the problem is at the school gate and outside the school environment, yes, there is a communication issue. Let us look at that and see what we can do. I will now draw back to the Budget because that has maybe taken me off a wee bit. I agree that measures must be put in place, but the education of our children is paramount — paramount.

I will now comment on the economy. Although the Budget is welcome because it makes allocations to those parts of our economy that are undoubtedly facing disruption, Members will agree that there is no simple answer, because there is no money tree. We have seen what the first wave of COVID-19 did. Support mechanisms were put in place by the Executive, but they were also put in place by the grace of Her Majesty's Government through the financial package that was able to support and sustain not only livelihoods but businesses across the country.

This Budget simply will not go far enough, and I do not think that even the Minister will say that it does. There is simply not enough money in the

system. We have to remember that, in the situation that we are in, with limited resources, actions taken have consequences. As I have said, our economy faces its bleakest period in my lifetime.

All Members will have received copies of the three-point plan, 'Finding a Balance to Protect our Community and our Economy', which was released by a number of businesses. Paragraphs in it certainly deserve to be quoted, because they are in line with what we are discussing:

"The Executive's decision to place large parts of the ... economy into another lockdown will, quite simply, result in another round of job losses",

which will ultimately impact on future Budgets.

It continues:

"Those who have had to shut their doors are deeply concerned by the decision after following the Executive's own guidance and investing money they didn't have in making their business"

life viable.

It goes on to say:

"They are understandably anxious about the viability of their businesses and the jobs they have created and so too are the many companies who are in their supply chain or rely on them for footfall ... Our economy is an ecosystem and closing down one part isn't a limited intervention — it harms us all."

It concludes:

"Pursuing a path of lockdown, release and repeat will undo all of the good work we have done to build a strong and diverse economy and protect workers and their families ... A DIFFERENT WAY MUST BE FOUND."

I have heard Ministers, Chief Medical Officers, Chief Scientific Advisers and commentators at large say, "There may be a need for further lockdowns down the line". That simply will not cut it, however. You cannot turn the Northern Ireland economy on and off like a tap. You cannot put people in and then out if their business is to be economically viable. They are here today but gone tomorrow. Their jobs and livelihoods depend on the decisions that we make in this House.

In looking at this Budget, many people will come to the conclusion, "What is in it for me? I am being told to close my business". I have heard the compelling stories. Many of our self-employed are looking at another lockdown with no money in their pocket, their businesses closed at one of their busiest times, bills still coming in, mortgage repayments, staff costs, and furlough coming to an end. The situation is dire, and they say, loud and clear, that it may be all right for people in the public sector and for, and I do not say this in a personal sense in any way, politicians and medical or scientific officers. They say, "The decisions that you make do not affect your livelihood, but I have a child at home whom I have to feed and put bread on the table for. I have a business that relies on staff who have been loyal to me and worked with me, and they simply do not know where their next week's wage will come from". Those are the issues that this Budget has to deal with and that Members will have to grapple with as we go into the future.

We must bear that point in mind. There has been much discussion in the Chamber about the economic impact of COVID and this Budget on different sections of society, but we can all agree that it will be low-paid workers, in the hospitality industry or elsewhere, some of them in close-contact services, who will be hurt the most. We must have a compassionate response. We must bear in mind that, yes, COVID-19 kills. We all know that; we have seen its devastating impact, but restrictions and lockdown measures will also do the same.

Data is required for planning. In this and other Budgets, we require — and I am sure the Minister has it — information, forecasts and projections that will inform his decision-making on the Budget that he presents. Equally, that means that data on COVID is equally important to feed into his decision-making on where that relief should come from next. It has been released today, in a previous question that I asked the Health Minister, but the data has not been released quickly enough to inform Ministers at the Executive, Members of the House and, indeed, the wider public with regard to the measures that are put in place.

In closing, I will turn to the issue of health; the most important issue of all. I recognise the huge pressure on the Department of Health and the financial allocations that have been made to it in this Budget and others. I think that £600 million was set aside for Health. The impact of COVID on managing staffing pressures throughout the Health ecosystem in Northern Ireland is going to be incredibly critical in the

days ahead. Craigavon Area Hospital has 500 staff who are out of the system when it is facing its busiest period. I welcome additional funding allocations to try to address those pressures.

I want to talk about non-COVID services and, sadly, non-COVID deaths, which this Budget will have to take into consideration in the days ahead. I read in a paper this morning that the Office for National Statistics reported a surge in non-COVID deaths in England: diabetic deaths are up by 86%; prostate cancer deaths are up by 53%; breast cancer deaths are up by 47%; Parkinson's disease deaths are up by 79%; and bowel cancer deaths are up by 46%. Never mind the potential impact on our health service from dealing with COVID, the significant allocation from this Budget to Health will also have to realise the pressures that are facing non-COVID services. COVID kills but so does lockdown. We need the data for Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Buckley: I am not a Minister, but I will happily give way. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Aiken: I do not know what is going on in your party, you could be. *[Laughter.]* I think Agriculture is looking for a new Minister.

I thank the Member for giving way. One of the questions that we should be considering is the 10 years of active underinvestment in our health service; the last decade. It takes more than 10 years to train an anaesthetist and more than seven years to train an ICU specialist. We must reflect on how we manage to depoliticise Health, going forward, because we have to invest in it. We cannot invent staff, and that is the critical shortcoming that we have.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way.

Dr Aiken: You gave way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Buckley: Yes, sorry. I thank the Member for his question. I will never shy away from the reality that faces the health service. The Member will have previous colleagues who served as Health Ministers in the last 10 years, as has my party and others. There has to be the realisation that we cannot play the health service like a political football. Equally, we must realise that the decisions that we make in this place have devastating knock-on impacts on people. GPs' face-to-face consultations are down by 92%. What have we missed in the system?

Mr O'Dowd: I appreciate the Member giving way. I have listened to several contributions from the Member today. He asked questions of the Health Minister, he made interventions when other Members were speaking, and, from my room, I listened to him talking about the response to COVID-19. He has spent considerable time telling us what we should not do. I agree with him that we have to learn to live with COVID. We have to create a situation in which our businesses and workers are protected, but our health service also has to be protected. Can the Member enlighten us as to what we should do?

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the Member to link his response to the Budget debate.

Mr Buckley: Absolutely, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for Upper Bann for his question. I must have been saying something right, because he ran from his room to the Chamber to listen to me speak. I am all for constituency support, but I did not expect it to come from the Member opposite. *[Laughter.]* I am not shirking from the fact that, in the wider debate, a balance must be struck. However, when making a speech in the Budget debate, it would be negligent of me not to highlight the impact on businesses. I have said it, and the Member for Upper Bann has said it: we have to learn to live with this virus. There are no easy solutions. However, as I said earlier, show the people the evidence and the data.

Tough decisions lie ahead for this place. We have been dealing with a health emergency; equally, we have an economic emergency. In the mouth of Christmas, people are asking where the money to pay their next bill will come from. It is up to this place — to the Finance Minister and his colleagues — to provide a sound economic footing for their future and a sound plan to deal with the pressures that we all know are coming.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the next Members who speak to ensure that their contribution is linked to the Budget. A Budget debate offers much latitude but, please, link your comments to the Budget.

Mr Durkan: After the inability of the last Executive to bring forward a Budget and three years of no government, when cut-and-paste Budgets were brought forward by civil servants with no political input, we all hoped that today's debate would be a much more optimistic affair.

However, these are incredibly challenging times for families and businesses across Northern Ireland. Our ability to use devolution to respond to the particular challenges facing us should be at the forefront of our minds as we debate this legislation today.

As the SDLP's social justice spokesperson, I will focus my remarks on our housing crisis, social security, the dire situation facing our arts, culture and sports sectors, and local government. We are in the grip of a housing crisis. A roof over your head is the basis for a healthy life and for cohesive policymaking. There are few areas of public and social policy that housing does not affect. It affects education, social security, the labour market and health. What chance has a child who has to do their homework in unsuitable, overcrowded and unfit housing, or a child who regularly has to flit between different homes in the private rented sector, to fulfil their full potential? The absolute minimum that the Executive should be able to guarantee to everyone in Northern Ireland is a warm, secure home. Yet, nearly 22,000 households in Northern Ireland are homeless, with the greatest number of those — some 2,732 — in my constituency of Foyle.

The Minister's party, Sinn Féin, recently launched a policy paper detailing ambitious proposals for 20,000 social and affordable homes. However, I hasten to add that the proposals are for 20,000 new homes in the Twenty-six Counties. The SDLP is pretty disappointed that the Finance Minister and his colleague the Minister for Communities, who has responsibility for housing, have not set out similar, or anywhere near as ambitious, plans for the North in this Budget. Instead, the social housing build target has been missed by almost 60%, and the 2021 social housing budget has decreased by £19 million on the previous year.

Our housing crisis needs a multifaceted solution. We urgently need more social housing built to house the thousands of people on the Housing Executive waiting list. The low number of social homes built has left many applicants languishing on the waiting list for years, and we all know them. We also need to support people who have no realistic prospect of securing social housing but who will also struggle to buy their own homes, which is why I welcome funding for co-ownership. It is one of the success stories in our housing landscape, and one that must be integral to any housing strategy going forward. It plays a vital role in helping lower earners to get their own homes and to leave the private rented sector and all the associated precariousness that can come with that.

Unsurprisingly, applications to the Co-ownership Housing Association have surged just as banks have reduced availability and are requiring up to 20% deposits in light of the pandemic. I recognise the Department's support, but I urge the Finance Minister to give the NI Co-ownership Housing Association and other housing associations the certainty of multi-year funding through financial transactions capital so that they can more easily navigate the peaks and troughs in our housing market. Given the economic situation that we will face in the coming months and, let us be realistic, coming years, banks will only become more cautious. That multi-year funding could give them the confidence to lend to Co-ownership and other associations. It would also have the knock-on effect of stimulating the construction industry and encouraging private developers to build more homes that come in under that £165,000 mark if they know that the co-ownership initiative will enable more people to purchase them. That can only be good for the wider economy.

On that point, I must draw attention to the severe budgetary pressures facing Northern Ireland Water, which is essential to any new homebuilding programme. The Infrastructure Minister made this plain: homebuilding is being inhibited by a huge strain on our water service, with a lethal combination of the pandemic now increasing water usage manyfold. Around 100 locations in the North are reaching, or have reached, maximum capacity. I note that a number of in-year allocations have been made to Northern Ireland Water, and they are very much welcome. However, those are just about meeting statutory requirements. It is vital for our economy and our communities that there is a long-term strategic approach to this crucial investment by the Finance Department and the Executive as a whole. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be sustained and significant investment in water, as it is the key to unlocking crucial housing and business development.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I support his call. I have no doubt of the future pressures facing NI Water and our infrastructure system, but will he agree with me that it is equally incumbent on the Finance Minister to look at the problems facing legacy developments because of a lack of investment in NI Water? We have a number of developments right across Northern Ireland that have been standing incomplete for some 10 years because of a historical lack of funding.

Mr Durkan: Absolutely. I do not want to lay all the responsibility at the Finance Minister's door,

but, obviously, it is the Budget debate and he is the Minister who is here.

Future funding determined by the regulator says that more than £2 billion is needed. Will the Minister commit to approving the investments to the right levels to ensure that water is on a sustainable footing for the longer term and avoid, as Mr Buckley said, the delay of future projects and the decay of existing services?

I will return to housing. As well as helping people to get on the housing ladder, it is vital that we help people to stay on it. There is no sugar-coating the effect that the pandemic has had, and will continue to have, on our economy and job market. We are likely to see many, many families struggling to pay their mortgages, and sadly, inevitably, we will see repossessions. That is devastating for families and puts even more strain on our already overburdened, drowning housing sector. Serious consideration must be given to a mortgage relief scheme. I recognise that the bulk of the Budget would have been prepared in the early days of lockdown, but, knowing what we now know, the need to look at such a scheme is blatantly obvious.

As I said, there are few policy areas that do not dovetail with housing policy, and chief amongst them is social security provision, which is the second area of the Budget that I want to touch upon. When the Minister's party joined the DUP in voting to hand our welfare powers over to the Tory Government that Mr McHugh has decried, it promised that no social housing tenant would be affected by the bedroom tax. Indeed, in February, the now Communities Minister took credit for Sinn Féin "binning the bedroom tax". Yet, in response to my question for written answer last week, she confirmed that there are 227 households being hit with that punitive measure.

The New Decade, New Approach deal set out a commitment to review welfare mitigations and agree new measures before March 2020 — it is now October 2020 — when the existing package was due to expire. Of course, events overtook us, and the only option has been to extend the current scheme under regulations. However, it is vital that primary legislation be laid before the Assembly as soon as possible for us as MLAs and, indeed, stakeholders, to scrutinise, alongside the funding commitments and requirements. If any questions about or criticisms of last-minute accelerated passage are met with accusations of trying to sabotage the legislation or trying to sabotage mitigations, those will be seen through and dismissed.

I sympathise with the Communities Minister's explanation to the Committee that responding to the pandemic has dominated her Department's workload, and I commend her in her dedication to addressing the plethora of issues as they have arisen. I urge her, however, to recognise that this legislation will be part of that response. The latest figures show that there were an additional 89,250 universal credit claims between March and July of this year. As the current incarnation of the furlough scheme ends, and as our businesses face the double challenge of the pandemic and leaving the EU, the Economy Minister has estimated that up to 100,000 people will be unemployed, while the Communities Minister envisages a worst-case scenario of up to 125,000 claimants. Families will badly need an extension of the current mitigations, but the rise in new applicants highlights even more starkly the gaps in the current package: the five-week wait; the two-child tax credit rule; and the benefit cap. People receiving those benefits, and those making their applications now and in the coming months, need the certainty and assurance that they will be protected against the sort of system that the UK Tory Government would impose upon them.

In order to deal with the anticipated avalanche of people requiring that support, DFC has identified the need for 1,400 new posts, but it is only getting funded for 900. There is no capital bid associated with it, because, apparently, capacity exists in the Northern Ireland Civil Service estate to accommodate those new workers. I do not know whether that takes into account social distancing. I would like to know where they will be based, and, Minister, please do not say, "Belfast". Government must take this, and every, opportunity to decentralise and to tackle ongoing regional imbalance.

I turn now to our arts and culture sector, which has been uniquely affected by the pandemic and the regulations.

I welcome the original £4 million and, indeed, the more recent £29 million that was allocated as a result of Barnett consequentials, but, given the delay in the announcement of that second tranche, it is vital that that money gets out to the affected industries and individuals without delay. I was glad to read in the paper today that that is happening at last. They must be supported not just throughout this circuit breaker but beyond. Mr Buckley described COVID-19 as a "disruptor", but we have to do everything across every sector to make sure that it does not become a destroyer.

4.30 pm

These people and these industries cannot simply press pause. It is not just the livelihoods of the thousands of artists, performers, sound engineers and set designers and such that the industries employ that are at risk. When they go, whether it is into unemployment or, if they follow the Chancellor's "Let them eat cake" advice, to retrain, many of the aspects that we all miss so much during the pandemic — going to concerts, to the theatre or to museums — will not be there when we overcome the pandemic, and we will overcome the pandemic. It is incumbent on the Minister for Communities and the Executive not only to ensure that those people get the financial support that they need from the Executive but to support them to adapt to the regulations, for as long as they exist, to allow them to continue, whether that is through live streaming or using venues for other purposes in the interim to supplement income.

Our sports sector is struggling, from our elite sportsmen, sportswomen and clubs down to the grassroots. Sports clubs and activities play such an integral role in all our communities and in the development of our children as well as in our own physical and mental well-being. Sponsors have been hit very hard, and restrictions on attendances deprive clubs of much-needed revenue and supporters of the pleasure and, in some cases, the pain of getting in to support and cheer on their team, whatever their sporting code. Perhaps, as a suggestion, Northern Ireland's share of the revenue generated through the sugar tax or the soft drink levy, which has been hovering at around £12 million, I think, in Barnett consequentials over the past few years, could be invested in sports, which do so much to promote healthy living and to tackle obesity and the associated problems.

Local government is on its knees too. We need to work more closely with councils to ensure that they have the capacity and the financial wherewithal to carry out their vital services and support communities.

None of us doubt the difficulties ahead, but now is the time to front-load support and to provide protection against the looming economic carnage. We must invest in our communities to offset the worst of this fallout and to prevent the problems that we can see coming down the track. Our constituents will demand no less, and our constituents deserve no less.

Mr Frew: I have sat in for most if not all the debate today, and some valid points have been made. There has been some rough and tumble,

as you would expect. I will try to be the voice of reason, as I always am.

This is an important Bill. Anybody with any experience here has seen Budget Bill after Budget Bill, and there is a tendency to take them lightly, but it is fundamental to the governance of this place that finances are placed in the correct columns and for the correct Departments and that, when that money gets to those Departments, it is used in the appropriate way. Scrutiny of a Budget Bill and a process are vital, but it does not start and end in the Chamber. It is vital that our scrutiny Committees get to see the information that they need to see in order to do their job right at an early stage and then to support and advise their Department on how that revenue should be spent. Scrutiny Committees are very useful things, not just for scrutiny but for advice and support. Believe me: our Departments need all the help that they can get.

The Estimates are published, and we go through them here. The Finance Committee does its part. There will be sufficient dialogue and scrutiny there. Then, at last, we get a Budget Bill on the Floor. A Budget Bill is treated differently from any other Bill — most other Bills, anyway — in that, in most cases, it is given accelerated passage. I want to put a marker down — the Chairperson of the Finance Committee suggested this earlier — that no Minister or official in any Department, not least the Finance Minister and his Department, should ever take it lightly or for granted that the Finance Committee, whoever populates those chairs and benches, will give accelerated passage to a Budget Bill as a matter of course. If departmental officials fall into that trap, they may well get a rude awakening some day, because, during my time on the Finance Committee, I have been less than impressed by what I have witnessed of the engagement and information flow that goes from the Department to the Committee. There will be many things that we will miss and many that we do not request, but, when we request information, the fact that we do not get it, that there is delay or that we have to put in the same request over and over again, which is then treated as multiple requests — as if that would get them off the hook for the late delivery of documents and emails — is not good enough. Let it go out loud and clear from the House: no official should take for granted the accelerated passage of a finance Bill. We do it for the greater good, but, some day, the balance of greater good might tip and it might not be for the greater good any more to allow a finance Bill to go through without proper Finance Committee scrutiny, like the scrutiny that we

give to every clause of every other Bill that goes through the House. I put that marker down.

Again, even this week, the Finance Committee asked questions about authority. As the Committee Chairperson stated, we saw a scramble whereby authorisation was given at late notice and after we had requested to see the authorisations. It is clear that not all is well in the Finance Department. I have no reason to believe that it is working tickety-boo in any of the other Departments either. There is a lot to learn and a lot for those of us on Committees to scrutinise.

The Bill is the Budget (No. 3) Bill. The title itself sends a signal that we are not in normal times. These are strange times. I suppose that I have a certain sympathy for the Department and the Minister over the massive influx of moneys into the centre that have to be distributed to Departments. I have a lot of sympathy for the fact that the Finance Minister, along with others in the Executive, has been fighting a crisis on many fronts, not least COVID, and there is a lot of uncertainty, which increases the crisis and escalates the emergencies that we all face. Therefore, I have a certain sympathy for everyone who is mixed up in that process and has to work in it.

I see the blue pages, and may I say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is great that the Bill Office is starting to publish Bills again? Imagine a legislature that was not even publishing Bills. It is an absolute disgrace, if you ask me. It is good to have a Bill in your hand. In the Bill, I see figures; I see big figures. I see where there has been a massive increase for some Departments, where it is needed, and I see less of an increase in others, where it is not needed. Of course, that is good, because we need that money. That money has been drawn down from Barnett consequentials, and it is good that we can get money directed to help to fund the support schemes.

Today, we are approving additional spends and flexibilities to finance the support schemes and so on, but it is also to ensure that Departments do not run out of money. Some Departments are getting dangerously close to doing that. That is why we are at the Budget (No. 3) Bill and why we have had to have a couple of such processes in-year. I understand that. However, today is also giving approval to do the same thing over and over again. It is doing the same thing, and it is giving approval to carry on, to carry on like the greatest 'Carry On' movies, but this one is not funny. There is no strategic thought here whatever. We are in the midst of a crisis and an emergency — we are being forged

by fire — but we think that we can do the same thing over and over again.

We are thankful for the massive lump of Barnett consequential money: it was £2.4 billion, I think, at the last count. It has been invested in schemes that we required, but we cannot even spend all of it. We are sitting with, I think, £55 million in the centre, and we have £600 million going to the health service. We cannot spend that money, and we cannot maximise borrowing. We cannot even spend or draw down the financial transactions money that is there for us. If everything was running smoothly, you could argue that we did not need the financial transactions money, but look at the crisis in COVID. Beyond that, look at the crises in housing, in NI Water and in Translink, and look at the support required for businesses and sports clubs. I could go on. We have an inability to spend money that is there for us to spend, so who are we letting down? We are letting down the people of Northern Ireland. That is where the buck stops. That is who feels the impact. The Executive are failing those people.

The Member from the party opposite talks about Tory austerity: how much more money do we need to prove that we are not very good at spending it? We have £2.4 billion, but we cannot even spend all of that money, which we surely need. The Member talks about more fiscal power. Why should we have more fiscal power when we cannot handle the money that is given to us here and now? Why would we need more fiscal power if we cannot spend the money that is coming down from Barnett consequentials? Why should we need more fiscal power when we keep doing the same thing over and over again, year in, year out, and when we do not have any creative thoughts on how we could spend our money more efficiently?

The party opposite has not made a hard fiscal decision yet. It has never brought forward a live Budget for the following year. We are still waiting. How does the Member think we should get more fiscal power? It is bizarre. Why would we put that pressure on a Finance Minister? Should we really have tax-varying powers? "What way would the taxes go?", I wonder, Who would it impact on most? How would the money that we raise through tax-varying powers be spent? Would we spend it on doing the same thing over and over again, like we do every year?

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will, yes.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: The Member's comments on the ability of the system to spend money are valid. It is something that the Executive and the Civil Service need to tackle, because getting money out the door to spend is a vital part of what we do.

When talking about fiscal powers, the Member used the example of the money that we got from the Barnett consequentials but cannot spend. One of the difficulties with getting money in-year is that it is very difficult to spend, because you do not have the schemes, operations or staff in place to do so. If you have fiscal powers, you can plan for the long term. You can plan your monetary outworkings.

I will finish on this point: how would the money be spent and the tax raised? The Assembly would decide. Have a bit of faith in yourself as well as in others.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is a good and valid point, and there is a good fiscal debate to be had on that. Would it not be better, however, to go to a multi-year Budget plan than to have tax-varying powers? At least you would then have the scope, space and time in which to spend money effectively and efficiently.

I take the Member's point, however, and it is something that I do grapple with. I know that the Member who made the intervention will grapple with it as well. Yes, let us see how we can do things better. He mentioned the Assembly, but look at the way in which the Executive work. The Executive work on how they spend money. The Finance Minister has said over and over again that he is waiting for bids and that he cannot spend money until he sees those bids. The Departments are saying, "It's not my place to bid. It's somebody else's place to bid". Another Minister says, "No, it's your place to bid". There we go on that merry-go-round.

I am not blaming the Finance Minister for that, by the way, but there has to be a more strategic layout of how the Executive work a Budget and how Departments then bid mid-term and even in monitoring rounds. We see it every time. There is failure upon failure, and we keep doing the same thing not only in the Budget process but in the way in which we spend money. Sooner or later, whether it is me or you or some other Member, party, grouping or Committee, we need to stop the cycle. We need to get off the merry-go-round and do things differently.

We need to make decisions that will result in money being spent efficiently, and I just do not see it happening. It has been a long time since I have seen it, to be honest, and that needs to change.

A good lot of the money in this Budget is having to go, and should be going, to the Department of Health. Let me therefore pay tribute to the nurses and the other people who are at the coalface of this emergency as we speak. Let us think about the grievous shifts and long hours that they are putting in, the horrific sights that they see and the bad news stories that they face daily. No one in the House can fathom what they are going through. Some of us have experience in a care setting, including my colleague Paula Bradley. I am sure that those Members think at night about the horrendous situation that our healthcare workers find themselves in daily. We must do everything that we can to prevent the spread of this disease, to take the burden off the health service in other ways and to make sure that it has the money in this Budget that it requires.

Sometimes, in the heat of battle, forged in fire, out of necessity we can become a different animal on a different plane. That is where our health service needs to get to very quickly. It is not the people who work in the health service who will fail us. They never do. It is the system in which they work that fails the staff. It has to become a different animal. It has to be on a different plane. Sometimes, in the heat of battle, forged in fire, is the only time, through necessity, that that can happen, and it needs to happen. Have we the leadership to do that?

A total of £600 million is set aside for the health service, with £55 million of that still sitting at the centre. Woe betide any Department that hands back money at the end of this financial year, because the people will ask why. They will ask why we are giving money back when we desperately needed it in our Departments.

I get it when the Health Minister says that he cannot just magic up staff, facilities, buildings or equipment. However, I wonder if the Health Minister is going to spend all the money that he receives and if it is not going to go back to the centre at the end of this financial year. I wonder whether there are any other Departments that should have got, and could have spent, that money. I know that there are Departments that may not need the money either, because they have stopped doing some worthwhile things, and that is also criminal. I make this plea: where is our strategic vision? Where is it being displayed that we are doing things differently,

more efficiently and with more agility? Where is it? Can we see it?

Not only are the Executive not supporting business and communities at this time, they are working against them. We have an anti-sports Minister. We have an anti-arts Minister. We have a Communities Minister —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I draw the Member back to the Budget Bill, which we are debating.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In this Budget, the Department for Communities is being funded to support vulnerable people who need oral hearings and tribunals for the employment and support allowance (ESA) and personal independent payment (PIP). Some of those people have been refused tribunal hearings, which has knocked their benefits off. Some people have received no benefits for months because they cannot get to an oral hearing. That is a disgrace. It affects the most vulnerable in our society: the people who have ill health and the people who cannot work. Those people have been let down.

We have an Infrastructure Minister who, it seems, did not want to furlough Translink staff to help that company to have the agility to operate efficiently through this crisis. In this Budget Bill, there is money going to Translink. There is a further request for more money to go to Translink. Is that money being spent well? Is it being spent efficiently? Is there not a better way to operate Translink through this crisis than by throwing money at it like that?

We have swathes of people and businesses that, it seems, we cannot support in this Budget, yet we are able to shut them down within hours and turn off their supply chain and their custom. It is simply not good enough. We had a junior Minister saying on the radio, last week, that driving instructors could continue to work. Two days later, they were told that they could not and would have to stop. How can anyone operate a business with an Executive that change their mind day in, day out and that, even before they have drafted the regulations, have changed their minds twice or thrice? It cannot continue.

Earlier, a Member opposite asked my colleague Mr Buckley for solutions. Of course, we do not have all the information that the Executive have, but we have met the Chief Medical Officer. Even after meeting him, I have yet to see the evidence for picking on some sectors as we have. As for solutions, I point Members in

the direction of the three-point plan that 23 business organisations launched today with regard to information, messaging, confidence and support. It should say all of that in this Budget. It should be transparent, and it should have information. It should have people's confidence and support. I do not see that it has much of any of that.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that information is paramount in the budgetary process? Information feeds into the process where relief is needed and where it should not be provided. Therefore, the lack of data, to which you referred, should be every bit as important to the Finance Minister as it is to the Health Minister. Unfortunately, we are not seeing that.

Mr Frew: Yes. The Member makes a valid and correct point. How can we ever think strategically if we do not have the information at hand to make these tough decisions? We do not have it. The data presented to me by the Chief Medical Officer does not tell me where the disease was transmitted or in which venues. We cannot proceed like this. We cannot keep throwing a dart at a dartboard while blindfolded. That is just not the way to do government. It is just not the way to proceed. The Budget Bill refers to none of that.

I will give credit where credit is due. Today, a chart from the Republic of Ireland has been circulating, and it shows the very information that we are talking about. It shows that the transmission of the virus has taken place in households, retail, sporting venues, pubs, bars and restaurants, and it displays that information in the form of a long chart.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Dr Aiken: For clarity, if the Member and other Members cared to check www.health-ni.gov.uk and the detailed evidence papers that are available online, they would realise that that information is now available. I thank the Health Minister for allowing that to be published. I also thank the members of the Northern Ireland Executive, whose decision it was to put that information out there.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his timely intervention. I would love to know from the Member — I will give way to him again if he can tell us — what date that was published.

Dr Aiken: Just today.

Mr Frew: Just today. That sort of proves my point about the Budget Bill that we are debating today.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes.

Dr Aiken: I do not want to chunter from a sedentary position, because I have already been told off for that today. The papers were within the purview of the Executive — the deputy First Minister and First Minister in particular — and it was up to them to decide whether they should be released. The Health Minister has made it very clear that he was more than happy to release the papers and has been for some considerable time. I am glad that the First and deputy First Ministers have decided to allow that information to go out.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, it is not like the Member to point the finger at other Ministers. He has made a very good and valuable intervention, and I welcome it. I welcome getting as much information out there as possible. I will take considerable time to go over it in great detail to see whether I can somehow link the information that is now displayed with the decisions that the Executive made last week. I want to see how they came about. I want to see the linkage to that information. I look forward to looking at that in great detail.

Make no mistake about it: our people are experiencing a lockdown. People have talked about it as a circuit breaker. I am a spark by trade, and I know what a circuit breaker is. A circuit breaker is a useful thing. It is there to save people's lives. If you are hanging on to the power and in danger of being electrocuted, it turns off the power. If you have a damaged piece of equipment, a circuit breaker turns it off so that it does not cause a fire. A circuit breaker is very important. This is not a circuit breaker; this is a lockdown. It is a lockdown because our economy is an ecosystem. If you close down one part of our economy, it affects it all. When it comes to the economy, there is no such thing as a partial lockdown. What we cannot do is to have lockdown after lockdown after lockdown. It is simply unsustainable.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): May I request, again, that the Member come back to the Budget?

Mr Frew: In the Budget Bill, we should have a strategy to counter this emergency. It is the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

This Budget really took hold last April, and yet here we are, in October, and we still have no evidence on paper of how we are dealing with the emergency properly.

Are we at the stage where our only strategy is lockdown? The first time we locked down, we had financial might. We had Barnett consequential money, and we were able to fund the business support schemes and the various aspects of that. We were able to give the rates holiday, which was very important and was a game changer, and we were able to use and avail ourselves of the furlough scheme, which was important. Those measures are now not in play. The rates holiday is a good thing for the full year, but those businesses have no more reserves or capacity left, and you are asking them to immediately shut down without putting any package of support in place. The only package of support that has been put in place by the Finance Minister just will not cut it. It is just not enough, and it is based on the rate base. There are so many other businesses that will not be able to avail themselves of it, and it is simply not enough.

5.00 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will give away, yes.

Mr Wells: The Member should know that, as long as he includes the word "budget" in every sentence of his contribution, he will not catch the ear of the Deputy Speaker and will be able to continue regardless.

Speaking about the Budget, will the Member accept that there are many businesses in Northern Ireland that, unfortunately, have had to close but are not on the list of those that have been told to close? Typical examples of that are ferry operators and dog kennel owners: they cannot survive in the absence of other aspects of the economy. They have to close, but, because they are not on the list, they do not get a penny.

Mr Frew: The Member makes a valid point. It goes back to my ecosystem point about the economy: if you close down one part of the economy, you affect it all, and you affect more of it to varying degrees. The Member is right. Applying a strategy of "Lockdown, release and repeat" is no strategy at all. It will lead to ill

health, ruined lives, destroyed businesses and wrecked livelihoods. Doing it without just and timely financial support is unforgivable, and we should have seen that financial support in the Budget Bill.

In 2020, hotels will sell one million fewer rooms than they sold in 2019, and each day of closure will see a further 7,000 bedrooms slip away, with a loss of around £50,000 per night to the local economy. That does not take into account the loss of food and beverage sales, conference income or the moneys generated from weddings. How will they survive a second lockdown without any financial support? There are businesses that have contacted me over the last few days, and not one of them is in good shape. There is nothing in the Budget (No. 3) Bill that will give them any comfort: none whatever.

Coffee shops and restaurants within wider retail units or golf clubs have had to close: where do they stand? They cannot avail themselves of the rates-based scheme, for the little amount that it is worth. We had a junior Minister who said that driving instructors could carry on: two days later, they were told to close. That cannot keep going on. Personal trainers are reduced to one person at a time and do not have a commercial base: how does the Budget support them? Do you know the way that we used to talk about entrepreneurs and how we would encourage them, how we would help them on and how this country would be built on entrepreneurs? One girl who I was talking to today had turned her garage into a studio for skincare: she has no capacity or funding left. She is left high and dry and has been told to close nearly immediately. She gets no support, and there is no sign of any support.

Look at the money that hairdressers have spent on their premises. It probably does not range into the thousands, but it is certainly in the hundreds. The problem is that they have no more savings or capacity left because of the first lockdown. Yet they have been told to shut down, even though they have implemented all the safety gear and safety apparatus and with all of the measures that they have put in place. There is nothing in the Budget (No. 3) Bill for them. It is not even about what a hairdresser does — hairdressers do many things — but they might be the only point of contact for a vulnerable elderly person who gets their hair done once a week, once a day or every other day. That is the only contact that that vulnerable elderly person, who is isolated in their home, gets. Where is the support in the Budget (No. 3) Bill for the vulnerable people living at home and sometimes shielding? It is non-existent.

There is a lady who provides a service and space for disabled kids and their parents, a sensory room. It is a good, cutting-edge business. It is entrepreneurial, but it provides a dedicated service for disabled children and their parents and much-needed respite. All the equipment is in the room, and the kids have great fun with their parents out of the house, where all the pressure comes. For that business owner and those disabled children and their parents, where is the support in the Budget (No. 3) Bill?

I could go on. Soft-play areas thought that they would close. They have not, but can they really open safely when all the businesses around them are closing? It may be only a matter of days until they have to close too. If they close and do not get support, will the Budget (No. 3) Bill support them? Will the Finance Minister or the Executive put in place a package to support them? I have seen nothing yet. All I have seen is confusion.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. Does he accept that the Economy Minister also has responsibility for bringing forward proposals for some of the businesses that he has highlighted?

Mr Frew: Yes, I acknowledge that. That is why I go back to my point about a strategic thought and process. This is not the way to do government in a crisis. The Finance Minister took a collective decision, with the Executive, to close businesses without having information about the impact of that decision to hand. Ministers scurried about for days afterwards seeking clarification of the impact on businesses. That is no way to make a decision. Making that decision without the financial support and mechanisms in place to back it up —

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mr Muir: Does the Member accept that the regulations that he refers to, which have had a financial impact on our public finances and businesses, were made by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and could have been made in a much more timely manner?

Mr Frew: I am not sure what point the Member makes. I will let him make another intervention if he needs to. We have been told clearly, even by the First Minister, that it was a decision of

the Executive, a decision by the Executive to bring in the measures last Tuesday.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Again, Members, this is not a debate about the measures; this is the Budget debate.

Mr Frew: Thank you for your guidance. I get waylaid by the Members around me. It is terrible.

I conclude by saying this: we must do much more and do far better. The Member across the way made an intervention that I did not get a chance to respond to. This has to be a strategic thought process that works in quick time, aligned with the emergencies that we face. There is no way that we can justify closing down branches of the economy that affect all of the economy without having in place a strategic plan to fund and support those businesses. Even if we had a programme that had not been launched, it would not be so bad, but the fact that we do not have a programme is criminal. Allowing businesses, entrepreneurs, business owners and employers to fall by the wayside like that is not correct, it is not right, and it is no way to do government.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill will be passed. There may be some shouts from the corner, but it will be passed. We have yet to see a draft Budget for the next financial year. That will have to include measures because COVID-19 will not be done by then; it will not be finished. We will still have a crisis in housing and in welfare, and we will still have all the other crises, such as those in NI Water or Translink and all that. We have not yet seen a Budget for that year, and we need to see it soon. If we do not, how will Committees, the Finance Committee included, do their work? How will we consult the public so that they can inject their thoughts into the Budget process? It is simply not good enough to allow the drift to carry on at the heart of government in Northern Ireland. The Executive and the Finance Minister must do much better.

Mr Nesbitt: I did not intend to speak today, because I spoke in yesterday's financial debate. I made, I think, three points, all of which the Minister acknowledged positively, and I am grateful to him for that.

I was listening to the debate up to Question Time, and I had two issues with it, the first of which was the tone of some of the contributions and exchanges. If there is a public mood, I think that we missed it by a country mile. The second issue is that it seems that the debate on the

Budget (No. 3) Bill is not being joined up to the other aspects of Executive government.

I will not argue that money is not tight or that we could not use a lot more, but we are talking about a lot of money. Once we go beyond tens and hundreds of millions and into billions of pounds, people find it hard to understand or to contextualise it. If we had that money in cash in £20 notes, would it fill the Chamber? Would we need the Great Hall? I have no idea. It is a lot of money, and the question is this: how do we agree that we are spending it to best effect? That is difficult. If you are running a business, it is relatively easy. Your board of directors will tell you your purpose in two words: "Make money". You minimise the amount of money that you spend, and you maximise the amount of money that you invoice: that is called profit. But what is the profit that the Budget Bill aims to achieve?

When I came here, I had worked in the private sector for quite a long time, and what surprised me was the lack of focus on outcomes. It was all about doing stuff. It was all about inputs and spending budgets, but there was little focus on what we were achieving. I will give you an example. We have what we call "super output areas" — in other words, we measure communities in terms of poverty, dereliction and deprivation — and we draw up league tables. We then, quite rightly, put resource and funding into those areas. Over the 20 years of devolution, there are some areas in the top 10 areas of deprivation that have had tens of millions; in fact, there may be one that has had over £100 million. Guess what: it is still in the top 10 on the league table. Does that not tell us something? Does that not tell us that what we are doing is not achieving the outcome that we were trying to achieve?

The problem is that we are debating the Budget (No. 3) Bill without a Programme for Government, which is the measure of success. The draft Programme for Government for 2016-2021 was published four and a half years ago on 26 May 2016 and is still not agreed. It was a marvellous document, because it put a focus on outcomes. It said that we were going to stop just doing stuff and go forward with what we were calling an "outcome-based accountability" approach.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Frew: The Member makes a valid point, which I omitted to mention in my speech, about

the Programme for Government. The beauty of the Programme for Government, with its outcomes-based design, is that it wedded Departments together to complete outcomes. Without an outcomes-based Programme for Government, those Departments drift apart.

5.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree totally. There is no point in pointing the finger at the Minister of Finance, the permanent secretary or her staff at the Department of Finance or anybody else in government if we are not operating that joined-up approach. I have previously used the example of educational underachievement. Traditionally, what we do is to point the finger at the Minister of Education and say, "That is your problem. You have to fix it". We know that healthier children will do better at school, so the Minister of Health has a role to play. We know that children in better housing conditions are more likely to do better at school, so suddenly the Minister for Communities has something to say. There are three Ministers. You could make the argument that every Minister in the Executive has a role to play and that the Minister of Education is only the lead in that effort. We are making an effort. The Minister and his staff work hard.

Interestingly, the man who devised outcomes-based accountability (OBA), Mark Friedman, identified why that is not good enough by writing a book entitled 'Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough'. We can all try hard but fail to achieve the outcomes that we want to achieve.

Let me refer you to the Hansard report of a meeting on 11 October 2016 when Mark Friedman came here and presented to the then Committee for the Executive Office. He brought some colleagues with him, including an American consultant called Phil Lee. He gave us the example of a community with a population of one million people and how, before OBA, the Departments of the Government all did the same thing: they lobbied for money and resource. After OBA, they hit a point at which the Government said, "We need a bit of austerity here. Everybody needs to take a haircut on their finances". Six public health and safety agencies, courts and jails etc got together. They had been told the overall figure that they had to cut and how it was to be cut. They went away, sat down together and had a discussion. They went back to the Government and said, "We are going to cut the overall amount that you want us to cut, but we want to do it differently". Five of the six agencies took an even bigger cut than they had been asked to

take so that they could reinstate a programme that worked in the jail system. They all realised that it worked so well that they all benefited from it. As Phil Lee told us, instead of hoarding resources or lobbying for their own piece, they stepped back and saw the bigger picture. They realised that this was the right thing and the best thing to do.

We have had devolution for 20 years, but we are nowhere near that level of maturity yet, are we? When we look at the Budget (No. 3) Bill, it is not only a question of how we intend to spend the money but a question of whether we are spending it on the right things. It is not just about whether we are delivering government programmes as promised but about whether those programmes are the right ones to deliver. Under OBA, we have promised that we might be going out to community groups and to the voluntary and community sector that are delivering a programme for us and saying, "Our monitoring and evaluation says that this is not working, so I am very sorry, but we are stopping your funding". That could apply to a community group in your constituency that you have been photographed with for your local paper and quoted as saying that it is doing a great job. Do we have the courage to do that, because that is what we committed to in 2016?

We have committed to a lot of things that we have not delivered on. We are not joined up. How deeply ironic it is that we are not joined up when 84 of the 90 Members of the House are aligned to parties that are members of the Northern Ireland Executive. Our equivalent of 10 Downing Street or Government Buildings is Stormont Castle down the hill, but there is a big difference. Downing Street is for one man: a Prime Minister. Government Buildings is for one politician: an Taoiseach. Stormont Castle is for two politicians: the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Yet woe betide anybody who says that you should use your single transferable vote to express an opinion about who you want to be First Minister and who you want to be deputy First Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the Member to come back to the Budget Bill.

Mr Nesbitt: I will, but I am trying to make a point, Deputy Speaker, about how the Budget Bill relates to the governance that we signed up to in 1998. The point is that you can be rivals in an election, but, once the votes are counted, you are supposed to be partners. There has been no sign of partnership working in this debate. I think that people expect us to get over ourselves, not to reduce a global pandemic to a sectarian headcount.

A mile or less from here, if we go out on to Stoney Road, we end up at the Ulster Hospital, where, in the maternity unit, I suggest that at least one child is being born as we speak. I hope that that child never watches this morning's debate or any other debate until we learn to be the partners whom we committed to being in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and we focus on spending the money in this Budget Bill in a way that will improve the lives of those newborn babies.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will finish by going back to 1998 and what the parties to the agreement said:

"The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.

We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships".

That is the leadership that we are expected to offer from this House. I regret that we did not live up to that at times during this debate.

Mr McNulty: I begin by passing on my condolences to the families of the 16 people who have, sadly, passed away with COVID on this island over the past day.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate. As legislators, we have a number of key roles, including to shape public policy and public spending and to scrutinise the implementation of that public policy and spending by Departments, public and arm's-length bodies.

I will focus my remarks on a number of areas. I am a member of the Education Committee and SDLP spokesperson on sport and public health. I will also refer to Brexit and the COVID pandemic and how we, as an island, respond and build our way out of it.

Nelson Mandela said:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

That quote encompasses everything that we need to understand about education and the way in which we should approach everything that we do in life. We often hear in this place and beyond that we have one of the best educational systems in the world. I am sorry to say that I do not believe that. Just ask any parent of a child with special educational needs who has been failed by our system. They have to fight for every little bit of additional help and support that they can get, be that literacy support, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or emotional support. They wait too long for a diagnosis, and then, when a statement of special educational needs is eventually produced, it takes too long to put in place the support that is needed. Children are being failed.

There are also children in disadvantaged areas who, during the pandemic, are struggling to cope. Homeschooling has been difficult. The Executive have had to supply electronic equipment to allow some children to continue their education at home. However, that is a societal issue. Although I welcome the Education Minister's efforts to raise standards, particularly for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, we must recognise that educational underachievement and disadvantage, just like COVID-19, does not discriminate on the grounds of religious or political background. We need to build capacity, resilience and ambition for all our communities.

Our school estate is in dire need of real investment. Too many children are being taught in substandard facilities. How can we really aspire to deliver a world-class education system if we expect teachers and school leaders to work in cramped and outdated accommodation?

Teachers got their just pay rise this year, but we really need to do much more. We have all witnessed how flexible and adaptable teachers and schools have been, upskilling and adopting new approaches as they switched to remote and blended learning.

As we hopefully move from lockdown back to a new normal, we need to address the impact on people of school closures and periods of isolation from school and communities. We need to see a proactive approach taken to an education catch-up programme, but we also must address mental health and well-being. If we fail to address the issues of emotional health and well-being, our society will suffer the consequences of COVID long after a vaccine is found.

We are in difficult times. Businesses are closed, and we do not know what further restrictions may or may not be imposed in the times ahead. If we are to see an economic recovery, however, we need to ensure that businesses are retained and supported through these difficult times. Although the support announced by the Minister this week for businesses impacted on by their having to close is a good start, it is nothing more than that. We need to have more support for those closed and restricted businesses and, indeed, for those who have not had any support as yet, after more than six months, such as mobile or work-from-home hairdressers and beauticians; those in the arts and entertainment sector; those in the bus, coach and transport sector; those who work in gyms; those who work in retail and in hospitality; and the self-employed. Too many businesses, individuals and families do not know where the next pay cheque will come from.

Let there be no more fumbling about in the dark, no more dilly-dallying by Ministers and no more passing the buck. We saw the Economy Minister abdicate her responsibility for the bus, coach and taxi industry. Other attack dogs in this place pointed the finger at Minister Mallon for months, only for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to intervene. For the First Ministers to intervene —.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate for the Member to refer —?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. During points of order, Members should take their seats.

Mr O'Dowd: Is it appropriate for the Member to refer to MLAs as "attack dogs"?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Sorry. Can you repeat that, please? I did not pick it up.

Mr O'Dowd: Is it appropriate for the Member to refer to MLAs as "attack dogs"? He said:

"Other attack dogs in this place".

The only people in this place are MLAs.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): In the course of debate, much language is used. I will review the setting of the words and ask the Speaker's Office to comment.

I ask Mr McNulty to continue.

Mr McNulty: The First Minister and the deputy First Minister then intervened and stripped the Economy Department of the powers and handed them to the Infrastructure Minister. What will be the cost of that delay to the bus and coach operator industry?

I was always told to be careful if you point the finger, because there are always three pointing back at you. In all seriousness, we need to see every Department, led by the Executive Office, plan our way out of this pandemic, from Health through to Education and the Economy, and even Communities through sport.

Our health service had changed and adapted. Society has learnt to value like never before the work of our healthcare staff in hospitals, in care homes and in the community. Where would we be without our healthcare workers? We have all learnt the true meaning of saying, "Your health is your wealth". Among all the clapping and applauding of our healthcare staff, it is forgotten that it took the nurses taking to our streets earlier this year to get this place back up and running.

The Health Minister has performed admirably throughout this period, but if we are serious about valuing our health service, we need to see it transformed. We need services to be available to those who need them and available where they need them, and we need to see specialist services delivered outside the outer ring of Belfast. We need to see all-island specialties developed without delay, especially for cancer services.

As someone who has been steeped in sport all my life, I value its importance, not just as a game but as a means of building a person, building character and building and binding communities. I was so delighted last night to hear that the restrictions announced in the South will not impact on our inter-county championship, which will continue. The importance of the GAA and sport to the national psyche was brilliantly encapsulated by David Brady, a Ballina man, and Colm O'Rourke, a Skryne man, on 'Claire Byrne Live' last night.

We have seen our sporting organisations right across this island and in every code step up when this society needed them most. They set up food banks. They provided support to the vulnerable in our communities, and they did so with joy in their hearts. They reached out beyond their communities.

Sports clubs and organisations have seen their revenues collapse. Most of those are amateur

sports, based in our communities, and they draw their financial support from our communities. They cannot fundraise, yet their costs continue. Support already given is welcome, but it needs to be much more if they are to survive.

5.30 pm

I plead with the Minister and the Executive to support sport. I would have loved nothing more — I am sure that the Minister is the same — to have been at the Athletic Grounds last Saturday night. However, not being at matches is a sacrifice worth paying for public health during this pandemic. Whilst the result was not what we wanted, sport, even from the sofa, gives a release and a sense of community that is good for people's emotional health and well-being. With sport — Gaelic games, rugby, soccer, horse racing — continuing, the national mood will be improved, and it will help brighten up the dark days of winter.

That brings me to Casement Park, Páirc Mhic Easmainn. I, like every other Gael across this island, was delighted when Minister Mallon approved the plans for the redevelopment of Casement Park last week. However, now the finances must follow, and I urge you, Minister and the Executive, to bring certainty and clarity to the revised financial support package on offer from the Executive. This is crucial for the delivery of the project, but also the jobs in construction that it will bring will be so important in the time ahead. Will the Finance Minister commit to ensure that the entire funding will be available to construct our stadium of dreams in Ulster?

Brexit is still on the horizon. We need the Executive to plan our way through COVID-19 and Brexit. A no-deal exit would be catastrophic for this place, especially for border constituencies like my own. I will not rehearse old arguments, only to say that I remain of the view that membership of the European Union was our best economic and social way forward, and to walk away was a foolish act of self-harm by Brexiteers.

"The European Union is the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution."

Words from my former leader John Hume, RIP. We cannot stand by and allow Brexit to destroy our economy and prosperity. I hope that Departments are making necessary preparations for what I still hope will be a deal. Our public services and economy have come

through a rough time in recent months. We need to build resilience and support for businesses, services and communities in the times ahead.

I support the Bill. I hope that the Assembly can live up to the expectations that our people had earlier this year when, at long last, it was rebooted.

Mr Wells: I have been in this Chamber 26 years today, so this is my 26th Budget, and I have to say that I have heard it all before. What we have had is a succession of MLAs using the Budget as a platform to pursue their particular pet projects, be it issues in their own constituency or a wider concern. What I have not heard this afternoon — it is rapidly becoming this evening — is anybody suggesting where the pot of gold is that we are going to obtain to fund all these demands. We, as an Assembly, have to be realistic and suggest that we must raise more money if we are going to fund additional services. Barnett consequentials are limited; yes, extra funding has been made available because of coronavirus, but that is for particular, targeted purposes. The Minister cannot grab a couple of hundred million pounds that has been ring-fenced for coronavirus and use it for a new road scheme or extra provision within education.

There are areas where extra money could be raised, and I urge the Minister to address these, potentially for next year's Budget. I will give a few examples. The aggregates levy takes roughly £19 million a year out of the economy of Northern Ireland, and it is sent to the Exchequer. I have close contacts with the quarry industry, and I met two quarry operators from Northern Ireland this year who have paid over £1 million per quarry in aggregates levy. That is a huge amount of money that is being taken out of the economy. The irony is, of course, that, despite coronavirus, our quarry industry is doing exceptionally well.

All of those to whom I speak say that they have never been busier. Why is that? Some suggest that, because people have not been able to take holidays, they are carrying out improvements to their homes or, if they are farmers, to their land. Certainly, the quarry industry is very busy, which means that even more money is going to pour out of the economy through the aggregates levy. When the levy was introduced, the idea was that this money would be used for projects to ameliorate the damage to communities caused by quarries. Quarries, generally, have a very good track record in Northern Ireland of dealing with their local community. However, it is irksome

that this money has been confiscated by London — or, probably, by Southend-on-Sea — yet, as far as I can see, not one penny has come back to Northern Ireland. This is important because although Northern Ireland makes up only 4% of the population of the United Kingdom, it accounts for nearly 12% of the quarry aggregate industry. We are a great success in this particular field. I ask the Minister of Finance to find out where that money has gone and why none of it, not even 4%, has come back to Northern Ireland, where it could be spent on important projects.

We have had the success of the plastic bag levy, which has reduced the use of single-use plastic bags by 80%. There is certainly room for that to increase, because it is a voluntary tax. People like me go to the supermarket and do not want to pay a shilling. For the benefit of younger people, that is 5p, but only about three people in the Chamber know what I am talking about. People can avoid paying that by bringing their own multiple-use bag. Why not consider increasing that to a more realistic level?

My point on MOT fees might be controversial. I am a regular visitor to the MOT centres in Newry, Downpatrick and Lisburn. You have only to see my car to know why. Just over £30 for an MOT is an absolute bargain compared with the rest of the UK. I can take a vehicle in — mine is normally worth about £250 — and, if I am fortunate and it passes, I walk out with a vehicle that could be worth treble that amount. All for a £30 fee. Maybe there is scope to address that figure. Of course, the Minister will say that this is all small stuff compared with what is needed to keep Northern Ireland going.

In the 26 years that I have been here, during every discussion on making the water service — Northern Ireland Water — a more effective model for the delivery of that essential service, there have been arguments about privatisation. It has been extremely unpopular. I am sure that even mentioning the word "privatisation" would have Mr Carroll jumping on me and threatening me with all sorts of sanctions because I had sworn. The halfway house is the Welsh model, Hyder, which was very successful in taking the funding of water out of the relevant Department. Here, of course, it is the Department for Infrastructure. The Welsh model funds water and enables adequate capital investment without being a burden on the economy. Today, several Members talked about the chronic underinvestment in water. There are so many examples of developments that cannot take place because of the lack of sewerage infrastructure and because many of the pipes supplying water to our community have long

since passed their sell-by date. We need investment in our water, but it does not necessarily have to come from the public purse. In next year's Budget — it is important to keep mentioning the Budget, Mr Deputy Speaker — the Minister should consider a new way of funding our water service.

Several Members said that we need a radical change in how we provide hospital services. Every Member of the Assembly agrees with that statement, as long as it does not effect their local hospital. That is the problem that we face. When I was Health Minister, there was a proposal to change the configuration of the Northern Trust and the Western Trust. What was the reaction? The MLAs representing Coleraine arrived up with a petition signed by 23,000 people, saying, "Do not lay a finger on our hospital." That was the level of buy-in from that community. When there was a proposal to close Dalriada Hospital, I received, as Minister, a petition signed by, I reckon, 97% of everyone in the Moyle District Council area who was aged over 11. In fact, we could not find anybody in the area who had not signed that petition.

I remember going up to see the hospital — it was an excellent provision — and there was a tractor cavalcade in the town. They said that, if I tried to close Dalriada Hospital, the tractor cavalcade would ensure that I would not be leaving Moyle for many months, and I think they meant it.

The difficulty is that important health decisions need to be made. Health can be delivered in a much better way. We are spreading a limited resource over far too many buildings. Others who look at the provision of health in Northern Ireland are aghast at how many structures and buildings we require to deliver the service. Leicestershire has the same population size as Northern Ireland: two hospitals. Yorkshire is the same size: half the number of hospitals. However, if you suggest that to anybody in the Chamber, they will be on their feet immediately saying, "Yes, but don't you dare touch my facility".

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member makes an interesting point that I have heard him make in the House before. Will he accept that, potentially, there is the ability to have that public conversation and make that change in light of the pressures facing our hospitals due to COVID-19?

Mr Wells: As you should know, the Bengoa report was one of many. We have had

Compton, Donaldson and Bengoa. All three — and many others, such as Gerry Burns —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to link his comments about COVID and hospital reform to the Budget.

Mr Wells: They obviously outlined the concerns they had about the budgets for health service provision in Northern Ireland. All of those reports said that, if we were to try to bring the budget down to a sensible scale, a major realignment of hospital service provision in Northern Ireland was absolutely essential. Indeed, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister signed up to the Bengoa report and said that they wished to see it progressed. That is fine until you try to close one broom cupboard in one hospital in Northern Ireland. Watch the reaction of those who represent that area. Indeed, gone are the days when political dissension will bring 10,000 people onto the streets of Northern Ireland. Those days are over. However, touch a hair on the head of one hospital in Northern Ireland and you will have the entire adult population on the streets. How can we keep within a budget if that is the attitude that we have as a community?

Here we are 26 years on, 25 Budgets later, and still we cannot grasp that we are pouring a large amount of the very scarce resource contained in the Budget down a black hole, because the structure is fundamentally wrong. I do not believe that a democracy in Northern Ireland can deliver these changes, because the pressures on the individual representatives are so intense.

I listened with great interest to the comments made by many Members criticising Departments that have not spent the money allocated to them in their budget. They have failed to remember what are called the monitoring rounds. We have a series of monitoring rounds every year — three or four per annum — where the resources that have not been spent by particular Departments, for various legitimate reasons, are brought back into a central pot and redistributed amongst those Departments that are experiencing pressures.

Quite frankly, there are times when Departments could never have made ends meet had it not been for the monitoring rounds. Certainly, when the monitoring rounds are published, there is no shortage of safe havens for the unspent money. It is unfair to say that there is anything particularly wrong in Departments voluntarily giving up money to provide extra funding, rather than trying to keep

it within their bailiwick, to meet pressures that are emerging elsewhere. I have been involved in that process. I reckon I must have been involved in about 100 monitoring rounds over 26 years. Therefore, do not be critical of Departments who readily identify unspent funding and give it up. The tendency would be to try to spend it rapidly on some hasty project where there may not actually be a need.

Mr Frew made the point that it is unforgivable, after a series of monitoring rounds, to still be left with unspent money at the end of the financial year. Obviously, that is totally wrong. However, some of those who spoke today clearly do not understand the funding mechanism that the Assembly has to live within. We all face very dark times, and I detect in the Chamber that many Members are very uneasy with the present restrictions that have been implemented and the Budget set out for the implementation of those policies.

5.45 pm

I agree with Mr Frew. The landscape for support, and the Budget that has been outlined to support companies in this particular period of restrictions, is very different from that which was available in April, May and June when there was the luxury of 80% furlough payments for employed and self-employed people. There were grants of £10,000 and £25,000, and there were bounce-back loans. We now face a totally different situation. I believe that many companies will not see a resumption of trading in four weeks' time, and we have to accept that.

I accept that the Minister has a small budget in comparison to fund that. Compared to what was available to the Executive at the start of the financial year and what is available now, it is very small beer indeed. It is a very small amount and it will not save businesses from going to the wall. I ask him to include in his Budget companies that have not been asked to close but which will have to close because of the restrictions. No cognisance has been taken of their needs. I mentioned ferry operators earlier. The Carlingford ferry operator has not been told to close, but it will close.

The business model for soft-play areas depends not only on paying customers but on cafes. Their business model indicates that they have to have their cafes open to make them pay. The cafes are closed; therefore, soft-play areas are in great difficulties. Dog kennels depend on the holiday trade, which has absolutely died. They have not been told to close, but they will have to close because of the situation. The Minister should include in his

Budget a scheme similar to the hardship fund in the earlier package that kept some of those businesses —.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. This is a problem that I face daily in my constituency. I have been liaising with the Minister on dog kennels, for example, for a long time. The knock-on impact of locking down the economy has budgetary impacts on many different sectors. To date, the Minister has relied on research, and I understand the need for it at the time, carried out by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, to establish the sectors that should be awarded rate relief. However, that has not taken into account those sectors that have had no support, and because of the sectors that are closed, there is essentially no business there for establishments that have been asked to stay open.

Mr Wells: I think that that is very relevant to the Budget being discussed this afternoon.

The final category that I would like to highlight is that, in the Budget, there is protection for the Department for Infrastructure's transport division and Translink's coaches. They will be protected in the present situation, but what about the hundreds of drivers and owners of private coaches in Northern Ireland who have seen their business dry up to absolutely nil since March? They still have to pay insurance, maintenance, rates and, more importantly, they have to pay the capital repayments for leasing the vehicles. A coach can easily cost £200,000 or £300,000. They have not been ordered to close down, but they have to close and they face wipeout. We could find that, eventually, the private sector is ruined and goes to the wall, which will provide Translink with a monopoly, and, of course, it will have been helped financially.

The Minister obviously committed some sins in a previous life to deserve the position of Minister of Finance at this juncture. There are many difficulties, but until we mature as an Assembly and stop saying, "Please give me, give me, give me" and suggest to the Minister and the Department of Finance where we feel this money can come from, I could be here for another 26 years listening to exactly the same debate and getting absolutely nowhere.

Mr McGrath: Maybe this could be a constituency double act: my constituency colleague detailed the ways to raise money, and I will detail the ways to spend that money. That would work well. I took the time yesterday to speak as Chair of the Executive Office

Committee, and I welcome the opportunity to speak today as an MLA for South Down so that I can illustrate a number of the needs that are felt acutely by those living in my constituency.

The Budget is, indeed, a difficult business. The Minister responsible for its implementation is in an unenviable position. MLAs from across the North have spoken at length today, some at more considerable length than others. They also spoke yesterday to outline their constituents' needs and the areas where the Budget can deliver for them. Ministers will defend the financial need for their portfolio, so all Departments must work together, as I mentioned yesterday, to deliver on a genuine cohesion of purpose.

Our Executive must move beyond the continued silo mentality that prevails. Such an approach stops our Executive being strategic and planned and developing interventions that have the greatest impact. Such a joined-up approach will stop duplication and, worse, interventions being missed. We must work together to see unity of purpose and spend. However, that works and is justified only when those who request moneys take responsibility and accountability for what is delivered. From those who have been given much, much shall be expected.

To place that in context, as I mentioned yesterday, the Executive Office received half a million pounds to work with the press in light of COVID. Initially, we saw how the COVID messaging was working. The public bought in to that up to the point where political leaders began taking the regulations and public health into their own hands and determining what was and was not in the spirit of the regulations.

While our Budget up to this point has been viewed through the lens of COVID, just as our politics have been viewed through the lens of Brexit for so long, we have to at least attempt to look at how we rebuild. I should say that it is absolutely regrettable that we see moneys allocated to the various Departments all too often go towards:

"expenditure on activities that are required as a result of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union."

I imagine that this was another caveat that our resident Brexiteers failed to mention in the run-up to the referendum: "We will take back control, but, by God, it won't half cost you".

Brexit aside, we need to think big. I am a proud Irish nationalist, and I believe that we should

think beyond our borders and the limitations of Brexit and COVID. As I detailed yesterday, we now have the commitment to the medical school at Magee. I want to see the medical school act as a driver for future development. Given that close to £1.5 billion is being allocated to the Department of Health, who is to say that we could not have a state-of-the-art nursing school at the Downe Hospital, as staffing is apparently the reason for the prolonged closure of our emergency department? The Downe Hospital is a fantastic facility and has great scope for further development. The adjacent Downshire complex has scope to be developed for classrooms and as a learning environment, and we could see, once again, a generation of medical practitioners graduate from Downpatrick. Yet that will need investment, and, yes, it will mean effort and work, but the payback could be immense, with more local people being able to avail themselves of the opportunity to train, more supply going into the much-depleted pool of nurses that our health service so desperately needs and a strengthening of our health service so that it serves all our communities and is fit for purpose.

The lesson of the Downe Hospital in recent months serves as a reminder to the Executive, going forward, that, when you place investment for the public at the heart of your portfolio, you win every time. Think of the positive ripple effect of Minister Mallon's delivery of Casement Park for west Belfast and for the wider community that benefits from it. Think of the benefits of the Ballynahinch bypass, which we have waited for for so long and will, hopefully, see starting soon. Think of the benefits brought about by her continued commitment to the Strangford ferry. Think of the delivery of the Downpatrick park-and-ride facilities, although it must be said that I would gladly continue to campaign for upgrades to the A7 from Belfast to Downpatrick. Such a move would only further the connection of communities and people and provide stability through sustainable jobs, a bit like the exciting news that we heard today about the expansion of Finnebrogue Artisan in Downpatrick at the Down Business Park. It is creative and innovative thinking that will only go from strength to strength, but it is done with the skilful work and financing of its managing director, Denis Lynn, with little to no public investment. How much more could be done with the right support from our Department for the Economy? Today, that was an announcement of 300 jobs in the Downpatrick area. It is very welcome, but there is not much support from the public purse. Those are just a fraction of the benefits that we will be able to enjoy because of infrastructure that Minister

Mallon has delivered. However, if we fail to do that —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Certainly.

Mr Frew: The Member says that the Minister has delivered: the Minister delivers a planning application that either meets the criteria or does not. How does the Minister for Infrastructure deliver those projects?

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, it is taken in the round of my conversations that, when you deliver for the public and deliver public investment, you deliver for jobs. I do not think that the idea was directly to connect two separate parts of my full speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I draw the debate back to the Budget, please?

Mr McGrath: Certainly, because it is all about spend, Mr Deputy Speaker.

If we fail to spend but take the approach of the current occupier of Number 10 and try to progress such hare-brained schemes as a bridge to Scotland, disaster will follow and public confidence will plummet as vital public funds are flushed down the drain.

I welcome the fact that moneys have been allocated in the Department of Health to the Fire and Rescue Service, which protects all of us daily but often with little or no thanks. It is my hope that we will see, as part of this investment, the development of an all-island strategy to combat wildfires, which severely impact places such as the Mourne mountains in my constituency. Much like COVID, the fires do not recognise borders, so our response to them must reflect that.

In this year's Budget, over £300 million is committed to the Department for the Economy. While some of that money will undoubtedly be spent on the response to COVID, I welcome the fact that it will also be used for the delivery of city deals. If we look at ongoing work in Newry, Mourne and Down, we will, hopefully, soon see the delivery of the Mournes gateway project. While the project cannot be completed without the funds, it could not be delivered without innovation and creative thinking from individuals working on the ground in local communities. Be under no illusion about the transformative power of the Mournes gateway project. We all know that County Down is the most beautiful

county in Ireland, and the gateway project will cement its position as the number-one tourism destination in Ireland. The power of tourism is widespread across my area. Downpatrick has the wonderful product of ecclesiastical tourism as the home of St Patrick, world-renowned and pursued. The Lecale coastline is breathtaking, yet we have one of the smallest hotel headcounts in the North. Such investment could bring ripples across our economy.

Budget Bills are a long process, and they are not often the spiciest debates in the Chamber. However, they afford us the opportunity to think creatively and essentially to put our money where our mouth is. I look forward to seeing the North begin to rebuild after the devastation of COVID and, hopefully, find a way through Brexit. In future Budgets, I would like consideration to be given to a small towns budget to help towns like Downpatrick to regenerate and develop. With appropriate investment, even at a modest level, we could see the transformational power of public spending helping towns to have bespoke attributes that would make them attractive to residents and visitors, both those from the local area and from far-flung places. Such investment is always recouped manifold by the local economy and is a worthwhile investment process. With about 20 to 30 small towns across the North, a rolling programme of a few million pounds each year could see them transformed in a short time.

I want to mention mental health, specifically youth mental health.

Young people are struggling, be it through the trans-generational impact of the Troubles; the prolific nature of drug abuse in communities; the peril of paramilitarism, which is still alive in some communities; or the evolving stress of modern life and the adjustment in online existence with bullying and cyberbullying. We need to tackle that matter now or we will store up problems for the future.

6.00 pm

I would like to see a well-resourced, ring-fenced fund to tackle youth mental health, both in schools and in communities. We have a well-run and well-equipped Youth Service across the North that is well placed to deliver that work. The Facilitating Life And Resilience Education (FLARE) project has had a fantastic impact on young people's lives. Such initiatives should be developed and enhanced. Their reach could be much greater if they were given the chance to enhance their work.

I reiterate: placing investment in the public at the heart of the portfolio wins every time. Investment in young people is investment in the future. Such investment is clearly strategic and beneficial. We can do it if we are willing to work together. I support the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

Mr Carroll: Yesterday, I spoke about the way in which the Executive were using the current crisis to drive forward policy in a way that ignores basic processes of scrutiny, accountability and transparency. The Budget Bill was laid late yesterday afternoon. By the time that I and other opposition MLAs got out of the Chamber and got sight of it, we had only a matter of hours to look at the relatively scarce detail that is in front of us, making it, in real terms, impossible to amend or influence the process. As was pointed out yesterday, the way in which revenue Estimates and, indeed, the Budget are presented poses more questions than answers and offers little by way of understanding the financial need and projections of support that have existed over the years that proceeded the mammoth health and economic crisis in which we now find ourselves.

The whole process says a lot about how the Executive, effectively, expect people to put up and shut up with regard to what advisers have told them and what they present. Frankly, the Executive, their advisers, the layers of management and chief civil servants who sit at the helm of the public sector have shown little ability for independent thought or action outside of what the Tories across the water have presented to them throughout the crisis since March. The Chamber has form in that regard in accepting years of Tory austerity, the privatisation of public services, schemes such as RHI and every other scandal that has engrossed some of those who sit in the Executive now. That Executive are presiding over what may well be the biggest disaster in their and, possibly, my political life as COVID cases surge, workers lose jobs as a result of the mismanagement of economic restrictions, the NHS struggles to provide basic things like the flu vaccine, and we peer into a very bleak winter indeed.

When the history books are written about the turbulent year that we have faced, there is no doubt that one area of agreement among historians will be that, on this island, we entered into the crisis with somewhat of an advantage because we are on an island and had the benefit of witnessing the virus spread across parts of Asia and mainland Europe. However, that advantage was wasted by a political elite of

decision makers who are wedded to a for-profit neoliberal model of politics and economics. The same economics that decimated the NHS, cut ICU beds and reduced the public sector in the run-up to the crisis has seen the Executive, effectively, sacrifice public health and preside over a shambolic COVID strategy since March. As I said yesterday, the Executive wasted an important opportunity to reach a zero-COVID strategy in the spring/summer by rushing to reopen the economy before we could control the virus in any real sense.

The extent of the health and social crisis has, of course, seen Governments step in to intervene in their economies in a way that has contradicted the decades-long prevailing economic orthodoxy. Even the British Tories stepped in to pay workers' wages for some limited time because they knew that they needed to keep alive the political and economic system over which they preside.

In that context, there are, obviously, budget increases in some Departments compared with last year's expenditure. We have heard about that already. Anything else would be completely and utterly catastrophic in the period that we are in.

That expenditure clearly does not go far enough, however, if we consider how chronically underfunded this place has been for decades and the deep crisis that we are in, and probably will be in for some time. Increases for the Department for Communities, for example, will no doubt be welcomed by the Minister and the Executive, but they do not go anywhere far enough if we are to overhaul our benefits system so that people are not falling through the cracks. Where is the payment for hospitality workers who are losing income? Where is the self-isolation fund for workers if their employer does not, or will not, pay them while they are needing to isolate? Where are the greater statutory sick pay levels for all workers who are unwell and have to take time off work?

As figures have shown in recent days, COVID is fundamentally a class issue. Workers are forced to work on the front line whilst billionaires can self-isolate on their private island. Since yesterday, many more workers from the same workplaces whose workers contacted me in March have done so again. They are worried that their employer is not taking the necessary precautions to protect them at this time and is, in fact, prioritising the maximisation of profit over the safety of staff and other people. What measures will the Executive take against non-compliant or obstructive employers? We have fines for individuals who breach the guidelines.

Where is the same reproach for big companies that put staff at risk?

After this Budget, we are peering at the disaster of a chronically underfunded health service, if it is not a disaster already. On top of the massive COVID costs, people are concerned about surgeries being postponed or cancelled. As I said, our vulnerable population is being told that there is a shortage of the flu vaccine. That is largely down to the fact that our health service is overstretched, underfunded and understaffed. The Budget, as presented, will not fill that void, nor will it make a serious dent in the mental health crisis in our communities. We learned today that one in eight of our young people is facing anxiety, depression or some other form of mental health problem. How will the Budget tackle that? I do not think that it will.

Today, I was contacted by Civil Service workers who are worried about a lack of mental health support. They do not know where to go to or how to get help. They are worried about paying extra as they follow the guidance and try to work from home. Those issues need to be addressed, but it does not appear that they are addressed in the Budget. On top of that, and as I mentioned earlier, workers from Bombardier, Royal Mail workers in Derry and workers in other workplaces are up in arms about health and safety. I salute those workers for not going into work and for taking action to protect themselves. There is not a major injection of funding into the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). In fact, yesterday's Estimates indicated an actual reduction in spending. That is disgraceful beyond belief.

As I said yesterday, there has been a significant reduction in spending and in public-sector superannuation for Civil Service pensions as a result of the changes in the workforce that have been driven by years of austerity and the disastrous voluntary exit scheme, both of which have put massive pressure on staff, increased expenditure on agencies and impacted on trade union membership.

As some Members have said, the Westminster Government need to step up to the plate. We have been disrespected and underfunded for too long, and all parties should be shouting loudly about that. It is not good enough, however, simply to blame Westminster, when parties here have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on such schemes as the renewable heat incentive (RHI), PFI schemes and austerity schemes, and when they have agreed to increase expenses at the same time as job losses are happening.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member rightly talked about workers' rights. The increased expenses that he refers to are to pay his staff, and my staff, a proper wage, however. Is the Member objecting to that?

Mr Carroll: I refer the Member to debates that took place several months ago. One of the first things that the Assembly did on its return was increase pay for Members' staff. Why was sorting out their own staff, who in some cases are family members, the first thing that Members did, when there were workers waiting to be paid? Healthcare workers are still waiting for strike pay that they are owed. There is a list of workers as long as my arm who are waiting for fair pay. Why were party staff paid before those other workers?

Getting back to my point, there is also the issue of borrowing money to cut public-sector jobs and lower corporation tax but not to fund jobs and services. Mr Frew, if I heard him correctly, spoke of money not being spent by Departments. What is going on with that?

The Assembly has revenue-raising streams, including powers to borrow and to lift the cap on rates for the wealthy. These are, as has been said in many debates, extraordinary times, so extraordinary measures must be taken.

Yesterday, the Minister pointed out the need for alternative proposals to address some of the issues that I raised yesterday and today. That requires serious thinking outside the box, which the Department and Executive have not done or do not seem willing to do. Those measures should include an emergency wealth tax to pay for the COVID crisis and shaking the magic money trees that exist in the back gardens of the very wealthy who reside here, in the South and in the UK to ensure that those with the largest shoulders carry the heaviest burden.

We need to make a radical break from the failures of the free market to put people and health before profit. The Minister may say that it is not in his remit to do that, but I would ask him whether he agrees with the point. If he does, he needs to project that, as he has on other issues, with Finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales. A Sinn Féin Finance Minister should be fighting and arguing loudly for the rich to pay their way in a greater sense.

Household wealth has risen by 13% from 2016 to 2018 and stands at £14.6 trillion, or £221,000 per person. That enormous wealth should be used to avoid the austerity disaster that was implemented last time. Why are the Executive not highlighting and trying to reduce that massive inequality that is screaming out in front of us?

Rishi Sunak, the Tory Chancellor, is pressing for corporation tax to rise by 5%, back to its pre-2010 levels, I believe. Why is this Minister, and the Executive as a whole, not pushing for a higher rate of corporation tax, even beyond the 5% that Rishi Sunak is proposing? UK companies are already able to exempt £160 billion of their profits from taxation, in addition to receiving one of the lowest headline rates in the OECD. If that pre-2010 tax rate was implemented, if that £160 billion — even a significant proportion of it — was collected, we would be in a different situation entirely. The Executive and the Finance Minister should emphasise these points. Does he agree with these points? If not, why not? If so, what is his strategy to press, fight, articulate and argue for them?

Given the extent of the crisis that we are living through, it is unhealthy to have such a lack of political opposition in this place. It is an unfortunate reflection of our political system and situation. For our part, we are elected to be a socialist opposition, to hold the bigger parties to account and to build an alternative in our communities and on the streets. For that reason, we do not, and I do not, go along with this Budget. Whilst I might find it hard to divide the Chamber today, I want to put on record my opposition to the Budget for the reasons that I outlined.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I thank Members for contributing to the debate. I noted down many of the issues that were raised. I know that we are not time-limited, but I do not intend to keep people any longer than I have to.

A lot of Members, as is always the case, have mistaken this debate for a debate that is setting a Budget, rather than one that is approving and legislating for expenditure that was approved in the March Budget, which we debated and passed. Indeed, some Members seem to be highly critical now of the content of what they voted for in March. That probably underlines the central point of the necessity for the review of the financial processes, so that people who come into these debates understand what they are taking about and what is in front of them rather than what they imagine it to be.

A number of points were raised that I wish to address. The Chair of the Committee raised the issue of the sole authority of the Budget.

Yesterday, in response to a question or a point during the debate — I am not sure which part of yesterday's proceedings it was — I said to Mr Allister that I accept that there needs to be a consistency of approach to approval. The fact that the amount was put into the Estimates and voted on is, in effect, approval. However, for good practice, we need to ensure that there is a formal letter of approval. There has been a variety of methods of approval — emails, letters and verbal approvals— and all those are included. He asked about the legislative competence. They are all included in the Estimates, so they are, in effect, voted on anyway. However, for consistency and transparency, we need to see that. The Department will put in place that process from here on in, and I thank the Committee for drawing that to our attention.

6.15 pm

The Chair of the Communities Committee raised a number of issues in relation to the impact on the monitoring round. It will not be delayed for much longer. We faced into a very busy fortnight in which a lot of emergency activity had to be undertaken. The intention is to do the monitoring round. Releasing financial transactions capital (FTC) is not so much about monitoring; it is more about obtaining a decision from the Office for National Statistics on housing associations. That decision is expected in the coming weeks. That will have a marked impact on improving our access to financial transactions capital. I also recognise the request that was made on behalf of Supporting People and the need to process the sign language strategy. I will discuss those issues further with the Communities Minister.

Matthew O'Toole, who is no longer with us, raised a number of issues, one of which was FTC. The Departments are aware of the potential that FTC offers to provide support for the private sector. I have always encouraged all Ministers to consider how best to use funding in that context. Given its nature as financial transactions, it is not possible under Treasury rules to recategorise it as resource or capital. He asked whether I was seeking flexibility from Treasury, particularly on switching unused capital to resource. At the moment, we anticipate full capital spend. However, I am seeking additional flexibility to transfer funding from capital to resource to allow us flexibility within our existing budgets and to respond

dynamically to any unanticipated challenges in this year.

Matthew O'Toole also raised the issue of a review of financial process. From my opening remarks, he will know that I think that that would be very helpful. I have now been to several Budget debates in the Chamber. It is rare for them to be responded to in the way that they should be. Possibly, the one in March was, as Members recognised that that was the Budget. However, in responding to the rest of them, Members have been telling us what we should not be doing, even though they voted for it back in March. Ironically, as he will remember, back in 2011, when I was Chair of the Finance Committee, the Committee did a piece of work to review the budgetary process to try to streamline it and make it more transparent and accessible. That work needs to be continued. The more I listen to these debates, the more convinced I am of that.

Andrew Muir and others — including Mr Wells, who made related points — asked about the work to establish a fiscal council. This will also answer some of the points that Mr Carroll made. Of course we want to have tax-varying powers here and to be able to set our own policies. One of the central differences between Mr Carroll and me on this is that he thinks that, if you advocate these things enough, you will get fairness in the system at some stage. I do not believe that we will. I think that the only way that we will ever get fiscal fairness is to create our own constitutional future on this island, not within the current constitutional framework.

Mr Carroll: Thank you for giving way. I agree in broad terms with what, I think, he is outlining. However, does he agree that, as part of the united Ireland approach that he describes, the wealthier must pay a lot more? Positions that the Minister and his party have advocated previously did not seem to indicate that they were for that.

Mr Murphy: No. We have often indicated that we are for a much more radical approach to taxation and a fairer sharing of the burden. Even though I petition the Treasury for fairness and flexibility in its approach, I do not think that that is its instinct. It has not been the Treasury's instinct to take that type of approach for several hundred years. That is why I primarily advocate constitutional change on the island. I think that we can adopt our own approach to those matters.

Mr Muir asked further questions about the money that was set aside and ring-fenced for the health service. We recently received some

detail about the spend of that money. I know that other Members raised that, and it brings me to the question about why we are not spending COVID money and are not going to spend it. I do not know where that comes from. We have ring-fenced £55 million out of £2.4 billion for something that everybody in the Chamber has spent the last two days arguing for: to help those who have been left behind. If propositions are not brought forward very quickly by the responsible Departments to help those people who have been left behind, I will allocate that money elsewhere through the Executive. Of course, they will have to approve that. There is no question of not being able to spend the money.

We have received some detail on the money for the health service. It knows the time frame within which the money has to be spent and it will, according to itself, take up the lion's share of that — over £500 million — and release some back for further allocations within the Executive. That is what it asked for. Of course, in their response to the pandemic, the priority of the Executive has been to protect and support the health service, and that money was quite rightly ring-fenced for its use.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for giving way and for his comments. He raised an interesting point, particularly on the cash totals that we have to be able to deal with in what is now a remarkably short period, bearing in mind that we are rapidly approaching the end of the financial year. We must be able to put those bids in place. On behalf of the Assembly, I ask the Minister to encourage the rest of his ministerial colleagues to expedite that process. We do not have time to waste, and we must be able to support our economy and our businesses as well as our health service.

Mr Murphy: Of course. I have said that repeatedly, and I have said that I want to see that at recent Executive meetings. I have listened to all the arguments about "Our Minister is good" and "Your Minister is bad". That stuff does not get us anywhere. I want to see projects delivered. People have now decided who is responsible for what, and I have asked them to bring propositions to me as quickly as possible. Of course, I have also asked that they bring propositions to me for the additional £200 million, which we received only last Friday.

I recognise that the COVID money that we have received — the £2.4 billion — has to be spent in this financial year. That is why we gave Health the time to have a proper look at that £600 million that was available to it and to make

sure that it could bring forward properly costed proposals and understood the time frame in which the money had to be spent. That was clearly my intention. In the middle of all that, we have had monitoring rounds for the ongoing allocations to Departments outside of COVID. The October monitoring round will be brought forward very quickly, and we will have a further monitoring round in January.

I am not sure if it was Mr Wells who said that the biggest sin is to return money at the end of the financial year, but I agree with that. That often does not lead to the best spending when we are in an annual Budget system and Departments are forced into trying to spend money because it is a bigger sin to hand it back than spend it on something that, perhaps, is not so strategically important. However, that is the situation that we are in until such times as the comprehensive spending review allows us to move into a multi-annual budgetary situation and plan that better. That is why we have asked for carry-over flexibility if we end up not spending all the money. From my time as the Minister for Regional Development, I know that Roads Service was always ready to spend all the unspent money in January, February and March on road improvements. That was welcome and needed, but it is not a strategic way to spend our money. Of course, we want to make sure in relation to that.

Mr Givan raised a variety of points, but one question that he asked was about money that had been returned by the Health Department. It returned £2.5 million of capital funding for the mother and children's hospital flagship project. It also returned £6.3 million of resource in the October monitoring round because of a reduction in the Agenda for Change pay pressures. It is not that Health was unable to spend the money, but it is a fact that sometimes either projects do not cost as much as originally thought or money that was anticipated for things such as the Agenda for Change is not used.

Mr Givan went on — Mr Frew raised similar points yesterday and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Mr Buckley raised them today — to challenge the decisions that were taken by the Executive in relation to the interventions that were necessary for next week. I am not getting into that. Arguably, from a benign point of view, that debate is within the DUP. Others might categorise what is going on within the DUP in relation to these measures much more stridently. He said that members of the Executive had wanted to close schools for six weeks. That is not true. Apart from the Health Minister and the First Minister and deputy First

Minister, Executive Ministers do not bring proposals to the Executive about restrictions. They are brought forward by the Health Department and are transposed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister into a paper for the Executive. We do not come to the Executive with propositions about the length of time of restrictions, the severity of measures or what is required to reduce the R number. Those are brought forward to us.

That mischaracterisation has gone on for over a week, and I will take this opportunity to clear up the matter, as it was repeated in some media outlets as well, as it was briefed last Monday. We did not, and do not, propose for any longer restrictions because we do not bring propositions to the Executive. We listen to advice, to discussion and to debate, and we take in what the medical experts tell us, what we know the impact will be on society and the economy, and then we take our decisions. There is a responsibility on all of us — not just on those of us who are in the Executive — to argue for those decisions if that is what our parties have backed. If people have a different view in their party, that is a matter for their party discipline.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. I hear what he is saying. I do not pretend for a moment to think that his job is not highly difficult. However, can the Minister explain to the House how you can make such an impactful decision on a Tuesday night yet have Ministers running about on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday not knowing the implications of Tuesday night's decision?

Mr Murphy: First, if the Member wants context, he should ask his own Ministers, including his party leader, who brought the propositions for those decisions to the Executive. These things are done at pace. The rate of transmission, as he knows, was going through the roof, particularly in certain areas, but right across the North.

We got advice from the Department of Health that we needed to take action immediately. That did not allow people to figure out how to get all their ducks in a row, because the virus, by that stage, had spiralled further out of control, and people would say, "Why did you not take action sooner?". It is a balancing act between taking the necessary interventions and making sure that we have all the regulations lined up, with all their implications for all the various businesses. It is not a clean or clear-cut process; it is one that requires speed of action and as much clarity as we can possibly bring to it.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): On a point of order, Mr Wells.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, you have admonished many humble Back-Benchers throughout this debate because they had drifted from the Budget to a debate on coronavirus. Can I suggest that the Minister is doing exactly the same thing?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member is attempting to do the job of the Deputy Speaker. This can be a difficult one, but you tend to allow some latitude. In fact, I was doing that so that the Minister could respond to comments. However, I was about to encourage him to come back to the Budget debate.

Mr Murphy: I am certainly happy to take your advice, a LeasCheann Comhairle. However, I am responding to the points that were raised after you gave latitude in the first instance, *[Laughter]* so it would hardly be fair to allow Members to raise points with me without allowing me to respond to them.

As I said, that debate has raged on in the DUP. I hope, for all our sakes, that some meeting of minds happens in that party, because the more clarity we have on the public message, the better for all of us.

Declan McAleer, who spoke on behalf the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, raised the issue of EU exit costs, and, of course, we have continued to press the Treasury to meet those in full, as they have committed to do. We have not yet had that confirmation, but we will continue to press for it. There are concerns about the future of farm payments, and I wrote recently to the Treasury to express my concern about how that is planned to be rolled out. That is a matter of concern for us all.

Robin Newton mentioned EU funding for education programmes. That funding was supposed to be replaced under the shared prosperity fund, but we have yet to receive any clear detail about that.

Caoimhe Archibald asked about the Treasury engagement for the job support scheme. We have rehearsed that many times here. Initially, the job support scheme was not intended to provide any assistance, other than to those who were working for at least one third of their

normal hours. That has been changed in recent times to recognise that the further restrictions require greater support. That is welcome. However, it is nowhere near the scheme that had been advanced with regard to job retention earlier in the year. I think that it will inevitably cause people to lose their jobs, and that is a concern for us. She also asked, again, as did many Members, about the sectors that have been left out. As I have said, the £55 million was set aside some months ago by me in a proposition to the Executive to allow space and time for those schemes to be brought forward. It is a matter of regret that some of them have not been brought forward. Again, I encourage Ministers to get down quickly to providing some support there.

6.30 pm

Many points were raised about education, with Robin Newton raising a number. I understand his passion for the subject and do not doubt his sincerity, but I know that he will recognise that 10 years of austerity Budgets mean that schools are in the red with their budgets and that classroom assistants are being paid a pittance on part-time contracts for doing vital work. Those, along with the special educational needs (SEN) budget, which we increased this year, were low-hanging fruit and were the first areas to be hit by austerity. The impact of that cannot be overestimated in the context of the ongoing situation. I agree with him about the value and importance of education for young people. It is not just about the three Rs, as he said; it is about the sense of worth and of having a chance in society that education can provide. We cannot set aside the impact of that.

Some Members, including Kellie Armstrong — I see that she is not with us — and Jonathan Buckley raised the issue of underspends by Departments. Mr Wells made point that I was going to make: monitoring rounds are a necessary process. If we did not have them, we would be rigidly fixed in our budgetary spend to what we agree at the start of the financial year. For a variety of reasons, some projects do not go ahead as planned, and some budgets are allocated on the basis of anticipated spend and some on on-demand spend that may not materialise. We have to have the ability to reshuffle money as the year goes on, and the objective is to make sure that we spend out, against our own agreed priorities, that money before the end of the year.

Kellie Armstrong asked about the labour intervention. The Executive were unable to meet the bid from the Department for Communities for £4.8 million for labour market

interventions due to needs from other COVID pressures that presented at the time. The Department for Communities has funded the initial pressure internally in the short term and is open to bid again in-year and as part of the forthcoming budgeting exercise.

In relation to Mark Durkan's contribution, one of the benefits of being about here long enough — I have been here since 1998 — is being able to remember the positions that parties have taken over the years. One of the downsides is that, over time, one loses tolerance for listening to them. He waxed on about the welfare mitigations and threatened that the Minister should not expect accelerated passage to be accepted. The first Welfare Reform Bill that came through here was brought in by his party colleague Margaret Ritchie, and she asked the Assembly for accelerated passage to bring it through. I remember, because I was part of the negotiations on welfare mitigations between five parties, and it was us that held out for the welfare mitigation package. Sometimes people like him operate on the basis that if something happened more than a week ago, the public will not remember it, but, thankfully, I have been around here long enough to remember all that.

He criticised the Budget for not having a housing plan. Of course, he went on to recognise that the Budget was the same one that he voted for and agreed in March and that had been set in train before the Executive came back and needed approval within a number of weeks of their coming back.

In relation to investment in infrastructure, I assure the Member that the Department for Infrastructure has received its biggest capital budget so far this year. It is up to the Department and the Minister to prioritise that capital budget. I do not disagree about the need for capital investment in water and sewerage infrastructure, but, of course, that is a decision for her. The Department has a capital budget of £558 million, which is by far the largest capital budget of any Department and represents more than 36% of the Executive's total capital budget.

It is a matter of prioritisation. I do not go into the Department for Infrastructure, nor would anyone there expect me to, to dictate how that money is spent. I also recently allocated an additional £15 million in capital that has enabled Northern Ireland Water to bring forward investment in sewerage infrastructure, including a number of waste water treatment works, this year. Of course, I will meet the Infrastructure Minister in the near future to talk about budgetary requirements for next year.

I assure him that we are tracking the location of jobs. The estate that is needed by the Civil Service has reduced and will probably continue to reduce as a consequence of COVID and of more people working from home. However, we also want flexible arrangements, which is why we have been looking at regional hubs so that civil servants can work there. That is more accommodating to their lives, and it also reduces their carbon footprint and the need for transport in and out of Belfast, as many of them work there every day. That will help us to deal with some of the problems that arise in that regard.

I have already said that I am not sure where Mr Frew gets his information that we are not spending the COVID money. We are spending that money, and the plan is to spend it all out. We now have figures from Health about the largest chunk that is left. We have had an additional £200 million and we need economic intervention. Economic interventions are in this Budget. The Member kept asking about the Budget (No. 3) Bill and where the money is; it is in the Bill and he should read it. He has misunderstood the Bill, because the money that we agreed, which he voted for last March, is in the Bill, and the money that we received for COVID is also in it. We have allocated more money to businesses this year than probably ever in the history of the Executive.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Minister has made that specific point many times. He knows the circumstances that we faced in March, when things had to be rushed through and we were just at the start of the pandemic. I am sure that he will accept that much has changed in the intervening six or seven months. Do honourable Members not have the right to reconsider their position, given the historic events that we are now facing?

Mr Murphy: Of course, and it is up to the Member whether he votes against the Budget (No. 3) Bill, as can Mr Wells if he wishes to do so. However, he must bear in mind that we brought the Budget (No. 2) Bill through since March, so we have been trying to manage the situation. Of course, these are unprecedented times, but the Member argued that there is no money for this or that in the Budget. We have given more money in business support than has ever been given out by an Executive in the history of this place, and it is all in this Budget.

More money has now been allocated for business support. It might not be enough as far as the Member is concerned, but we have more money allocated and we have more money to allocate. I have asked people, such as his colleague in the Department for the Economy and other Ministers, to bring forward propositions to spend that money as quickly as we possibly can. We recognise, having talked to businesses and dealt with them, that, as well as the key issue of supporting wages, which is about keeping workers in jobs, businesses need cash to keep them afloat. That is what we have been trying to do.

Mr Muir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Muir: Throughout the debate today, we have heard lots of people calling for action for different sectors and for different Departments to bring that forward. It would bring transparency to know what bids the Finance Minister has received from Departments. Could those be proffered as part of the October monitoring round? It is important to know whether those bids are there; otherwise, nothing will happen.

Mr Murphy: There are two exercises at play and there is an overlap between them. That is just the way that this year has gone. In a normal year, all the action would be in the monitoring rounds because that is when Departments bid for any money that is surrendered. We have also had injections of COVID money that have come across from London, so we are trying to manage both things. The bids are in for the October monitoring round, but there is also COVID money to be allocated, so it will be seen in the totality of all those bids. Of course, when it comes to an allocation, we produce the chart when we make a statement — the Executive agree it — about the money that was bid for and the money that was allocated. Members will be able to see that chart at that time.

As I said, the Budget process for next year will begin as soon as we can get the information from London. The Member berated me at one stage for not going away and setting that Budget. I do not know the time frame for a Budget, nor do I know the amount that I will have, so it would be quite irresponsible of me to start to set a Budget now. That is why we have pressed the Treasury for information about the comprehensive spending review. That will dictate how much money we will have and over what time frame we will have it.

As soon as we have that information, we can start to set the Budget and consult on it. That is the time to have that debate when all the Members who have ideas about what should be in that Budget can have their say about what we should be spending our money on. That is a debate that we should, perhaps, have had this time last year. It was rushed through because the Executive were back only in January, but that is a debate that we will have in the time ahead. I look forward to all the contributions and suggestions coming forward at that stage.

I agree with Mike Nesbitt's point about an outcomes-based Programme for Government. That is infinitely preferable, and I fully support it. He made a point about no leadership being shown in the debate. Again, I have been long enough about here to remember all those issues. The Good Friday Agreement happened in 1998, and it was 1999 before an Executive was formed. Questions about a dearth of leadership have been about this place for a long time and at various stages.

Jim Wells made various points relating to the fiscal commission issue, the aggregates levy and other things. That is the sort of debate that we need. That is why I want to establish a commission that will look at all those issues and generate a debate in this institution that will allow us to decide whether we can take more tax-varying powers and, if we take them, what we can use them for. That is how all those ideas can be brought to the Floor.

The Member made the point about companies that have to close, as opposed to ones that are obliged to close, as a result of the restrictions. We can consider being more generous, and the Economy Minister has talked about the supply chain and businesses that have been severely impacted. The initial run of money — certainly in the scheme that I brought forward — was to get it directly to those who were obliged to close. Further schemes should try to have a broader support in the economy. The job support scheme that will pay the wages of those people is fairly rigid and is based around businesses that are obliged to close. If people in ancillary businesses decide that it is not profitable enough for them to remain open, we can try to get some support to them, however limited that is, but the job support scheme from Britain will not apply to their staff if they go off.

Mr Buckley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: There is a variety of —. I will go for Mr Buckley since he *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way. On that point, the University of Ulster carried out economic analysis on the important rate relief that is so essential to the budgets of businesses of that type. Will you consider widening the scope of that to cater for businesses that, unfortunately, may not have been forced to close but are facing the impact?

Mr Murphy: Quite a lot of retail and hospitality already has the rate relief for the full year. They continue to benefit from rate relief, as do a lot of retail businesses. As many people have told us, the effect of COVID will still be with us beyond the end of this financial year. We are already considering rate relief beyond March of next year for targeted sectors.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I am grateful for his time. On the job retention scheme, which he says is quite rigid, there are a number of scenarios in which a large retail unit has a restaurant within it and it is the restaurant that has been forced to close but not the retail unit. Will they still be able to apply for the job retention scheme to pay the wages?

Mr Murphy: It is the job support scheme. The job retention scheme is the original scheme, which is more commonly known as the "furlough scheme". We have been told that the job support scheme is for businesses that are obliged to close under the regulations. If that is a portion of the business within a larger business, it may well apply to the workers who are in that portion of that business. If others in the supply chain decide that it is not profitable enough and that there is no point in staying open and that there is no business to be done, they may not qualify for the job support scheme. In whatever support that we can put out to schemes, we need to bear in mind that the key thing of the retention of workers for many businesses will not necessarily apply in circumstances where they have closed when they have not been obliged to.

I will give way one more time. I am sure that everybody else wants to get home tonight.

Mr Wells: The Minister is dealing with a very important issue that every MLA has been approached on. I give him one example that he will be very aware of: the Carlingford lough ferry has not been told to close, but its business has collapsed as a result of the lockdowns on both sides of the border. I have been approached by a lady whose job is to supply hotels with equipment and furniture. Again, she has not been told to close, but her business has

completely dried up. Would he consider a scheme where, if a company or a business can show that 90% of its trade has stopped as a result of the latest restrictions, they could qualify for funding that comes out of the Northern Ireland block grant rather than it coming from the job retention scheme?

Mr Murphy: There are two difficulties with that. The Economy Minister will bring forward some hardship schemes for businesses that are in what might be considered to be the supply chain and that are affected by the general economic downturn. There are two issues. One is the cost of the wage, which, if we brought in all businesses affected, would be beyond the means of the Executive. The other thing is the data. We do not possess the data to support us to be able to do a job retention or job support scheme. That data is held by HMRC. It has been asked whether it would assist in the development of such a proposal from here and has given a point-blank refusal to that. We do not have the data, and I suspect that the cost of such a scheme would be beyond what we have left of the COVID money.

A range of other points were raised, and I will try to finish those points. One of the questions that Gerry Carroll raised was about the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) staff reduction of cost. Ironically, it is a reduction of cost due to COVID-19, because the events that the HSE staff would have run or attended, such as the Balmoral show or awareness events, have not been able to take place.

All the outreach work that they would have done has therefore not been able to happen. That has reduced the cost. It is not about safety issues but about some of the outreach work that the HSE does. The programme spend has been utilised in other ways, however, such as for online and media campaigns targeting areas of high risk, such as falls from height in construction and aspects of agriculture and manufacturing. It has re-profiled its expenditure in that way.

6.45 pm

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I have tried to answer as many questions as I can without wearing out your patience and that of the rest of the staff here. I will draw my remarks to a conclusion. It is imperative that the legislation debated today continue its passage through the Assembly so that public services here can continue to be delivered to our citizens. I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising

spend on public services by Departments for the 2020-21 financial year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is the Budget Bill, it is established practice that the motion requires cross-community support and that that support be clearly demonstrated.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): It would be preferable if we did not have to move to a Division.

Question put a second time and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA Bill 09/17-22] be agreed.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Lack of Rail Connectivity in Foyle

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Ms Martina Anderson to raise the matter of the lack of rail connectivity in Foyle. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak and the Minister, Ms Nicola Mallon, will have 10 minutes in which to respond. Ten minutes plus 15 minutes is 25 minutes. The debate can last for only an hour, which means another 35 minutes. At present, three Members have indicated to me that they wish to speak, so, in theory, those three Members could have longer than the Minister, should they choose to take that time, but I am not certain that they will. If any other Member wants to participate in the debate, please rise in your place, and I will add your name to the list.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. A chairde, I proposed the Adjournment topic to bring to the Assembly the important issue of rail in the north-west. I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber this evening. We start the debate three hours later than we thought we would.

If you look at a map of Ireland's rail network, you are likely to notice straight away the complete lack of infrastructure in the north-west compared with that on the rest of the island. It sticks out like a sore thumb. You need only to glance at a rail map of the island of Ireland to see a glaring and obvious problem.

From Derry out into the north-west, you can see only a blank space. Where once, before 1960, four rail lines converged in Derry, now there is only one. Derry's railway station is the second most isolated train station on the entire island of Ireland, and it is only one of a pitiful three railway stations in the north-west, out of 53 railway stations in the North of Ireland. Compare that with a hundred years ago, when we enjoyed a much more extensive network that connected communities across the island. Now, old rail tracks and stations are scattered throughout the country, reminding us of what our rail network used to look like. Over the last century, as the economic impact of partition has festered, Ireland's rail infrastructure has rotted.

Over the lockdown, like many people in Derry, I walked out what is called "The Line", for exercise. While surrounded by the beautiful sights of the River Foyle, of ancient oak and wild rabbits, you only needed to look down to

see the decaying carcass of the old Derry rail line to Carrigans in Donegal. Thousands of people driving over what is called the Craigavon Bridge from the city side to the Waterside will pass the dilapidated ruins of the old Victoria Road train station that used to connect Derry to Strabane and onwards to Portadown and Dublin. That is the legacy of partition and underinvestment.

Developing rail infrastructure in Derry is essential to draw together the people of the north-west to our natural hinterland. It will erode the devastating impact of partition and create a safe, clean and durable infrastructure for the people of Derry for many generations to come. If we are serious about developing a modern, thriving, all-Ireland economy, we must be equally serious about building a modern, durable, all-Ireland rail infrastructure network.

For too many years there have been a number of failed attempts to close the Derry rail station. Comments expressed by some, and the attitudes of some officials in the Department for Infrastructure, have concerned many. We were told that, "Rail is too expensive" or, "Rail is an old-fashioned idea" or, "There is not enough demand". Rail, starved of financial support, is not presented as a viable transport alternative by some officials, so what can one expect when officials have been trying for years to get a service of regular timetabling, starve it of financial resources and allow the rail track to crack and buckle by not replacing stretches of it since the 1960s?

Despite the naysayers, since 2011, the number using the Derry service has increased exponentially. Sinn Féin's Infrastructure Minister at the time, Chris Hazzard, did play his part in that we saw passenger numbers increase by 40% in one year, smashing all estimates. Chris Hazzard, as Minister, contributed massively to improving connectivity in the north-west by developing an hourly Derry to Belfast service and delivering the north-west transport hub, not to mention ring-fencing funding for the likes of the A5, as well as getting the A6 under way. All of that was delivered within less than a year in office.

Minister, instead of trying to blame past Ministers, who clearly did deliver for the region, I suggest that you and your party would be better committing to delivering for rail in the north-west in the here and now. Sinn Féin will support you in that. That is what the people of Derry want to hear, and they are fed up hearing this ping-pong blame.

In 2019, the Department for Infrastructure projected that there would be shy of 2 million journeys on the Derry rail line. In fact, there were over 3 million. Not only is there a demand for rail; there is a need for rail. Derry's rail line needs to deliver for workers, families and young people. Yet, in 2020, each train that leaves Derry takes over two hours to get to Belfast, and, believe it or not, that is an improvement on what it used to be. Only a single train leaving Derry arrives in Belfast before 9.00 am, when the workday starts. Not a single Derry to Belfast express train service runs.

We cannot escape from the fact that rail has the potential to play a massive role in the transport of the future. It is not in memory of Victorian antiquity, unlike what some, unfortunately, even some in the Department for Infrastructure, think, or thought, I hope. In Europe, rail is the backbone of major economies, and it helps to prevent the decimation of rural communities whose people would otherwise need to move into the cities to be close to where they work. Affordable rail will cut pollution, reduce our reliance on cars and connect communities.

Earlier this month, I was impressed by the Minister's announcement of a feasibility study into high-speed rail connectivity:

"Derry — Belfast — Dublin — Limerick — Cork"

However, upon investigation, I discovered that this was not an announcement of a study; it was an announcement of a plan for a study. Whatever the outcome of that study, it does not guarantee that work will automatically commence. Indeed, my party colleague Darren O'Rourke TD's reply from Minister Eamon Ryan specified only a study of rail speeds around:

"Belfast — Dublin — Limerick — Cork line",

with no mention of Derry.

Minister, will you clarify the position, please? You appreciate that the people of Derry do not want piecemeal promises that are polished and spun to conceal inaction. The people of Derry deserve the delivery of high-speed rail from Derry to Belfast to Cork to Dublin and to Limerick. We also deserve the delivery of the western arc, from Derry to Letterkenny to Sligo and to Galway.

If we really want a just transition to a green, sustainable future, investing in rail is not only an option; it is a necessity. A good start would be to deliver the upgrade of the Derry to Coleraine rail line, ensuring that it is future-proofed for

generations to come. We need this feasibility study to be completed at pace. It needs to be done yesterday. As the world looks to recover from COVID-19, the first thing that investors and businesses will see in our beautiful city of Derry is our infrastructure and connectivity. Without rail, Derry will once again lose out.

Minister, we talked about this before, and your Department has received its highest ever capital allocation. As a member of the Infrastructure Committee, I acknowledge the pressures, but we need a time frame for when it is anticipated that construction work will begin on upgrading the Derry to Coleraine track. We need another time frame for the high-speed rail feasibility study, and we need a guarantee that work will commence. We need a third time frame for the advancement of the western arc concept.

Minister, I am sure that you will agree that it is time to be ambitious, time to be visionary, time to deliver rail for Derry and time, once again, to unite the people of Derry, Donegal and Dublin.

7.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member did not use her full allocation, which gives me 39 minutes. Six Members want to speak, so I can allow a time limit of six minutes and 50 seconds per Member. I just want to clarify that Mr Durkan and Ms McLaughlin wish to participate in this debate. Yes? As constituency Members, you get first call.

Mr Durkan: I very much welcome this evening's debate and thank the Member for bringing it to the House. Ms Anderson has outlined clearly the undeniable and blatant disparity in rail provision between the east and west of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the east and west of the island. A quick glance at a map detailing the rail network across the island shows the gaping hole in the north-west that is a stark image that demonstrates, beyond question, the impact of historic neglect and, quite feasibly, deliberate disinvestment in rail in that area.

It is hard to believe, but that picture would be even starker if the former Department for Regional Development and Translink had had their way 10 years ago, when they signalled that it was the end of the line for the Derry line. Huge credit and thanks must go to the local lobby group, Into the West, who saw not only the folly of that plan but the real potential of the Derry-Belfast or Belfast-Derry line to grow. A great campaign was fought. Sadly, in our constituency, we are well rehearsed in

mobilising to fight campaigns against such injustices, and that campaign was won. How the service has grown, with incremental improvements in timetabling and the use of EU funding to build a new multimodal transport hub. I certainly acknowledge the role that Chris Hazzard played in that. Those improvements, however, have been outstripped by a growth in rail passenger numbers, with a 61% increase in the two years since the hourly Belfast service was introduced in 2017. That is the fastest rate of passenger growth anywhere on the island. If we build it, they will come, and, if we build it up further, even more will come.

I am delighted that the Minister is not letting Translink sit on its laurels. She is pushing it to continue investing in and improving the existing services and infrastructure. That has been evidenced clearly by her responsiveness to issues raised by us as local elected representatives, even something as apparently minor as extending the availability of discounted journeys to Dublin that had previously, bizarrely, started and finished at Coleraine. It was not that minor that Translink could or would fix it without the Minister's intervention. She has looked at and continues to look at timetable tweaks to improve connectivity with Dublin. She has reversed the decision of her predecessor, Chris Hazzard, who removed plans for phase 3 — the renewal of the track between Castlerock and Eglinton — from this Budget period, and she has commissioned a feasibility study. An updated one was required, given that phase 3, as I said, had not been included in the next Budget period by Chris Hazzard. I do not enjoy political ping-pong, as Ms Anderson puts it, but being rebuked by Ms Anderson for blame game politics and negativity is like getting a goalkeeping lesson from Jordan Pickford.

The Minister remains engaged with Into the West, so this Minister has done well to get us back on track in the 10 months that she has been in post. Any time I discuss or debate the issue of rail in the north-west, I think of our late colleague and great friend, John Dallat. He was a true champion of rail. In many ways, unlike the trains, he was ahead of his time, seeing and espousing the environmental and economic benefits that investment could bring. He would be most proud of your commitment, Nichola. However, just as you will not let Translink rest on its laurels, he certainly would not have let the Minister rest on her laurels either, and she is not. In collaboration with her Southern counterpart, Minister Eamon Ryan, she has expanded on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to high-speed cross-border conductivity to include the north-west. We have to look beyond Derry being the end of the line,

as the potential for growth is massive. We would love to see an extension of the network and the restoration of rail in Tyrone, using Derry as a springboard into Donegal and beyond, as Ms Anderson said.

We need to have the ambition to create an all-Ireland rail network, and that ambition must be matched with investment and effort. I have no doubt that we can work collectively across the Chamber and in the Executive to deliver these much-needed and much-demanded services.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I suspect that, with any other Deputy Speaker, the Jordan Pickford thing would have been a hit, but football is completely over my head.

Ms Mullan: I am only after asking my colleague who Jordan Pickford is. I will google him after this.

I welcome tonight's debate, which has been brought by my colleague, Martina Anderson, and I thank the Minister for attending. I know that she is aware of the Derry line's history and the lack of rail infrastructure. It is an issue that unites all the parties in Foyle. I was a recent attendee at an Into the West meeting and heard about its long journey and the commitment that those people have given to fighting for rail infrastructure that is fit for our city and region. I pay tribute to that group for the work that it does.

As has been mentioned, the Derry to Belfast line has enjoyed much success over the past few years, all the while fighting to be recognised as a key element of our public transport network. The impressive passenger number increases on the Derry line after my colleague, Chris Hazzard, introduced hourly services to Belfast have led to Derry becoming one of the fastest-growing stations on the island, and that is a testament to the powers of rail to increase connectivity and incentivise people to take up public transport. The increase in passenger numbers has exceeded expectations, and we need to build on that. By decreasing journey times and increasing the frequency of the services, we can make public transport the transport option of choice.

The inclusion of Derry in the feasibility study for a high-speed rail network is very welcome, Minister. That needs to be pursued by action and delivery on the ground. As Mark Durkan said, a feasibility study on phase 3 of the line has been commissioned by the Minister, but I ask the Minister to go further and commit to delivering on that. It is a common belief that the north-west has a substandard state service in

comparison with east of the Bann, and it should be an objective of the Department to end that perception.

A century ago, Ireland had a much more comprehensive rail network. I am sure that most Members have seen the pictures, as it is a popular image on social media. It makes our current network look pale by comparison. It also highlights how the north-west's services were completely stripped away over the years, and who can deny regional inequality when they see the map? The north-west does not enjoy a rail network; it has a line connecting Belfast to Derry, a journey that takes two hours and 15 minutes. For many of us who travel to Belfast daily, taking the train is not a viable option. The line also possesses some of the most isolated stations on the island. The large appetite for rail in the north-west has been demonstrated, and we must build on that and provide a modern service for the people.

Over 30 years ago, my granda, a native of Belfast, used to take me on the train from Derry to Belfast and back home again. Over 30 years later, apart from the new transport hub building, little has changed. There has not been the expansion and investment that a region like the north-west would expect. Let us get phase 3 of the railway works delivered, let us improve the frequency of services, let us reduce journey times, let us look at increasing stations on the line and let us not confine the conversation to the current network.

We all look at the old rail network with astonishment, but no action is ever proposed to right that wrong. Let us begin exploring the expansion of the rail network in order to address the decades of neglect and underinvestment that the north-west has suffered.

Our rail network can play a huge role in tackling our carbon emissions. Emissions from transport amount to around 23% of the total greenhouse gas emissions in the North. It is the second highest carbon emitter on the island. By improving our rail services, we can make public transport a much more attractive alternative to private car journeys. However, an issue for rail as a whole is that our rail network is largely dependent on fossil fuels. We need to start decarbonising our rail network to make it truly sustainable.

We need only observe the success of the rail line in recent years to recognise the benefits that a greater service could bring to the north-west. Although we are in a challenging period, we always need to plan for the future, and that

should include improving a service that has proven its worth time and time again.

Ms McLaughlin: I, too, welcome the opportunity to take part in the Adjournment debate this evening to discuss the undeniable disparity in rail provision between the east and west of Northern Ireland. Within the infrastructure that exists, there is also an east-west disparity in the level of that service, with Derry and two other stations in the west suffering from a significantly poorer level and frequency of service than every station from Coleraine eastwards on the same line. My colleagues Martina, Mark and Karen have all clearly articulated the well-known operational and developmental issues that have plagued the railway service in the west for decades. We all agree that we need to improve the existing service and to improve and extend the existing network.

To date, Minister Nichola Mallon, you have done superb work for Derry, from road resurfacing to white-line painting, to new greenways and accelerating progress on Derry's road connections to Belfast and to Dublin. You have just got on with the job. That is even without mentioning the progress on Casement Park in Belfast and the grid interconnector. The latest example of progress on rail connectivity is the result of Minister Mallon's meeting with her counterpart in the Irish Government, Eamon Ryan, going further than the widely discussed fast rail connection between Belfast and Dublin and from there to Cork. Ministers Mallon and Ryan have instead taken the idea further to connect the undersupported cities of Derry and Limerick. This is what it looks like to have a Minister who takes Derry seriously. Minister Mallon has moved beyond the rather weak proposed phase 3 upgrade of the Derry to Belfast rail line, which, I am told, would deliver only a smoother train journey without providing a faster journey. We want to turbocharge that proposal, with the idea of having a truly fast and interconnected rail line taking us from Derry to Dublin and to Cork. That is something for everyone to get really excited about.

Sadly, this is not putting right all the mistakes of the past. Derry has suffered far more than its share of past mistakes, many of which were examples of deliberate discrimination against us and against Donegal. The destruction of the rail network across the western part of the province of Ulster is an example of that. I would love to see that vibrant infrastructure return, and, first of all, I would love to see a fully costed model for achieving that, along with a model to raise the capital to pay for it. I stress that I do

not want Translink to be privatised. The mess of the public transport system in England is evidence of what happens when public railway and bus services are privatised. I stress too that a privatised rail service would not rebuild the rail infrastructure that the west used to have, as the rate of return would be completely inadequate.

Let us acknowledge the work that Minister Mallon is doing for the west. She is investing in road and rail while giving the green light to increased investment in the electricity grid. That is all excellent for our connectivity and for our subregional economy, including job creation.

7.15 pm

I welcome the progress in bringing our train network into the 21st century. I hope that there will be an enlarged and truly all-island rail network. As I say, I look forward to fully costed proposals for the new rail lines. Let us come together to support and fund the Department for Infrastructure. That will require not only major ambition but major investment and an all-Executive approach to transform rail transport fully and truly on this island, north, south, east and west.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I will make a point of housekeeping: Members should be referred to either as "Mr" or "Mrs", and all comments should be made through the Chair rather than directly addressed to a Minister. Obviously, no offence was intended, but, on another occasion, offence may well be intended, so it is important that we establish that.

Mr Durkan: No bother, Chris [*Laughter.*]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members have been thrown out for less than that.

Mr K Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Adjournment debate on rail connectivity in Foyle. Unfortunately, as you can appreciate, I am no substitute for Gary Middleton. I do not know whether that is a positive or a negative. Unfortunately, Gary is unable to be here, so I will be speak as a DUP MLA from west of the Bann and as a member of the Infrastructure Committee.

Transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland plays a significant role in our economy. It is important for our students, our workers and our tourism sector. It has also proven to be effective in attracting investment into the north-west region. The DUP has been a champion of the

new graduate-entry medical school in Londonderry for many years. The increase in students, alongside further plans at Ulster University, further makes the case for improved rail infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The train service has proven to be a sustainable option for many employees travelling to and from Londonderry. That is better for the environment, and, in many cases, it is better for productivity, given that we regularly hear feedback from train users who enjoy being able to work as they travel. The railway line along Northern Ireland's scenic north coast was described by travel journalist Michael Palin as one of the most beautiful rail journeys in the world. Even Her Majesty The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh are fans of that beautiful route, having enjoyed a train journey along the railway line in recent years. We must ensure that that tourism asset gets maximum usage and investment to ensure that it achieves its full potential. The railway line has also proven key during major events such as the Open golf championship and the Clipper festival in Londonderry.

It is important to recognise that progress has been made to date. After years of lobbying by many sections of our communities, it was great to see the old Waterside railway station refurbished and the new north-west transport hub opened. That key project benefits connectivity in the north-west by integrating multimodal forms of transport and linking the station to the city centre and the wider greenway network. It is encouraging that passenger numbers on the trains have increased year-on-year. That proves that there is an appetite for that mode of travel. How much greater could that be if there were further investment in the lines?

The three years without a Government in Northern Ireland have, no doubt, had an impact on progress. The outgoing Infrastructure Minister, Chris Hazzard, left office with no direction for the Department. Delays in upgrades have caused a lot of frustration for railway users and campaigners. We need to see the delivery of phase 3 on the Londonderry to Coleraine line. The Minister has instructed that a further feasibility study be carried out on that, and it is vital that that be carried out as soon as possible. Additional halts along the line must be considered, particularly at Ballykelly, where the DAERA headquarters are located, and at City of Derry Airport. Those additional changes would be welcomed by commuters and users of those facilities.

As an MLA for Mid Ulster, I also recognise that there are wider issues with transport links in the west of the Province. I urge the Infrastructure

Minister to ensure that she lives up to the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' to address regional imbalance and the infrastructure deficits in the west. Of course, that extends beyond rail: we need delivery on our road infrastructure as well. I note that the Minister has announced a feasibility study for a high-speed Londonderry to Cork rail link. Despite the Minister's knee-jerk dismissal of the Northern Ireland to Scotland bridge link, I will await the findings of that feasibility study.

Improvements to our infrastructure in Northern Ireland must, however, be our priority. The Minister has the power to make significant improvements, but that will require a long-term vision and investment. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member from Foyle for bringing the debate to the Floor. It might sound strange that a Member for South Antrim is speaking on the issue of rail links to the north-west, but, as some of you will know, in my previous existence, I was the chief executive of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, and we spent considerable time trying to promote the north-west. Indeed, one of the most surprising things that we came across was when, in trying to reduce our environmental footprint, we decided to go to Londonderry by train. We reached the unusual situation where, when we arrived in Belfast on the Enterprise train, the train to Londonderry had just left. The two trains did not even connect up with the timetables, which showed the degree of improvements that needed to be made.

I want to refer to another Minister, Danny Kennedy, who in May 2014 introduced a rail investment prioritisation strategy. That was about investing sums of money that today would probably equate to close to £1 billion into the rail infrastructure. As part of that, we wanted to see improvements in the lines to Londonderry and improvements to the trackbed. We also wanted to see improvements so that we could open up the rail network across Northern Ireland in areas where it would work fairly easily. We wanted to see the likes of Glenavy and Crumlin being linked, and we wanted to see the existing rail network being used to its maximum potential, but the rail network needs a considerable amount of investment.

We need to look at it strategically, and, as Mr Matthew O'Toole has mentioned on several occasions, we can now look at interest rates somewhere close to zero-rate interest or even negative-rate interest for strategic investment. We should be looking at a wide-scale update to

our rail network and at how we do that. We also need to look at how we future-proof it for the environment, and the key to that is the question of how we electrify the rail network. That needs to be part of a wider economic strategy in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, part and parcel of our party's proposals to get zero net carbon by 2035 should be a significant investment in rail and how we manage to do that.

There are other issues that need to be done. This might sound strange coming from the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, but I believe very strongly in all-islands communication. I also believe that considerable investment needs to be put into the Belfast to Dublin rail link, but the most important part of that investment needs to be put into the area south of Drogheda that goes into Dublin around the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) line. We need to lay a new trackbed, and that new trackbed will be extremely expensive. That has to come on an all-island basis to look at how we get a proper and effective rail system. Many people think that Irish Rail, CIÉ and the rest of it are some kind of paragons of virtue, but they have significant infrastructure problems themselves. Indeed, one of the things that we should be looking at is where we can get some kinds of synergy between the Northern Ireland rail network and the rest of the rail network on this island.

We should also be looking at our existing trackbed before it disappears completely, and we should look at the opportunities to open up to Armagh and, potentially, Dungannon. That would give us an increased link and improve commuter links in and out of Belfast. We need to be able to spread this about as much as we can. Indeed, that might be a better opportunity to open up to the west.

I am surprised that the Member from Foyle did not mention the opportunity of extending the rail link further out towards Letterkenny and the improvements that there might be if that were able to be done. That would cost a significant amount, however, bearing in mind that, according to the shared island unit, approximately €500 million is supposed to be available for North/South infrastructure, one of the things that we should be using some of that money for is a proper investment strategy to look at how we are able to develop our rail links and communication links along those lines.

I am about to finish my remarks, however, since we are talking about trains, somebody did say to me, rather unfairly, that I look a bit like the Fat Controller from 'Thomas the Tank Engine'. To Members from my party, I say that I have

now won the bet. Thank you very much indeed. We do need the investment in rail.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No one had ever thought it, but thank you for putting that image into our mind.

Dr Archibald: I will speak briefly in this debate. I thought that maybe I was hijacking it a bit, but we have heard from Members for South Antrim and for Mid Ulster.

The unfortunate reality is that the only functioning rail infrastructure to Derry and the north-west is via Coleraine in my constituency, so I want to raise a couple of issues in relation to the Coleraine to Derry line.

Beyond Coleraine, to the west, the frequency and the timing of services are less favourable than they are to the south-east, as my party colleague Martina Anderson and also Sinead McLaughlin outlined. There is a need to address the level of service to ensure that workers can get to Belfast for work in the morning on time. Night-time services are also required so that people have the opportunity to use public transport for leisure.

A few weeks ago, I asked the Minister whether, as part of the Coleraine to Derry rail line feasibility study, she would consider additional halts, and specifically a halt at Ballykelly, where the DAERA headquarters is located and where, under normal circumstances, a couple of hundred civil servants would be working. As part of the urgent need to tackle the climate emergency by cutting emissions, increased public transport infrastructure is needed if we are to give people the opportunity and option to travel to work on public transport and encourage them to get out of their car. I was very pleased that she indicated that it will be included in the feasibility study. It is important that we take the opportunity to look at improving our communities' accessibility to rail infrastructure so that they have the opportunity to choose public transport for travel to work and to school and for leisure as part of their daily lives.

A number of potential stops between Bellarena and Derry would bring the opportunity to deliver public transport services to more local communities, with linkages into Limavady, Ballykelly, Greysteel and, of course, City of Derry Airport. Points have already been made about the level of service. Improving that will also be vital. It is important that those additional stops be considered in more than just an aspirational way. We all understand that there

are funding constraints, but we need to have vision and thus seek to identify funding and work towards delivering the work. As my party colleague outlined, infrastructure is vital to economic development and, in particular, to addressing the regional inequalities and imbalances that we have unfortunately seen over many decades.

Finally, as I have the opportunity, I will pick up on an issue that is often highlighted to me by my constituents in Magilligan. Under the phase 2 upgrade, a new passing loop and halting station were built at Bellarena. Parking facilities at the station have remained unfinished, however. Despite a lot of contact with Translink, that issue is as yet unresolved. It remains a frustration for the local community. Perhaps the Minister will look into that situation to see whether it can be resolved.

I thank my party colleague Martina Anderson for bringing forward the Adjournment topic. I look forward to continuing to engage with the Minister on these issues and on other constituency infrastructure projects.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Gerry Carroll, I see Mr Muir in his place. Do you wish to speak in the debate?

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I declare an interest as a former employee of Translink and a self-confessed and perhaps lifelong bus and train nerd. I thank the Member for bringing the matter to the Assembly. I speak as the Alliance Party's spokesperson on infrastructure.

It is clear from the debate that we are all in agreement about the lack of rail connectivity in Foyle. As Mr Buchanan — to give him his correct title, in line with Standing Orders — said, the Belfast to Derry railway journey was noted by Michael Palin as being one of the most beautiful in the world. That documentary is currently available on the BBC iPlayer, if anyone wants to watch it. Previous upgrades in phase 1 and 2, restoration of the old Waterside railway station and the introduction of new CAF trains have enabled many more people to enjoy the journey in better comfort and style. The service, however, remains too infrequent and excessively slow, with the journey by road, or even by bicycle, often being quicker than that by rail. It is incredible that, just a few years ago, John Madden was able to cycle from Derry's General Post Office to the Albert clock in Belfast quicker than the journey would have taken by train. As Ms Anderson stated, for commuters, only one train leaves Derry on a weekday that arrives in Belfast before 9.00 am.

For concertgoers and anyone else attending an event in Belfast at the weekend, the last train leaves Belfast for Derry just after 9.00 pm. Those restrictions mean that, for many people in Derry, the train to Belfast is just not a viable option.

The problem extends beyond the Belfast to Derry railway line.

Derry's location offers fantastic access to the west of Ireland, but rail connectivity to Donegal, Sligo and elsewhere across the border is non-existent, with just three railway stations west of the Bann. It was not always that way, but, regrettably, it is now, and we have to focus on what can be done about it.

7.30 pm

The Alliance Party supports pushing ahead with phase 3 of the Coleraine to Derry railway upgrade at the earliest opportunity. That project is vital in improving the speed and reliability of services to and from Foyle at a fraction of the cost that we are investing in road projects. Politicians across the island have long spoken about the need for high-speed rail connecting the largest cities in Ireland. I welcome last week's announcement from Minister Mallon and Minister Ryan concerning the commission of a feasibility study into the planned high-speed rail network all the way from Cork to the north-west. However, if we are to see a sustained effort to improve rail connectivity to the north-west and beyond, we need an infrastructure commission for Northern Ireland that will produce a medium- to long-term infrastructure plan to be delivered by the Executive.

It is through a funded, sustained, medium- to long-term infrastructure plan that well-meaning aspirations for better rail connectivity in the north-west can be turned into a tangible reality. Any such infrastructure strategy must have building back better and responding to the climate emergency at its heart. I can think of no better project than improving rail connectivity in Foyle to support a regionally balanced green recovery.

In closing, better rail connectivity to the north-west must be at the heart of a funded Executive-sponsored medium- to long-term infrastructure strategy. If that can be achieved, we will, maybe, turn back the clock and look towards better rail connectivity that links Belfast to Derry/Londonderry, Dublin and beyond.

Mr Carroll: I am a West Belfast MLA, but it is important that I speak on this issue as I am

interested in and support the extension and rolling out of public services and infrastructure across the North more generally. I have frequently travelled on the slow but beautiful line from Belfast to Derry. That description is probably the only thing that I agree with Portillo on.

People Before Profit has been fighting for rail in Derry for many years — long before the big parties paid focus to the issue. To put it bluntly, the issue might not have been discussed as it is today had it not been for my former MLA colleague, Mr Eamonn McCann, and a handful of other activists in Into the West who raised the issue many years ago, when it was neither popular or profitable. Eamonn raised the issue when he was here, and people campaigned outside the Building and forced others to take the issue seriously. It is clear from my understanding of the issue, that pressure from below forced it on to the agenda and forced people to take it seriously as an issue at the forefront of local politics in Derry.

Trains are the most environmentally friendly means of mass transportation ever devised. Our rail service, as inadequate and underfunded as it is, is part of the public service. In the current decrepit state of capitalism, we must preserve all that we can of the public service. We live on a small and beautiful island, and we should put a necklace of rail around it for people to experience it in every way that they can. That is especially important in the era of COVID, when people need to travel locally to experience the beauty of the island, and for the many people who do not or cannot drive, or who do not have access to a car.

Expanding the Derry service would, obviously, be a start to the endeavour, and it could set a benchmark that could be followed for other areas across the island. I share Members' support for railway expansion across the north-west region beyond Derry and Donegal and other places, but, frankly, I do not hold out much hope in the Southern Government delivering that, but I am happy to be proved wrong. I will leave it there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, to respond to the debate. The Minister has 10 minutes.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank Ms Anderson for securing this Adjournment debate on railway connectivity in the north-west, which she and many others in Derry are passionate about. I listened with

interest to the comments made and points raised by Members.

While we may have political differences and different viewpoints on many issues, it is clear that rail unites people across all political parties. I believe that people have a deep emotional connection to rail, and we should aspire to do more on it. I am committed to doing that during my tenure as Minister.

It is true that the people of Derry and the north-west have waited for far too long for investment in rail. Members are right when they talk about the starkness of the rail map and the stark imbalance between east and west. That has, understandably, led to a sincere feeling among people in the north-west that they have been left behind. That is why it is important that I assure Members that I will not be a Minister who leaves the north-west behind. Since coming into office, I have been clear that my priority is addressing regional imbalance, better connecting communities and, importantly, ensuring that we shape our places around our people, for our people and with our people.

There are many benefits to investing in our rail network. Transport underpins our quality of life and chances of economic success. Our rail network plays a key role in making the North a more attractive place to visit, live, work and do business. That means giving people and businesses more and better choices about when, where and how to travel. For too long, though, we have not been ambitious or courageous enough. We have to think bigger, not least now because we need to tackle the climate crisis, grow our island economy and improve connectivity, not just across the North, but right across this island, as many Members who contributed to the debate rightly recognised.

Members have shown their enthusiasm, and I really do share that. However, we have to work together, as Ms Anderson and others said, if we are to achieve the change that we desire for our communities. Investing in infrastructure is critical if we are to move forward on our ambitions. We cannot just stand still and maintain our public network, which is a huge challenge in the face of COVID and a dramatic reduction in passenger numbers and income. We have to be ambitious enough not just to protect it; we have to grow it. That needs to be our collective ambition in the Assembly and Executive.

In recent years, my Department has invested over £100 million in major rail projects in the north-west. That included phases 1 and 2 of the

Coleraine to Derry track relay project, totalling over £70 million, and investment in the north-west multimodal transport hub, which Members referenced, amounting to over £27 million. My Department also invested £68 million in new trains that will help to increase capacity across the network, including on the Coleraine to Derry line. In addition, £474 million is being spent to upgrade the A6, and the projected cost of the A5 is £657 million.

However, more needs to be done to address historical underinvestment in the north-west. That is why I have committed to a new feasibility study to get phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail line back on track, and I have ring-fenced funding for that work to be done at pace. That will ensure that all future spend is fully informed by a robust business case and that there is high-level assurance on costs and on risk and benefit realisation. That will include working with Translink, Into the West and councils to examine within the new feasibility study the options of new halts and associated park-and-ride facilities at Strathfoyle, Eglinton, City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly. It will also examine the possibility of introducing half-hourly services from Derry. Members will also now that I recently announced that Derry will be included in the high-speed rail feasibility study.

The New Decade, New Approach commitment did not extend to the north-west, and that was simply not acceptable to me or my counterparts in the Irish Government. I am absolutely delighted that Minister Ryan and I, at the recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting, confirmed that we would develop a feasibility study of a potential high-speed rail connection between Derry, Belfast, Dublin, Limerick and Cork as we seek to create a spine of connectivity on the island and work collaboratively to tackle regional imbalance.

All-island connectivity should excite us all, not least because it better connects our communities in a more sustainable, cleaner and greener way, but also because it opens up huge potential for our economy. The new regional strategic transport network transport plan will also set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035. Consultation on this plan will provide the opportunity for Members to make proposals on extending the rail network even further. I look forward to further engagement with them on the plan in the weeks and months ahead.

In closing, I want to reaffirm that I have real ambition for rail on our island. It is an untapped resource and opportunity to boost economic

growth and tourism and, as Members have said, tackle the climate emergency. We are in unprecedented and hugely challenging times. It is at this very moment when creativity and ambition are most needed. Delivering an ambitious rail programme requires vision, investment and determination. I can assure you all that I have that determination and commitment to work in partnership with you and with partners right across the island as we deliver the radical change that the rail network on our island needs.

I have addressed a number of Members' points but, in the remaining time, I will very briefly turn to specific points that Members have raised. Ms Anderson talked very passionately about how things were when it comes to rail, how it was abandoned and the dereliction that has ensued. She is absolutely right that rail is key to growing our all-island economy and that we will flourish when we have clean, sustainable infrastructure — and that that infrastructure is rail. She is right to show that passenger numbers have increased exponentially over the past number of years; a number of Members pointed that out. That is inevitable when you think of the most scenic route that is the line between Belfast and Derry. As Mark Durkan said, if you build it, they will come. We all need to have that ambition for our rail network.

Ms Anderson asked about the need to improve our existing services and expand them through phase 3. As she will know, I am pleased that, working with Into the West, which is an important partner in devising the terms of reference, we have been able to shave six months off the feasibility study. We are accelerating that feasibility study at pace. But of course a feasibility study is only good enough until you get the money to be able to deliver it, so while I have ring-fenced money for the feasibility study, I very much look forward to bilaterals with Minister Murphy and to continue to make the case for investment in rail with our Executive colleagues because I believe, as Ms Anderson does, that investment in rail is a necessity. I agree that infrastructure is central to our recovery from COVID and our challenges in the face of Brexit.

Mark Durkan also talked about the deliberate disinvestment in rail. I agree with him that Into the West has been, and continues to be, a driving force for change behind the rail campaign. He also referenced the multimodal transport hub and, yes, that is very much welcome investment. However, Members are right that we need to do so much more. He is right that, when you are discussing rail, particularly in the SDLP, you cannot help but

think very fondly of John Dallat. I would very much have liked to have had his company in the Chamber while we were discussing this tonight.

As all Members have said, partnership working is really important. We need to build on the commitments in New Decade, New Approach. That partnership working requires all of us, as elected representatives across all the political parties, to work in partnership with the local council and Into the West, but also right across these islands.

Steve Aiken was right in saying that we have to look at connectivity. We have a huge opportunity. The Irish Government have announced €500 million for infrastructure North and South. Boris Johnson is talking about a connectivity review and how we need to turbocharge infrastructure. There are huge opportunities for us to use rail to connect our island North and South, but also to be very mindful of how we can connect better to our airports and ports so that we maximise our connectivity across these islands.

Sinead McLaughlin spoke about job creation and the importance of rail in transforming economic opportunity, and I completely agree. Other Members spoke very eloquently about climate action and the role of rail in that, and I agree wholeheartedly.

I also agree wholeheartedly with Mr Muir. We need a long-term vision and a strategic approach. I also absolutely agree with him on the importance of having an infrastructure commission that takes that strategic, long-term approach and which recognises, as every Member who has spoken tonight has, the importance and transformative power of our rail network.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank all the Members who participated in the debate.

Adjourned at 7.45 pm.

Suggested amendments or corrections that arrive no later than two weeks after the publication of each report will be considered by the Editor of Debates.

They should be sent to:

✉ **Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**

☎ **028 9052 1135**

✉ **simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk**

Hansard reports can be made available in a range of alternative formats, including large print, Braille etc. For more information, please contact:

✉ **Hansard Admin Unit, Room 251, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**

☎ **028 9052 1463**

✉ **hansard@niassembly.gov.uk**

The Official Report (Hansard) is licensed under the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence, which can be accessed here: [Open Data Licence](#)

[To receive an alert each time an updated plenary report is published, you can follow @NIAHansard on Twitter](#)