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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the first item of business on the Order Paper, I would like to make a couple of remarks. First, and in particular, I want to wish Christopher Stalford well. As many Members will know, he is still in hospital after taking ill again last week. On behalf of the Assembly, I want to send our best wishes to Christopher and his family. Secondly, I have spoken to Daniel McCrossan this morning, who is in isolation having tested positive for COVID-19. I want to commend Daniel for the robust self-isolation measures that he has taken. Again, on behalf of the Assembly, I send our best wishes to Daniel and his family in the time ahead.

Matter of the Day

David Cook

Mr Speaker: Mrs Naomi Long has been given leave to make a statement on the death of Mr David Cook, which fulfils the criteria that are set out in Standing Order 24. If further Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Before I call Mrs Long, I want to say that I knew David personally very well and worked with him on Belfast City Council. Many people will know that the years when we were both on the city council in the 80's and onwards were, at times, marked by very toxic circumstances. David was a man who was always very measured, civil, polite and easy to work with. We may not always have agreed politically, but that is irrelevant. I want to pass on my personal condolences to David Cook's family.

Mrs Long: Thank you for your words about David, Mr Speaker. I am, obviously, very sad but also honoured to pay tribute to an Alliance Party founding member, David Cook, who passed away peacefully on Saturday evening after a brief illness. Having previously suffered a stroke, he, sadly, contracted COVID-19.

On occasions such as this, I am reminded that it is because of the vision and courage of people like David Cook and all those who came together to form the Alliance Party that I am standing here today in the Chamber and that people have the option of voting for a different kind of political representation, committed to the creation of one community, united but diverse and inclusive. We are proud of their hard work, their desire to see a better way forward for Northern Ireland and their determination to make it happen. We are committed to continuing that work for a new generation.

David not only was a leader within Alliance as a member of our first executive and later as deputy leader from 1980 to 1984 but broke the mould in City Hall when he became the first non-unionist to be elected Lord Mayor in 1978. He served south Belfast faithfully on Belfast City Council from 1973 until 1985 and then at the ill-fated Northern Ireland Assembly from 1982 to 1986. He was also a committed European and stood as a European parliamentary candidate in 1984.

In more recent years, he continued his interest in Alliance and was a regular at party conferences and dinners over the years. His loss in this our fiftieth year is all the more poignant as we never got to celebrate that anniversary together as a result of COVID-19, to which he ultimately and tragically succumbed.

He also continued with his work in community projects, because that was what led him into politics and that was what he continued to do in his retirement from politics.

My thoughts and those of the Alliance family are very much with his wife, Fionnuala, today, his sons Barbary, John, Patrick, Julius and Dominic, his granddaughters Romy and Imogen, his sisters Alison and Nora, and the wider family circle as they mourn his passing.

David was a beacon of liberalism during very dark times, and he was a trailblazer for equality, respect and fairness when all three were in short supply. He offered the hope of change when hope was scarce, and for that we will always be grateful. He was also a gentleman, well liked by those who met him and dearly loved by those who knew him, not least for his warm wit and his sense of humour. He will be very sadly missed by us all.

Mr Newton: I rise to speak on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party and to extend my sympathy and that of the party to David Cook's wife, Fionnuala, and to the wider family circle.

As you mentioned, Mr Speaker, David Cook served on Belfast City Council. I did not have the opportunity to serve at a time when David was a public representative. He represented south Belfast in the Cromac ward, as it was known at that time. In my time, anything that I heard about David Cook was always extremely positive. He came into public service at a time when it was much more difficult and dangerous than perhaps it is today. He brought to civic life his particular skills, not only his personality but his legal mind, and applied those to problems.

We are all the sadder in society for the loss of David Cook, not only in the political realm but in the community realm where he concentrated his efforts after his retirement from politics.

I will finish as I started by extending the sympathies of the Democratic Unionist Party to our colleagues in the Alliance Party and to the family circle.

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Speaker, in line with your opening remarks about Christopher and Daniel, I also wish them a speedy recovery.

I pass on my deepest sympathies on behalf of Sinn Féin to David Cook's family, to his wife, Fionnuala, and to the Alliance family. I knew David through meeting him at various events and through his community work. I always found him, as you said, to be a gentleman. He was someone who was prepared to listen, who engaged in a respectful manner, and who, in my opinion, was always in a listening mode. It is easy to have a conversation with someone and to nod your head, but with David, you could say, "There is somebody who is taking on my point of view. We are taking on each other's point of view. We may not always agree". That tribute has to be paid to him.

I met David's wife, Fionnuala, on several occasions, and, I have to say, they were a lovely couple, always very welcoming and very warm. I offer the family my deepest sympathies. It is another reminder, as if we need one, of the dangers that COVID-19 presents to our communities and another tragic loss for a family as a result of this terrible disease. I pass on my sympathies and the sympathies of my party to all concerned.

Mr O'Toole: Mr Speaker, I, too, associate myself and my party with the remarks that you made about my constituency colleague Christopher Stalford and, indeed, my party colleague Daniel.

As others have, the SDLP would like to pass on its sincere condolences to David Cook's family, his wife, Fionnuala, the broader family and indeed our Alliance Party colleagues. David Cook was clearly someone who represented the very best of our politics and our society. He was someone who cared immensely about finding, building and expanding the common ground in a conflicted society.

On Twitter, Naomi Long talked about a painting of David Cook from his term as Belfast Lord Mayor. I remember my first trip to City Hall as a schoolboy. At some point, after seeing these very grand portraits, I saw a more modern,

bright, colourful painting by Neil Shawcross. I did not know who David Cook was then and I did not know who Neil Shawcross was, but, in many ways, that painting stood for a lot of what David Cook seemed to stand for: bold, progressive, modern politics. His loss will clearly be felt by the Alliance family and by people in south Belfast. In a sense, he was a predecessor of mine as an Assembly Member for the constituency.

It is a deeply sad day for David's family, but, hopefully, they and the Alliance family will look on at the warm words being said about him today in the Northern Ireland Assembly and be consoled that his legacy is a very proud and important one.

Mrs Barton: First, I send my party's best wishes Christopher and Daniel and wish them both a full recovery.

On behalf of the party, I extend our condolences to Mr Cook's family and his wife on their recent bereavement. While I did not know Mr Cook, I understand that he was a great community person, great company and a gentleman. Although in politics we do have our differences, I think that, at this time particularly, we should put those differences aside.

I also express our greatest sympathies to the Alliance Party.

Mr Dickson: I will open my remarks by asking the Assembly to think about Christopher Stalford and Daniel McCrossan in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

I rise to add a personal tribute to the remembrance of David Cook and to send my sympathies to Fionnuala and the wider circle. I came into elected politics in 1977. David was already an elected representative by that stage. I have fond memories of David and Fionnuala; not only were they key for me in listening to the sort of speeches that they made at party meetings and conferences but they were there for young branches starting up in the Alliance Party. They were always there to help us canvass, pointing us in the right direction and encouraging us in those days. That is what it was all about. It was the encouragement that David and Fionnuala gave to all of us in respect of the party.

I also had a professional relationship with David Cook. He was a solicitor in Sheldon and Stewart when I was working as a conciliation officer in the Labour Relations Agency. We could have been canvassing or at party meetings at the weekend, but, on a Monday, I

had to deal with him on a professional basis. He was very professional in his work as a solicitor. He worked very hard for his clients, and I remember those meetings with fondness, but we always had a good chat afterwards as to what had been going on at the weekend.

I just want to add my personal and deep felt condolences to Fionnuala and the family at this very sad time.

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. Thank you. That brings that matter to a close. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

12.15 pm

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, the next item of business is a motion regarding Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr John O'Dowd be appointed as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Ms Ennis.]

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Meeting

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Speaker has received notice from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members still have to ensure that their name is on the speakers' list if they wish to be called for a question. They can do so by rising in their place or by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking a question: it is an opportunity to ask questions, not to make speeches. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions to questions will not be allowed.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): In compliance with section 52C(2) of the 1998 Act, I wish to make the following statement on the 24th plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), which was held in Dublin Castle on 31 July 2020. The Irish Government were led by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD, who chaired the meeting. The Executive were led by First Minister, Arlene Foster, and by myself. All Executive Ministers, with the exception of the Minister of Justice, attended the meeting. The First Minister has agreed that I can make this report on our behalf.

Ministers welcomed the resumption of meetings of the Council. The meeting provided the new Irish Government and the new Executive with the opportunity to meet formally for the first time and to exchange views on a wide range of issues of mutual interest and concern. Ministers received a report from the joint secretaries on the work of the NSMC since 2016, including work undertaken across the NSMC sectors. They noted that three meetings of the Council, including one institutional meeting, had taken place since the last plenary meeting in November 2016.

The Council noted that the work of the North/South bodies has continued to make a significant contribution to communities, society and the economy of both jurisdictions. It also

expressed appreciation to the boards and staff of those bodies for their work since 2016.

The Council also welcomed the mutually beneficial cooperation that is taken forward between Ministers and their Departments across the areas of cooperation. Ministers noted the ongoing work of the north-west strategic growth partnership and the continued engagement of senior officials in both Administrations with regional stakeholders regarding the direction, and priorities, for the north-west region.

With regard to coronavirus, the Council was briefed by the Chief Medical Officers, Dr Ronan Glynn and Dr Michael McBride, on the current public health situation and on ongoing cooperation on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministers extended their condolences to all those who have lost loved ones as a result of the pandemic. They also expressed their appreciation to all those who have played a part in the COVID-19 response, in particular health and social care workers, who have shown extraordinary courage and dedication in their work on the front line.

The Council noted that senior representatives of the Executive and the Irish Government, along with their Chief Medical Officers, met at the NSMC secretariat offices in Armagh on 14 March to review the situation regarding the COVID-19 virus and how best to address the outbreak. At that meeting, Ministers affirmed that everything possible would be done in coordination and cooperation between the Irish Government and the Executive and with the active involvement of the health administrations in both jurisdictions to tackle the outbreak. Senior representatives of both Administrations have continued to meet regularly to discuss the ongoing COVID-19 response. The Council noted the memorandum of understanding on public health cooperation on the COVID-19 response agreed between the Departments of Health, North and South, on 7 April. The Council welcomed the close and productive cooperation that has taken place between Health Ministers, Chief Medical Officers and health administrations, North and South, to deliver an effective public health response. Ministers agreed that an early meeting of the Council in the health sector should review ongoing cooperation in responding to the pandemic.

The Council also noted the impact of the pandemic on society and on the economy, North and South, and the measures put in place by both Administrations to support communities and businesses affected by the crisis and to

assist with economic recovery. Ministers agreed that the upcoming meetings of the Council in relevant sectors will consider how North/South approaches can contribute to the promotion of economic and social recovery.

Ministers noted the continued commitment of the Irish Government and the Executive to work through the North/South Ministerial Council to help deliver projects that will benefit people across the island, including through investment in infrastructure that will support cooperation and unlock the full potential of the economies of both jurisdictions. The Council welcomed the progress made to date in progressing commitments identified in section E of the Fresh Start Agreement relating to infrastructure and support cooperation and noted the new and renewed commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach' and the associated Irish Government commitments.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the Ministers for today's statement. I will gently push this: this is our third week back, and we have had very light amounts of work from the Executive. The statement probably could have been made two weeks ago, but I am thankful that it has been made today.

In the statement, you referenced the appointments to the board of Tourism Ireland and the fact that there are vacancies on some of the other boards as well. Given that the North/South Ministerial Council can cover areas including health, the environment, agriculture and transport and with Brexit approaching in a matter of a few weeks, will the Council undertake to do all that it can to fill those vacancies? Is it possible to get in writing information on what the vacancies are at this stage?

Mrs O'Neill: This is the first opportunity that we have had to come to the Chamber. I accept that it is preferable that, after an NSMC meeting, we come quickly to the Chamber, because it is still current and we are able to discuss things, so we take that on board.

On the appointments, you are right: the Council approved the appointment of four directors of Tourism Ireland with effect from 31 July 2020 to 30 July 2025. The members appointed were Ruth Andrews, Joe Dolan, Stephen McNally and Mary Mulvey. They were nominated by the Irish Government. Obviously, there are outstanding board appointments — 10 in total — from the Executive, and we need to move speedily to nominate people. There will be a lot of sectoral meetings happening over the next

weeks and months, and they will provide plenty of opportunity to get all those positions filled as quickly as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members will note that there are considerable numbers wishing to ask questions. I remind Members that some leeway is given to the Committee Chair, but I ask others to be more concise.

Mr Robinson: Does the deputy First Minister accept that Great Britain is our largest market and that avoiding friction in trade east-west should be the Executive's key priority in the ongoing negotiations?

Mrs O'Neill: I say to the Member that is in all our interests to minimise disruption to trade. We want to see frictionless trade North/South and east-west. We as a people are being used as a pawn in the middle of the Brexit debate right now, and that is not a good place for us to be. Our people need certainty. Our businesses need certainty. We will work to make sure that that happens. That is one of the issues that we discussed at the NSMC, and, no doubt, we will have to keep coming back to it. We need an outcome that serves the people here well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members to make sure that they speak into an adjacent microphone for the benefit of Hansard and other Members.

Mr Sheehan: Was there any discussion of scoping out the possibility of a high-speed rail link between Belfast and Dublin?

Mrs O'Neill: It was something that we discussed. Improving connectivity between Belfast and Dublin is key in delivering opportunities for better connecting the island of Ireland and enhancing our respective economies. Our rail network, whilst relatively small, presents a unique opportunity. In line with that and the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', officials in the Department for Infrastructure have begun early discussions with their counterparts in the South regarding the process for developing a feasibility study of a potential high-speed rail connection between Belfast, Dublin and Cork. I know that our colleagues in the north-west would include Derry in that. That work is ongoing, and Nichola Mallon, the Minister for Infrastructure, intends to engage with Minister Ryan to discuss the improvement of the transport links — both rail and road — between Belfast and Dublin. An NSMC transport sectoral meeting is scheduled to take place in early October where this and

other matters will be discussed, following which Minister Mallon report to the Assembly.

Mr Nesbitt: I trust that the deputy First Minister will agree that a seven-week delay in reporting to the Chamber is not consistent with the spirit of the New Decade, New Approach commitment to transparency and accountability.

My question is about the commitment to an early meeting of the Council in health sector mode. Can the Minister tell us when that took place and what was the outcome?

Mrs O'Neill: I concur with the Member, as I did with the Chair of the Committee, that it is important that we turn the statements around quickly and bring reports to the House. The Assembly has been sitting for only two weeks, so, obviously, there has been a bit of a delay, but I take on board what the Member has said.

There is a health sectoral meeting planned for 2 October, which is only a short time away. I believe that that meeting will take place virtually, given the restrictions. Given where we are across these islands with the rise in COVID and what we are witnessing, it is really important that that meeting happens as quickly as possible so that we can share our information and work together where we can.

Ms Bradshaw: The ambition for the all-island memorandum of understanding was that there be greater cooperation and alignment across the island. However, the nature of restrictions reimposed in Belfast versus Dublin is different, the statistical analysis presented by the Chief Medical Officers is different and the communications are different. Can you provide some examples of where the memorandum of understanding is working or has worked?

Mrs O'Neill: The signing of the memorandum of understanding was crucially important in our fightback with regard to COVID-19. As we know, the virus does not recognise borders and does not stop somewhere because there is a different jurisdiction. The work that we have done across the island — sharing data and modelling and the work with the app to make sure that, no matter where you travel on the island, the app works — is all crucial, but we could do an awful lot more. I hope that, at the sectoral meeting on 2 October, the two Health Ministers and the Chief Medical Officers, in response to the current situation with COVID, will bring forward additionality to the memorandum of understanding and what else we can do to work together to get through the

winter months, which, we all readily acknowledge, will be very challenging.

Mr Clarke: Will the deputy First Minister give her assessment of the action taken by the Taoiseach and the Irish Government in response to some of the Ministers and their colleagues breaking health guidelines?

Mrs O'Neill: That is a matter for the Taoiseach and the Dáil.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, can you give us an outline of how EU-related matters of interest to the North and the whole island of Ireland will be taken forward by the North/South Ministerial Council?

Mrs O'Neill: At the plenary meeting in Dublin, the Council had a useful discussion around the implications of the British Government's withdrawal from the EU. There was a recognition that the jurisdictions had a common interest in minimising disruption to trade and economic activity on the island. The North/South Ministerial Council provides a useful forum for the consideration of such matters, and Ministers will continue to engage on the implications of the withdrawal from the EU, both at NSMC sectoral meetings and bilaterally, where appropriate, and we will consider EU exit again at the next plenary.

Officials from both jurisdictions will also continue with their ongoing engagement.

12.30 pm

You will also be aware that the Joint Committee established by the withdrawal agreement will keep under constant review the extent to which the implementation and application of the protocol maintains the necessary conditions for North/South cooperation and that the specialised committee will examine proposals concerning the implementation and application of the protocol from the NSMC. Should matters be identified that Ministers believe merit consideration by the specialised committee, the NSMC provides a mechanism to enable that.

Ms P Bradley: Can the deputy First Minister give us any update on the progress of the Ulster canal?

Mrs O'Neill: Some progress has been made. Back in 2007, as you know, Waterways Ireland was given NSMC approval to explore the potential to restore the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. Phase 1 of the

restoration, from Upper Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson, is now complete; preliminary work on phase 2, from Clones to Clonfad, has now commenced; and phase 3, when complete in the future, will connect Castle Saunderson with Clonfad and complete the restoration of the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. I welcome the progress that had been made and the commitment from the Irish Government to completing the third phase. The project will deliver social and economic benefits and will absolutely improve citizens' lives.

Ms Anderson: I thank the joint First Minister for that statement and ask her for an indication as to what focus the North/South Ministerial Council will have on the north-west development fund in any future funding arrangements.

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for the question. The current north-west development fund is still running, with funding approved until 2022. This includes a six-month extension of the funding period to take account of the COVID pressures and their implications for projects. The total investment committed by the Executive is approximately £2.15 million. This commitment is match funded by the Irish Government, as agreed in the Fresh Start Agreement in 2015. The north-west development fund has delivered a number of successful projects. Some examples are: developing economic growth through trade and investment missions; developing the physical environment by contributing to the INTERREG greenways project; and, through north-west sports development, strengthening community cohesion and well-being. The Irish Government indicated in New Decade, New Approach that they were committed in principle to providing further funding to the north-west development fund in collaboration with the Executive. The north-west regional development group recently wrote to us seeking a continuation of the fund beyond the current arrangements, and the First Minister and I are considering this request, which will require engagement with the Irish Government.

Mr O'Toole: Deputy First Minister, there has been a lot of chatter in the last few weeks about what is and is not in the Good Friday Agreement. Do you recognise that paragraph 17 of strand two of the agreement says that the North/South Ministerial Council should:

"consider the European Union dimension of relevant matters, including the implementation of EU policies and

programmes and proposals under consideration in the EU"?

To that end, can you be more specific about exactly what the North/South Ministerial Council is doing in relation to the implementation of the protocol and the protection of this entire island and why we are waiting until December to have a plenary session of the North/South Ministerial Council, after the deadline for *[Inaudible]*—.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his question.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my introductory remarks, this issue was discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council plenary session. That is not the only forum in which to discuss it, but it certainly is a forum in which to discuss it. If we happen to need other meetings outside the plenary format, we will not be shy in asking for them, particularly given the volatility of the situation that we find ourselves in right now. We want to see an outcome that works for people here. We want to see certainty and the minimisation of any disruption to trade. Those things are all crucially important, but we are clearly in politically volatile times with Brexit and what that means, and we hope that there is an outcome through the Joint Committee. I am happy to keep the Member updated on any discussions that we have on a North/South basis with regard to Brexit.

Mrs Barton: Deputy First Minister, in your statement, you affirmed that everything possible would be done in coordination and cooperation between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of the Republic of Ireland to tackle the latest outbreak of COVID. I represent a border constituency, and it is often the situation that neighbours from either side of the border find themselves going on the same holiday abroad together. When they return, those living in the Fermanagh/Tyrone area have to self-isolate for two weeks. If this is violated, they suffer the full rigour of the law, while those living in the Cavan/Monaghan area are free to socialise and mix and even come to Enniskillen.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can the Member to come to her question?

Mrs Barton: They can even come to Enniskillen to socialise. What discussions have there been about cooperation and coordination on issues that could result in the spread of COVID or endanger people?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks. The Member does represent a border constituency and

understands the challenges. She understands very well that the virus does not stop just because you move from one constituency to another or from one jurisdiction to another. That is why North/South cooperation on the issue of COVID is absolutely vital if we are going to be successful. I welcome the fact that there has been ongoing engagement at Chief Medical Officer level and at ministerial level, but, as we face into the winter months, we need to seriously ramp that up and work collectively across the island. We live on a very small island, and changes and differences in approach confuse the public, particularly in border constituencies. I think that we have to have an eagle eye to all of that and all the restrictions that are in place and work in tandem as best we can.

Mr Buckley: Is the deputy First Minister still committed to an extraordinary British-Irish Council meeting, and who does she believe or consider has been most reluctant to see one take place thus far?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very strongly on the record in saying that we need to have a British-Irish Council meeting, and we have asked for that and pushed for it on a number of occasions, even as recently as the weekend, when we had a call with Scotland, Wales and Michael Gove and again mentioned it there. I think that it is important that we have these meetings on a North/South and east-west basis. I am committed to all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement and all its institutions, so I think that that meeting should happen as a matter of urgency.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for making the statement today, and I note the cooperation between the Chief Medical Officers, going right back to 14 March. In the light of the fact that we are seeing very worrying increases in the spread of the virus from Dublin to Derry, that we are also seeing the unequal impact that that is having on working-class communities from Ballymun to Ballymena and that we are seeing postcodes affected here in the North that run along the border, to what extent is there effective cooperation between the Executive and the Government in Dublin in relation to COVID-19?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, I think that the extent of the ongoing discussion has been happening from the very outset of COVID, but I do think that it is time for us to renew our efforts and our focus, given what we are facing in the weeks and months ahead. You rightly point out border communities, for example Strabane and Lifford,

and you can see the pattern of the virus spreading. Those are all worrying developments, so now more than ever I think that we need to be very coherent and joined-up in our approach and continue, through the vehicle of the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meetings and on an ongoing basis, that regular engagement if we are going to be successful across this island in driving down transmission rates and trying to see our population get to the other side of this coronavirus.

Mr Dickson: Deputy First Minister, Brexit looms large as the UK approaches the endgame. Can the First Minister and deputy First Minister assure the House that they jointly share the best interests of people and businesses, given the often conflicting views of their respective parties?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that it is any secret to the Member that the First Minister and I have different outlooks on Brexit, but we have a commonality on the matter of protecting our people, and we want to see the minimisation of any disruption. I hope that a political outcome is achieved here over the next number of weeks, and I will use my best endeavours to play my part in all of that.

Ms Rogan: Give the rise in positive cases of COVID-19 in recent days and the challenges that the two Governments face together, can the Minister confirm when the next health sectoral meeting will be?

Mrs O'Neill: The next meeting will take place on 2 October. That is very timely given where we are at with the virus' spread. We in the Executive will have big decisions to take on how we manage our way through this crisis, so I think that that meeting on 2 October, only a number of days away, will be really useful and timely.

Mr McNulty: I thank the deputy First Minister for coming here and making a statement. Minister, given what previous Members who have spoken said about the increasing numbers of COVID cases from Dublin to Derry, do you agree that we should adopt a Fortress Ireland approach, with heightened collaboration, North and South, to ensure that we battle this virus effectively together?

Mrs O'Neill: We live on a very small island with a small population; we are one epidemiological unit, and I think that our best defence against this virus is actually to fight it in an all-island way. Just as we have that Fortress Ireland

approach when it comes to animal and plant health, I think that it is obviously important that we apply that also to our people.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, what discussions have you had about higher education in the North/South Ministerial Council? As you are very well aware, New Decade, New Approach includes a commitment for the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver the expansion of Magee to up to 10,000 students, and the Irish Government have made a commitment to support capital investment for the same expansion. It is important that both Governments jointly progress this policy and project.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you to the Member for the question. There will be a sectoral meeting — I think that it is at the very start of November — at which this will get a lot of discussion. The Executive, as you know, have reaffirmed their commitment, which was set out in New Decade, New Approach, to establish the graduate entry medical school on the Magee campus. That commitment is also absolutely in recognition of the fact that this is a transformative project for the North and the north-west region, both for the economic recovery and the wider social benefits that will come with it. The objective is to progress the project to secure a sustainable outcome in the fastest feasible time frame, with the aim of the first intake of 70 students in September 2020-21. This is a complex project, no doubt, involving a number of Departments and external agencies. The Executive Office is working with the Health, Economy and Finance Departments to prepare further advice to the Executive on the issues that need to be addressed to secure sustainability.

The inclusive futures fund will provide some £15 million of funding for three years to provide the platform for the school's long-term success. The Executive have also provided an assurance that they will provide funding for the project going forward, so it is a good news story for the north-west.

Mr Beattie: I have heard a lot of people say that COVID does not respect borders, and I absolutely agree with that: it does not respect borders. Considering the free movement of people on this island and off this island, on the rest of the British Isles, surely the Minister should be arguing for an all-islands approach — as in a British Isles approach — to deal with COVID-19.

Mrs O'Neill: I am on the record as saying that we should approach this in a very joined-up

way, so I believe that we need an all-island approach. I actually think that we should have an all-islands approach, particularly when it comes to things like travel. There are differences right across the islands and that is very confusing for the public in trying to work out where exactly they take their lead from. So, there is merit in all those things, and I am happy to work across these islands to battle COVID-19. It is about people first in the middle of all of this. It has to be about getting people through the pandemic and about us showing political leadership to get them through.

Mr Allister: In discussing COVID, did the Council discuss the undermining of the public messaging? In that regard, as a token of her sincerity, did she apologise for attending the Storey funeral? Even now, does she yet apologise for attending the Storey funeral?

Mrs O'Neill: The North/South Ministerial Council did not discuss that.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. The statement references the ongoing work of the north-west strategic growth partnership and indicates some cooperation to unlock the full potential of the economies of both jurisdictions. Therefore, I ask her specifically, has there been any discussion about the N2/A5 project and the Narrow Water bridge?

Mrs O'Neill: We talked about both those issues. The A5, for example, will greatly enhance the connectivity of the north-west, so it is a project that we all want to see finalised. It will reduce journey times and it will improve journey time reliability, road safety and all of that. In New Decade, New Approach, the Irish Government reaffirmed their £75 million funding commitment up to 2022 for the A5.

Following the quashing of the decision to proceed with the scheme in November 2018, the Department for Infrastructure is progressing the necessary work to enable a fresh decision to be taken. I understand that the commissioner's report on the public local inquiry into the 'Environmental Statement Addendum 2019' and related matters has been forwarded to the Department for Infrastructure, so we expect to see some progress being made there.

12.45 pm

In terms of Narrow Water bridge, again, we are absolutely committed to progressing that project, which has very strong local support, to link the communities on both sides of Carlingford lough and to take full advantage of

the tourism potential. Again, I understand that Minister Mallon visited the project recently and that the work on updating the economic appraisal of options continues in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. So, I hope that we will be able to see some progress being made there also.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, considerable time remains for this section, so if any Member wishes to ask a further question to the deputy First Minister, I ask them to indicate by rising in their place.

Mr McNulty: Minister, was the plight of frontier, cross-border workers raised at the North/South Ministerial Council? As per EU law, as I have been advised by various Ministers, North and South, the responsibility for assisting those people lies with the Minister for Communities. Will you confirm that and confirm whether you have made requests to the Minister for assistance for people who have been left behind or fallen through the gaps in the net of COVID support throughout the pandemic?

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that, yes, I have raised that issue on numerous occasions and I have written to the Irish Government on the issue. I think that it is a disgrace that those workers have been left behind. There needs to be a resolution. It is in the hands of the Irish Government to find that resolution and to make sure that those workers receive the payment to which they are entitled.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, thank you for your reply to my previous question, but it was not a reply to the question that I asked. I asked what conversations had taken place in the North/South Ministerial Council in relation to the further expansion of the Magee campus to 10,000 students, not about the medical school — that is a separate issue. The question is about the further expansion, the commitment made in the 'New Decade New Approach' document and the commitments made by the Irish Government for capital expenditure and investment in that expansion. So, could you answer that question, please?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sorry if I misunderstood your question. The issue was not discussed in detail at the NSMC because, obviously, we had a wide agenda, but there are, as I said, a number of sectoral meetings coming up, and that issue will get a much more detailed hearing. A meeting is due to take place on 6 November, so, hopefully, that will be an opportunity for a fulsome discussion on the issue.

We are committed to the full expansion of Magee. We have made that very clear, and it is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. We will just have to work very hard collectively in actually trying to deliver it.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for letting us all in again. Deputy First Minister, in relation to what we discussed earlier, will you use the North/South Ministerial Council to advance one particular question? All here want to see maximum access for Northern Ireland businesses North/South but also, critically, east-west. Can she advocate, via the North/South Ministerial Council, that businesses here be given access to EU trade deals? That is implicit in the Northern Ireland protocol, and, with goodwill, it should be possible to agree it in Brussels with, hopefully, goodwill from London.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I am happy take that up and to raise it at the next meeting. I think that, in an ongoing way with our colleagues in Dublin, we use that forum as a way of trying to advance such things, although, outside of that, there are obviously other opportunities, and I am happy to take that up.

Mr Allister: The Minister said that undermining the public message in respect of COVID was not discussed at the meeting. Since then, of course, we had the scandal of the golf dinner in Dublin. Does the Minister think that those who attended that and apologised were right to apologise, and, if they were right, why has she not apologised?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, the issue was not discussed at the NSMC.

Mr Lunn: Just to develop the discussion on Narrow Water, Minister, I know that it would have considerable infrastructural effect on the area, but do you agree that the tourism potential will be immense if we join up the Cooley peninsula and Carlingford with the Mourne? Considerable money was spent in the past on tourism development in the Mourne. It seems a pity that this scheme cannot be progressed quickly. It has been going on for about 10 years.

Mrs O'Neill: You are absolutely right. It has been going on for so long, and then people start to lose heart and think that it will not be delivered. We have a restored Assembly and Executive, and we have the NSMC now meeting. I intend to pursue this project because we cannot overstate the tourism potential that it will have for the area. I think that it is immense. It is in all our interests to try to get the project

delivered as quickly as possible, given that it has been so long in the making.

Mr Buckley: Given what we have heard today about COVID-19 being no respecter of borders, which I fully agree with, and the fact that some of our sporting organisations operate on a cross-border theme, particularly the GAA, does the deputy First Minister have any comments in relation to what has appeared to be a breach of COVID regulations with the mass pitch invasion at Dungannon's GAA game?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that questions are meant to be about the ministerial statement. I invite the Minister to respond if she wishes to do so.

Mrs O'Neill: It is not related to the NSMC.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you very much for letting us back in, Deputy Speaker. My question relates to the forthcoming health meeting. As MLAs, we have many emails in our in-boxes around waiting lists and delays because of the reconfiguration from COVID. To what degree will you look at an all-island approach to getting those waiting lists down and sharing capacity?

Mrs O'Neill: The detail of that would fall to the Health Minister, so the Member may wish to take that up with him, but there are opportunities for us to work across this island. Our waiting lists were already in a dire situation before COVID, and a lot of things have been put on hold as we try to respond to the pandemic, but we have to find ways to make sure that we look after people's health outside of the COVID situation.

For those people who have been waiting for a long time, I am quite sure that there are avenues for us to be able to work across the island to provide people with the opportunity to get the medical attention that they will require. There will be a need for us all to work really hard to address the waiting lists because we know that they are dire. They were dire before COVID, and they will be in an even worse state on the other side of it.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for letting us in again, Deputy Speaker. Minister, will you elaborate more on your statement when you talked about the all-Ireland economic recovery and what way that was dealt with at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting? Will there be a sectoral meeting on that or did the meeting go into any great detail?

Mrs O'Neill: The meeting itself had an understanding of the current situation that we find ourselves in, dealing with a global pandemic, how we are going to build on the other side of that, how we are going to build the economy, how we are going to look after society as a whole. There will be more opportunities to advance the economic recovery work through the sectoral meeting, which I am assuming — I do not have a date in front of me — is coming up shortly. We have to have a serious conversation about the type of society that we want to build on the other side of this. The economic recovery will be very difficult and very challenging, so we need to think outside the box and work collectively across this island.

Mr Nesbitt: Is the Minister aware of why the Justice Minister was absent? Were justice issues discussed?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I cannot remember why the Justice Minister was not available to attend, but there were no issues discussed that fell within her remit that we were not able to deal with.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions on the ministerial statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Committee Business

Pension Schemes Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Members should resume their seats when they have finished tidying.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 29 January 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill [NIA Bill 07/17-22].

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

Ms P Bradley: As the House will be aware, the Pensions Schemes Bill passed its Second Stage on 7 July 2020, and it was then referred to the Committee for Communities for its Committee Stage. At its last meeting prior to the summer recess on 8 July, the Committee agreed to issue its call for evidence, which went out on 5 August.

Without going into the detail of the Bill, it is worth advising Members that it seeks to introduce a regulatory regime in Northern Ireland for a form of occupational pension schemes called master trusts, in order to address a legislative gap. A similar provision was made for England, Scotland and Wales in the Pension Schemes Act 2017. Following the summer recess, the Committee began its consideration of the Bill, but it still has to undertake a number of tasks.

The Bill is key to ensuring the full regulation of master trusts that operate in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is essential that the Committee carries out robust scrutiny of the Bill, which contains 45 clauses and three schedules. That means that it needs to extend the Committee Stage.

At its first formal meeting after summer recess on 9 September, the Committee agreed to request an extension to the Committee Stage until 29 January 2021. That will allow the Committee for Communities to complete its scrutiny as fully as it can and within an

achievable time frame. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak on the motion. I will, therefore, put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 29 January 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill [NIA Bill 07/17-22].

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Private Members' Business

Honouring the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol

Ms Anderson: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North/South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour their commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

1.00 pm

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

Ms Anderson: There is no doubt that Brexit is an unmitigated disaster. How the British Government treated the Brexit withdrawal agreement and the protocol is no different from any other agreement that they have ever made. Sinn Féin warned the EU not to trust the British Government, and, true to form, after agreeing the withdrawal agreement and the protocol, the British Government immediately reinterpreted it, misinterpreted it, transcribed it incorrectly into domestic law and simply denied it.

EU laws, policies and funding touch on almost every aspect of our daily lives. There are, in fact, 115 areas of EU law that engage the Executive's and the Assembly's competency. As the motion states, it is unacceptable that the British Government would seek to abandon the safeguards and mitigations that are in the

withdrawal agreement and the protocol. Brexiteers such as Geoffrey Cox have described what Britain has done with its Internal Market Bill as "unconscionable". The Lord Chief Justice, Declan Morgan, stated that Britain's Brexit plan Bill undermines the rule of law domestically. Scotland's most senior law officer resigned over Britain's Internal Market Bill. Angela Merkel says that Britain has joined the "ranks of despots". All of that speaks volumes.

Even hardened Brexiteers must know that Brexit gives rise to political and economic challenges and that it is damaging, reckless and wrong. The Good Friday Agreement is facing an attack on all fronts. The British Government have eroded the authority of this Assembly — for example, by overriding our budgetary role — and can do so without so much as a nod to the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, or the wider Executive.

The British Government have also sidelined North/South cooperation. The environment, for instance, is a Good Friday Agreement area of cooperation, but Brexiteers rejected the need for a level playing field that would ensure that EU environmental protections were aligned across the island. Environmental standards in Derry would have remained the same as those in Buncrana, and anyone with a titter of wit knows and understands that pollution does not know any border. The Good Friday Government states that the British and Irish Governments must:

"discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest",

which include EU matters, yet no consultation or discussion took place between the British and Irish Governments, because the British Government completely ignored the role of the Irish Government as a co-guarantor of the agreement.

The British Government are driving a horse and cart through strands one, two and three of the Good Friday Agreement. As Sinn Féin said in 2016 about the Good Friday Agreement, and many others have repeated it, "Britannia waived the rules". The protocol in the withdrawal agreement was not perfect. It was an ugly compromise, but it mitigated the worst impacts of Brexit. It prevented a harder border on the island of Ireland, protected the all-Ireland economy and upheld the Good Friday Agreement in all of its parts.

We have heard lots of comments about where our biggest market is. The fact is that the

North's economy is dominated by SMEs, 80% of which trade across Ireland. Here are examples of the breathtaking scale of the damage done to lives and livelihoods by this Brexit mess. One quarter of the milk produced in the North is processed in the South. Chickens in their thousands produced in the South are processed in the North. Some 10,000 pigs come to the North from the South every week.

The production of Guinness necessitates approximately 13,000 crossings in Ireland every year, and, every day, almost 7,000 goods vehicles travel the A1 dual carriageway between Belfast and Dublin. Coca-Cola employs 522 people in Lisburn, and its produce is sold throughout Ireland. Any delays on the island of Ireland, as a result of Brexit, will cost €100 for every lorry, many of which cross the border every day. Bombardier, which is one of the North's largest employers, engages more than 60 suppliers in the South of Ireland. Food, beverages etc account for 49% of the all-Ireland manufacturing trade. Some 10% of the North's GDP comes from the EU, so that would mean that £3.5 million of European funding was gone.

Sinn Féin's position on east-west trade is clear: it must be as frictionless as possible but let us nail the nonsense about not tolerating a border in the Irish Sea. Have you lot been asleep? For many decades, there has been a border in the Irish Sea. Animals and animal produce, food and fertiliser, amongst many other things, have been checked at the border for many years, so that new-found offence does not wash with thinking people. Unfortunately, Brexit will intensify those checks, but we tried to warn Brexiteers that there would never be a good Brexit and that there would be consequences. A lot of focus has rightly been put on trade, goods and farmers in the North losing over £2 billion of European funding payments, while many groups that are losing EU social funds look on in despair and increasing alarm.

Let us not forget another big erosion caused by Brexit: your hard-won rights. Sometimes, we do not know what we have until it is gone. Last week, the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission addressed the Executive Office Committee. Both commissions live in hope that the British Government will honour article 2 of the protocol to the withdrawal agreement, which states that there will be no diminution of our rights. Hopes and wishes are for Christmas: British duplicity, on the other hand, is, unfortunately, real and worrying. British Ministers have already expressed an interest in lighting a bonfire under hard-won rights; in fact, they started that fire when Brexit

enabled them to bin the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which prevents discrimination, including disability discrimination, and recognises the rights of people with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence and integration. Given that the North has the lowest level of human rights protections, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights was important for us here. The DUP will not agree to a single equality Bill or to a bill of rights, so do not believe them when they tell us that those rights will be sorted. Maternity leave, workers' rights, consumer rights, equality pay and much more are under threat, and the British Government have already declared their intention to commence a full-frontal attack on rights when they scrap the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Sinn Féin motion calls for the full implementation of the Irish protocol, as agreed. That is in the best interests of all citizens across the island, and I urge parties to recognise that. Sinn Féin also calls on the Dublin Government, the EU and the international community to, again, stand firm in defence of the Irish peace process and in opposition to the increasingly reckless actions of the British Government led by Boris Johnson. The EU Council told us that there is a democratic way back into the EU, and that if, through a democratic process the country is reunited, the whole of Ireland will be in the EU. Those having that sensible, rational and legitimate conversation about constitutional change and how best to share this island in the future are the reasonable people in the room. We are the people who will work to defend the Good Friday Agreement, the all-Ireland economy —

Mr Allister: So says a bomber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Ms Anderson: — and the peace process from Britain's reckless Brexit agenda.

There is not an MP in Westminster stopping Boris or Brexit, but you, the people, through a democratic process, can stop him and his Cabinet from imposing all this madness on all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agaibh. Thank you.

Mr Givan: The Member who introduced the Sinn Féin motion has the reputation of speaking with such grace and poise. She told the former British Prime Minister in the European Parliament to:

"stick it where the sun doesn't shine".

Then we are the ones who are unreasonable because of the position that we take. I have to say to Sinn Féin: if you are going to introduce such controversial motions, have them proposed by somebody who we may take a little bit more seriously than the Member for Foyle.

The motion reveals what it is all about for Sinn Féin. It is all about the North/South; it is all about the all-island agenda and the reunification of this island that the Member spoke of. Nowhere in the motion does it mention east-west. That does not exist in the motion that Sinn Féin have brought. It talks about:

"North/South cooperation and the all-island economy;"

Then, of course, it repeats the debate about Brexit and the "citizens", undefined of where, who rejected Brexit. Let us not repeat that it was a United Kingdom-wide referendum. Let us not go over the ground that constituencies, including my own, voted to leave the European Union. The people of Northern Ireland do not want to go over that debate; we are now dealing with the outworkings of it, whether you agreed or not.

The motion talks about the protocol being "imperfect". There is an understatement. Of course it is imperfect, but ignore the consequences because it delivers the objective that Sinn Féin, the SDLP, and the Alliance Party, which supported the protocol, want to achieve.

When we hear from the Alliance Party, it will be interesting to hear about that. The Alliance Party has joined with Sinn Féin and the SDLP at every opportunity when it has come to the European Union and Brexit, and have always gone against the unionist people's position.

Before the Internal Market Bill was even published —.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will not give way. Members were jumping up and down with Matters of the Day,

before they knew what was in the Bill. Such is the interest that they have when it comes to the detail of how we work out this protocol and minimise its impact.

The protocol and the barriers that it creates to trade undermines our ability to have the unfettered trade that has been often talked about by not just the United Kingdom but by the European Union. However, when you see that in reality, there is not unfettered access because the protocol is an instrument to punish the people here in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. It is an instrument being exploited by the European Union and our predatory neighbour, the Irish Republic, when it comes to commercial activities that are going to flow as the outworking of it.

Those Members in the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party dismiss it. It is no surprise that the Alliance Party dismisses it again, given the position that it has held. The implications on trade should not be diminished by anybody in the House.

Mr Middleton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for giving way. Would the Member agree that it is a ludicrous position that some MPs, including the MP for Foyle, Colum Eastwood, are actively campaigning against trade deals with the US, given the significant economic challenges that exist within our constituency?

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

Mr Givan: Therein, I think, the public will see that not only do we need to agree to the position of the parties opposite when it comes to this, but if you dare go against it, they say, "we will lobby in the United States and seek to punish the people by not having a trade agreement".

Is it not absurd that if you do not get their politically ideological-driven position, you will then penalise the people of Northern Ireland? You will seek to damage our economy, will lobby in the States to try to prevent a trade deal from taking place and then you go on to say that this threatens peace and stability. In Westminster, the Member for Foyle went on to talk about violence.

You will use not only political arguments, and want to use economic leverage, but you follow it

up with threats of violence to achieve what you want to achieve. That is implicit when you talk about peace and stability if we do not do what you want. Where is the threat coming from to peace and stability? Where is the violence going to come from?

You use it implicitly to imply, "Do as we say because somewhere out there could be a problem that could then inflict something that damages our peace and stability".

So, whenever I look at the motion, I think that there is no other position that any unionist, certainly, could take but to reject it. Indeed, that is the position that should be taken by those who actually care about the people of Northern Ireland. That is because 65% of purchases come from Great Britain — that is £13.3 billion of purchases — and you want to put up trade barriers, have customs declarations, regulatory burdens and increased costs. Our consumers then pay the price. Then, 53% of external sales from Northern Ireland go into Great Britain, which is £2.3 billion of sales.

The Member for Foyle who moved the motion talked about 80% of SMEs trading on an all-island basis — 90% of SMEs trade with Great Britain, but there is no concern for the implications that there could be for the costs of their business. The motion is politically and ideologically driven in order to advance the only issue that Sinn Féin cares about with Brexit, and that is the reunification of Ireland. Everyone should reject it, but Alliance will still vote with Sinn Féin —

1.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Givan: — and its bedfellows in the SDLP.

Mr O'Toole: I will try to lower the temperature after some tub-thumping there.

It is difficult to take seriously the suggestions from anyone in the DUP that they care about the fettering of trade or trade barriers when this entire process has been driven by Brexit, which, at its core and at first principles, is about increasing trade barriers on the continent of Europe between the United Kingdom and the EU. It is very difficult to be lectured by people like Mr Givan, who were triumphant enthusiasts for Brexit, which will probably mean the biggest increase in trade barriers in the modern era and certainly since the Second World War. It is a remarkably ironic statement; Alanis Morissette

could not have written Mr Givan's speech any better, given the level of irony in it.

My party and I support the motion. I agree with the sentiment in it, which is that no one should be in any doubt that the protocol is an imperfect document. Let us be absolutely clear: I am sure that, five years ago, my party, others in the Chamber and I would not have selected the protocol as a framework for Northern Ireland, this island or commerce across these islands. We would not, but we are presented with a position where successive United Kingdom Governments, reaching their zenith under Boris Johnson and the ideologues around him, have decided that they want to break from the European Union in the sharpest, most dramatic way possible. That presents people in Northern Ireland with a dilemma. It is the same dilemma that was there in 2016. I sometimes talk about this in the Chamber. I used to be a civil servant, and I worked in Number 10 Downing Street before the referendum in 2016 and subsequent to it. I have since left. A large part of the reason for that is a deep and abiding frustration with the recklessness towards Northern Ireland, including to not only our post-conflict society but to our economy and people. It has been deeply frustrating, and, unfortunately, it has got only worse. I

Is the protocol perfect? No, it absolutely is not. Let me first be really clear about what the protocol is. It is a limited set of protections against the creation of a hard border, largely for goods, on the island of Ireland, so Northern Ireland will remain in the single market for goods and subject to the European Union's customs code. Effectively, that means that Northern Ireland will be in the EU customs union. But it does not mean that there will not be a hardening of the border in a whole range of other areas.

There are certain Members on the opposite Benches who probably quite gleefully like the idea of divergence between the two jurisdictions on this island. They will get it, unfortunately, in many areas, because there will be divergence in the services economy. It will be more difficult for people who are involved in services to do business across the border on the island of Ireland. If that is what you sought from Brexit, well done, because you are going to get it. We are going to have divergent regimes for immigration, and that is going to throw up all sorts of challenges. There are innumerable other areas for which there will be a hardened border on the island of Ireland, but specifically for goods, we have protection from a hardening of the border, and there are certain other protections as a result of the protocol. So, yes,

we absolutely need to see those protections delivered upon.

It is also the case that the protections in the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol were agreed by the British Government less than a year ago. It is important for people to reflect on what it means for the reputation of the United Kingdom Government when a Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and says, "The UK is going to breach international law". There are some people here who perhaps have long-standing reasons to distrust what is said at a Dispatch Box in the House of Commons. There are others who do not. Nobody here should take lightly the idea that a British Government are gleefully walking away from their obligations under international law. Even if it is a stunt — a negotiating tactic to escalate tensions — we in this part of the world should be deeply angry at being used to escalate tensions in a negotiation between the UK and the EU.

The UK Government have, throughout the process — even before these institutions returned — called for the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to have their say. We had our say in June, but they did not listen. We asked for an extension to the transition period. I do not know how any right-thinking person, in the context of a pandemic, would not want the transition period to be extended. I reiterate that call today, but we have not heard a single acknowledgement of it from the British Government. Let us hope that, if we pass this motion today and a further private Members' motion that we are bringing tomorrow on the Internal Market Bill, finally, the —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Toole: — Westminster Government will listen. We need the protocol to be delivered, not because it is an ideal situation, but because it is a base level of protection. I urge Members opposite to think hard about the kind of society that they want to live in and how we move our economy forward in a way that serves everyone in our society.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party will not support this one-sided motion.

It should come as no surprise to Members that neither Boris Johnson nor the European Union seem to have the interests of the people of Northern Ireland at heart. Anybody who has kept a close eye on the current negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union will have heard numerous

pronouncements about putting the people of Northern Ireland and the Belfast Agreement to the fore, and they will wonder whether some people will bother to read that document. Some of them should consider the implications of putting a border down the middle of the Irish Sea for the whole of Northern Ireland and these islands.

In my previous role as chief executive of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, I was fully cognisant of the importance of the €1 billion, or £1 billion — there is not a lot of difference today — of trade that went back and forth across the Irish Sea every single week. That trade — North/South and east-west — is a circular trade. The very implication of putting a border down the Irish Sea, which many people seem to profess to do without realising the implications on trade for everybody, including businesses across these islands, has to be considered.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: No, not just at the moment. I will give way in a moment.

The key question for us, as Members of the Assembly, is this: what does it mean for the people of Northern Ireland when we look at issues in the future such as state aid rules, the role of the European Court of Justice, and how the Assembly will legislate for issues that apply directly to the people of Northern Ireland whilst at the same time dealing with the considerable number of issues that will be brought about by North/South and east-west borders being built?

The really significant issue that we have to deal with is the fact that time is running out. Come 1 January, we could be in a position where, despite what Simon Coveney says, food coming from the rest of our nation is deemed to be unacceptable. We have heard Michel Barnier and Simon Coveney say that that is a ridiculous statement. However, when given the opportunity in the Joint Committee to say that that will not be the case, guess what? They said nothing.

For the people of Northern Ireland — for our electorate, and for the consumers we all are — we need to get some degree of clarity about what is going on. That should be the issue in front of the House. That should be the issue for all of us. That is the question that we should be asking. We should be asking Boris Johnson. I am no friend of his. There are lots of questions to be asked of the political parties in the House that decided on 3 October last year that tariff and regulation boundaries down the middle of the Irish Sea were a good idea. The question

facing us is about what is going to happen on 1 January. That is something that we, as an Assembly, should be concentrating on; we should not be looking at motions like this, which do not really ask specific questions. I must admit that I found it really surprising that the Member for Foyle mentioned checks on fertilisers going back and forth across the border. Anybody who is even remotely aware of what the circumstances were would know that, of course, there had to be checks on fertiliser because most of it was not being used for the appropriate purpose.

I do not think that anybody would believe that this motion is balanced. We need to be asking questions both of the United Kingdom Government and the European Union. We should all be asking those questions together. We should be doing that in such a manner that raises the appropriate issues for the people of Northern Ireland, namely what is going to happen to us on 1 January 2021?

Mr Dickson: I support the motion. The turbulent issue of Brexit overhangs our future. The protocol that was agreed less than a year ago and is now international law is, as Members have heard from around the Chamber today, an imperfect solution to the border issue for Northern Ireland, but it is a response to the potential barriers that a hard Brexit could construct. As a basic structure to protect the institutions which maintain our economic, political and social lives, it does have merit. It is an insurance policy, although clearly the original backstop, negotiated by a previous Prime Minister, was a better deal for Northern Ireland with fewer barriers and incorporated the whole of the United Kingdom in the single customs market. However, nothing is ever settled when it comes to Brexit or this Prime Minister.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No, you are fine thanks. Sorry; apologies. I was in a different zone. I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: I am really very grateful to the Member for giving way. This is a point that I did not get to make. Would he acknowledge that a large part of the reason why Theresa May's backstop, which would have largely avoided a border in the Irish Sea, did not pass was the kind interventions of the party opposite, the Democratic Unionist Party, which refused to support it and so, in many ways, they are the creators of the border in the Irish Sea that they now rail against?

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

Mr Dickson: Apologies again. Yes, of course I wholeheartedly agree. The amateur dramatics of the DUP in the last Parliament are clear for all to see.

Nothing is ever settled when it comes to Brexit or this Prime Minister. We now have an Internal Market Bill, which basically empowers the Government to override elements of an international treaty signed only months ago. This must be of profound concern to Members of Parliament who have been invited to participate, and have participated, in votes which break the law. It has also shamed the United Kingdom Government around the world. Let us be clear about that: the United Kingdom Government have been shamed by its Prime Minister and by its Cabinet.

It is hard to discern what this Government are doing or trying to achieve. Even if this is just a simple negotiating tactic, it undermines the United Kingdom's international reputation and the ability to strike further trade deals. Indeed, they have apparently lauded a trade deal with Japan, not a word of it different from what had already existed between Japan and the European Union.

The United Kingdom was admired as a member of the European Union for its influence, often by smaller member states for which the United Kingdom was often a reasoned voice. What sort of future will the United Kingdom have if it cannot and will not keep its word? Who would you deal with? Is this the global Britain that we want to be part of? One of the key prizes of Brexit is supposed to be the US trade deal; Mr Givan and others made reference to it. However, not just representatives of the House in America but democratic and republican senators have made it clear that they are concerned and disturbed by its effect on the Good Friday Agreement and the harm that it would cause.

There is also a clear risk to British/Irish relations, which have, it must be acknowledged, reached a high point over the last number of years. The cooperation and mutual respect between the United Kingdom and Ireland has been a key building block of the peace process and in building trust between both parts of this island.

1.30 pm

A general election was won on the deal that included the protocol, but now we are told that we have to default on it and that no deal would be a good outcome. What a massive failure of politics it would be if we have no deal, an indication of a Government who do not know what they are doing and a blatant act of self-harm by a Prime Minister who does not care, exactly at a time when we need someone who is competent.

Brexit also brings friction. We need to mitigate that and protect the Good Friday Agreement. The United Kingdom seems determined to self-isolate from the world's biggest trading blocs and deny Northern Ireland the safety net that the withdrawal agreement included. Locally, we need our Ministers to get on with their job and implement the elements of the protocol. I fear that not only is time running out for Northern Ireland and its Ministers to get the job done but we will be in the business of further destroying livelihoods and businesses. Business needs certainty. It needs rules and a future in which trade barriers are low and not increasing.

The protocol is not perfect, but the apparent alternative is much worse. We need to get on with implementing it. It is in the United Kingdom Government's power to reach a deal with the EU that ensures that goods and services can flow and trade freely through these islands. We should build bridges, not borders.

Mr Middleton: The key line for me in the motion, which we will vote against, says "whatever the circumstances". That, in itself, nails the real motive for the motion. Whatever the circumstances — no matter how bad it is for Northern Ireland; no matter what effect it has on businesses or the constituents whom we represent — we must support the protocol.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: No, I will not.

That is a completely unacceptable position for anybody to take. Of course, it is no surprise that Sinn Féin would take that position, because it takes that position on a united Ireland: it does not matter if communities are divided or our businesses would be decimated, whatever the circumstances, we should support it. Again, that is an unacceptable position. I raised it with the EU ambassador when he came to Londonderry on Friday. I made the point that not one unionist party or, for that matter, not one unionist in this country supports the protocol. It is disastrous for the United Kingdom and for business, and it is important that they hear that message.

My colleague touched on this: for some parties in the Chamber, their priority is ensuring that connections with Dublin and the EU are retained, but, again, whatever the circumstances, they want us to support the protocol. Our MP for Foyle, Colum Eastwood, and other MPs were tripping over themselves to get on to the air waves to support the position taken by some US politicians on a US/UK trade deal. A constituency like mine of Foyle is devastated not only by the COVID pandemic but by years of issues and lack of infrastructure and investment, yet political parties are actively encouraging no US/UK trade deal. That is a crazy position to take. I ask Members to reflect on that. Members who go through the Lobby today are making it clear that, whatever the circumstances, they want to support the protocol. I ask Members to reflect on that.

As for the issues with the protocol, our party has been clear that we do not support it. At every opportunity, our Ministers, MPs and MLAs have actively campaigned to address some of its flaws, of which there are many. There are key concerns around the protocol. One that has been touched on and, again, was raised with the EU ambassador is the GB to NI trade tariffs and the risk there, with the fact that the EU was using Northern Ireland as leverage and risking a food blockade on Northern Ireland. The paperwork, the regulatory checks, the issues for our fisheries, VAT and state aid — all those issues are very much a concern to local businesses.

Much has been made of the Good Friday Agreement — the Belfast Agreement. The Belfast Agreement contains one substantive mention of the Republic of Ireland border, and that relates to demilitarisation, which has already happened. I know of no one who is calling for the army to rebuild those installations on the border. The Belfast Agreement, however, was about respecting —

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: Yes, go ahead.

Dr Aiken: Is the Member aware that one of the people from the United States who have been calling for these arrangements, Representative Peter King, not only said that he supports the breaking of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) but wants walls and reinforcement of the border with Mexico and, I understand, Canada as well? How can that case be quoted as an example?

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

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his intervention. That points out the hypocrisy. I take all those comments with a pinch of salt, because there are question marks over the motives of all the individuals who have commented.

Those who will support the motion, whatever the circumstances, need to explain to our communities — our business community and our citizens — how making it easier for business to trade with its biggest market within the United Kingdom is a breach of the Belfast Agreement.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: Yes, go ahead.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member agree that, far from anyone talking about extra measures on the border, the then Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, who is the current Deputy Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, said that he could deploy his army on the border with Northern Ireland?

Mr Middleton: That was crazy. I agree with the Member; he is absolutely right.

In closing, I urge Members in the Chamber today to listen to the business community — *[Interruption.]* They laugh, but the people who are laughing are actually laughing at the business community, which is being —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr Middleton: — decimated through the current pandemic and with potential borders going up in the Irish Sea. Those are the people to whom they will have to be answerable, and I urge Members to reflect on the fact that, whatever —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Middleton: — the circumstances, they should not support the motion.

Mr McHugh: At the outset, I have to say that, if self-interest requires a U-turn, Boris Johnson is capable of that. We all know that, and Members on the other Benches know that only too well. He has U-turned on them many times, and, yet and all, like the obedient lapdog, they still lick his toes and wait for the crumbs off his table.

The EU withdrawal agreement protocol was a compromise, and built within that compromise is an arbitration system to allow the parties to deal with any disputes that may arise over certain issues. Many Members have touched on that but have not explained that, through that arbitration system, in the event of there being disputes on particular products or the likes of it, it could have been worked out between the parties that signed up to the agreement. However, by introducing his Internal Market Bill, Johnson is totally undermining the protocol. The protocol defends not only the interests of the people of the Six Counties but the Good Friday Agreement. It has been stoutly defended by member states of the EU and, more significantly, by the United States of America, guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement.

Let us not kid ourselves: the Internal Market Bill is about Boris Johnson and England and what is best for them. If truth be told, it is about fisheries to a lesser degree but, more significantly, about state aid, as the leader of the unionist party said, and the rules governing state aid to industry. It also gives the Tory Government the power to impose rules and regulations on the Assembly that can undermine our agriculture industry, particularly by compelling the Assembly to accept lower environmental, food safety and animal welfare standards. Boris Johnson, to whom we all listened recently, hides behind the defence of the Good Friday Agreement. He did not mention it when signing up to the protocol, but the European Union negotiators always had the Good Friday Agreement uppermost in their sights and its defence as the central plank from day one. Johnson went so far as to suggest — some people here have nearly touched on the same issue — that we in the North of Ireland might even be starved by the European Union, which would limit the import of food products to this island. It is ironic that a representative of the class and party who oversaw the starvation of millions of our people in the 19th century whilst exporting food from Ireland is telling us that the European Union will do the same because of limitations on the importation of food to this island. How ironic. I ask you: whom do you trust? Michel Barnier, chief negotiator for the European Union —

Some Members: No.

Mr McHugh: Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Commission —

Some Members: No.

Mr McHugh: Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives —

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr McHugh: — and many of our politicians from all parties in the North of Ireland and throughout the Republic of Ireland. Whom do you trust when it comes to defending our interests and our rights? Do you trust Boris Johnson, who shows no respect for this agreement and no respect for international treaties? Some Members were shouting "No", but the Lord Chief Justice, Declan Morgan, stated:

"International law is grounded on trust and confidence between nations".

When that is totally ignored, it seeps down and corrupts even our domestic law as well. Johnson is incapable of identifying with the age-old proverb of Na Fianna, "De réir mo bhriathair", which means "According to my word". A more direct English translation into a cornerstone of the business community is, "My word is my bond". We must be seen to oppose this departure in every way through the motion proposed by Ms Anderson.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McHugh: It is a departure from basic law and from respect for law within nations and between nations. We must be much more principled in every respect in how we deal with our affairs.

Mr Catney: Like many in the Chamber, I was shocked and appalled when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland admitted that the Internal Market Bill broke international law. For me, it showed that the current Tory Government could not care less about the Good Friday Agreement or the people of Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Catney: Absolutely.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member very much for giving way. When talking about the breaching of international law, the most disappointing thing about the United Kingdom Government planning to do so is that it would take them down to the same level as the European Union and exactly the same level as the United

States. The United Kingdom has a much higher standard to adhere to.

Mr Catney: I do not know whether I can agree with everything that you said, but I will tell you this: I am not a lawbreaker, and I would not like to think that you were either in some of the posts that you held before.

I have spoken many times of the need to protect the all-island economy, North/South and east-west. I have used the examples before, but a hard border on this island would have such a profound economic impact that I have to use every ounce of my breath to highlight the issue until someone, somewhere listens. Our whiskey industry is entirely integrated, with County Antrim producing single malt for the entire island and bottling whiskies for distillers in the Republic. In my constituency, Coca-Cola, which was mentioned earlier, bottles produce — syrup — that comes up from County Mayo, in the Republic, to Lisburn. The products are made in Lisburn, packaged and distributed throughout the whole island of Ireland. That is the unique business arrangement that that company has for this island. Those are just two large examples. Countless small and medium-sized enterprises that rely on products, services and buyers from across this island have no idea what is to come at the end of the year.

1.45 pm

The impact is not felt just by current businesses; it is also preventing new businesses from opening. There is a unique craft whisky industry booming on the island, and this is becoming one of the most significant times for the product. Many distillers have opened in the North, but the uncertainty of Brexit has severely impacted on their money and trade. The UK Government tearing up international agreements on a whim only adds to that uncertainty, and I hear every day of more and more businesses that are giving up on the place that I call home and the place that I love: Northern Ireland. That is fundamentally wrong.

If we do not fight now, the situation will become terminal. Let us be clear, our people are the ones who will suffer from the protectionism and the policies of the Tory Government. I do not know if any Members got the opportunity to watch some of the events from culture night that were online at the weekend. The participants highlighted the strong artistic and cultural traditions that there are across the island, from Derry to Cork. John Hume understood that cultural connection, Martin

McGuinness understood that cultural connection and the Reverend Ian Paisley understood that cultural connection. The Tory Government will never understand it; they will never understand the all-island make-up of our economy and our health and energy sectors. They do not even understand where the border is. In the face of Tory ignorance, it is on us to protest that failure of our citizens. I urge all Members to support the motion.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the motion tabled by my colleagues and the opportunity to speak on a subject that is vital to my constituents in North Antrim, to many businesses big and small across the North and the all-island economy, to the hard-fought and hard-won gains of the Good Friday Agreement and to peace and stability on the island.

There is no good Brexit for the people of Ireland, which is why the majority of people in the North voted against it. Nobody wanted then, nor do they want now, barriers to trade or the movement of goods or people. That is why Sinn Féin did not support Brexit. All of the potential issues that are being discussed today, even some that are being discussed by the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party, emanate from Brexit.

I hear Members on the other side of the House talking about the consequences of Brexit; a Brexit that they supported. Brexit is the problem. The Irish protocol is designed to mitigate the worst impacts of Brexit on citizens, businesses and communities in the North. It should not need to be pointed out, but the protocol was an agreement that was reached between the EU and the current British Government. Yet, last week, we had the Internal Market Bill tabled by that same British Government to thwart an agreement and the commitments that they made.

Am I surprised that a British Government would make a deal, sign an agreement and then try to undo it or circumvent it in a way that breaks international law to suit its own narrow political interests? Am I surprised that the British Government would display little knowledge, and in some cases no knowledge, of the impact of their decisions on the people of this island? Am I surprised that, even when they are aware of the implications of their actions because they have been made clear to them, they care little about the impact of their decisions on the people on the island of Ireland, even when we are talking about something as important as the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process? You will not be surprised to hear that I am not surprised by anything that is done by this particular British Government.

It is important, though, that the Assembly, which is representative of the people and interests of the North, has its voice heard and registered. The Internal Market Bill and its implications for the Irish protocol are totally unacceptable. Indeed, they are very dangerous. There can be no damage to the Good Friday Agreement and no hardening of the border on the island of Ireland. We in Ireland cannot be collateral damage to a British Tory Brexit. If Brexit is to proceed, the Irish protocol must be implemented.

I sit on the Assembly's Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, and on a weekly basis we discuss the potential negative impacts of Brexit and the uncertainty for our business community. There will be 25,000 front-line farming families affected. Obviously, a large percentage of the North's exports goes east but a far greater number of businesses — mainly small and medium enterprises — export largely or solely to the South. Fifty per cent more businesses here sell to the South than export to Britain. The vast majority of that trade is, as I said, carried out by SMEs, which are the backbone of our economy.

Eighty per cent of microbusinesses and 70% of small businesses export solely to the South. The agri-food sector, which is hugely important to the Northern economy, is no different. While east-west trading is undeniably hugely important, the production of the goods that we export is inextricably integrated North and South. Annually, over 400,000 pigs are exported from the South to the North for processing and the same number of lambs are exported North/South. Over 800 million litres of milk are exported to the North to be processed and then exported from the South. East-west trade, as I have said, is vital but in order for us to even produce the goods that are exported east, North/South trade must be seamless.

In the Agriculture Committee, we are told that 200 lorries a day come across the water to stock our shelves. Whilst that is obviously vital, anywhere from 6,000 to 12,000 heavy and light goods vehicles cross the border every day. In our Committee deliberations, we have also shared the concerns of those in the environmental sector about the impact on current EU legislation and on environmental protection. Regardless of political allegiances, we are an island nation with our own unique environment. Living on an island, it would be completely and utterly ridiculous for us to have different environmental standards and practices North and South. Birds and fish, rivers and hedgerows and the very air that we breathe are not bound by borders.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McGuigan: The EU has some of the highest environmental standards in the world and without binding standards of the same or higher levels, we risk a race to the bottom for environmental standards and protections.

Mr Stewart: I support my party colleague, Steve Aiken, who has already spoken in the debate, in saying that we will not be supporting the motion. I am pro-business and pro-Union and it is for those two fundamental reasons that I did not support Brexit. We firmly believe that it would not only, potentially, have an impact on the Union but would have massive consequences for business and trade. As democrats, we accepted the result when it came but it is barriers that are the biggest restrictions on trade. The protocol puts in place very difficult circumstances in which businesses will be able to trade east-west.

The motion refers to trade North/South and, obviously, that is important; there is no doubt that there is an all-island economy. However, fundamentally, Northern Ireland's biggest market is east-west, given its relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom. Any impediments to that would be deeply regrettable and would have a deep impact on existing businesses here. I know of one business in my constituency that reckons that it will cost it up to £1 million a year to implement some of the measures, red tape and bureaucracy that will be required just to have the protocol in place. That will be deeply damaging. I do not want to see any barriers in place but we do not want paperwork to be introduced that will prevent companies from doing the business that goes across every day. My party colleague mentioned the £1 billion in trade each week. Any impediments to that will be deeply damaging to our economy. It is regrettable, then, that that is not mentioned anywhere in the motion.

I also fear that, more and more, we will see in adverts and on TV that products that are sold online and elsewhere will not be available in Northern Ireland because so many companies here and across the United Kingdom will not want to do the paperwork or pay the additional costs that will be required to bring in those products, further diminishing Northern Ireland's economic impact. It is regrettable that that is not included in the wording of the motion. We have also talked about the impact on the potential for state aid and the impact of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in relation to any additional

legislative burden that would be borne here by businesses and on their ability to trade.

The motion calls for the protection of the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions so that it is not diminished. That is somewhat ironic, given that it was just a couple of months ago that the Sinn Féin MP for Mid Ulster said in relation to the Good Friday Agreement that nationalists had been sold a pup. I am trying to figure out whether Sinn Féin supports the Good Friday Agreement or whether it is, as the Francie Molloy MP said, a pup that had been sold to the nationalist community. My party supported the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts —.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: I am pushed for time, but I will give way briefly.

Mr Dickson: On the subject of being sold a pup, does the Member agree that the Prime Minister sold the nation a pup when it came to the protocol and winning his election?

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

Mr Stewart: Indeed. Thank you for that intervention.

The Ulster Unionist Party supported the Good Friday Agreement throughout. When I spoke to my party colleague Reg Empey about this recently, he highlighted Sinn Féin's role in the agreement and said that it did not participate in any negotiations on strand one issues and, in fact, did not even endorse it at the end. It feels as if Sinn Féin found the protection of the agreement and all its entities quite recently and conveniently, as it did the relationship with the European Union, which is, again, a recent marriage of convenience.

I acknowledge the fact that some parties here have been dedicated and supported the European Union throughout. I refer to the SDLP, which was consistent in its message, for which I give it credit. However, Sinn Féin's continuous support and idolisation of the European Union in all its forms seems to have come quite late to the party.

From a unionist point of view, the Good Friday Agreement is clear:

"the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union and,

accordingly, that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish; and that it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people".

Quite how a border of any type in the Irish Sea is compatible with the Good Friday Agreement in that respect is, quite frankly, beyond me.

The Belfast Agreement removed articles 2 and 3 and enshrined the principle of consent, meaning that the Northern Ireland people, and they alone, would decide their future. Surely any impediment to trade in either direction, North/South, which is identified in the motion, or east-west, is a clear breach of the agreement. How can there be an argument against that? It cannot simply be a claim that barriers between Northern Ireland and the Republic are a breach of the agreement but any restriction on trade barriers going east-west is not. The two cannot be mutually exclusive. It does not seem to stack up.

With regard to the economic impacts, Northern Ireland's biggest market is Great Britain. Any impediments to that would be deeply damaging to trade here. The focus should be on getting to 1 January and constructively trying to carve out together a workable solution so that we can protect our businesses.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm, and I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, and the next Member scheduled to make a contribution is Andrew Muir.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

COVID-19: Tests for Children

1. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health whether he is considering measures to assist parents at test centres that require help in administering COVID-19 tests to children under five. (AQO 679/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I recognise that for young children, including children under five, testing may be an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Parents may find it easier to apply the swab in the home environment using the home testing kit that can be ordered through the digital portal or by calling the 119 helpline. There is a video available on the Public Health Agency (PHA) website to show parents how to take the swab. I am advised that health and social care colleagues are again looking at how best to support COVID swabs being taken on the rare occasions where parents or carers may not be able to obtain a sample at a national testing centre.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The process of parents administering tests to under-fives can be difficult and cause anxiety. There is also a deep concern among parents that they are not doing the test properly. Does the Minister agree that it is important that parents in those circumstances are provided with professional advice, or the necessary assistance, to ensure that the tests are administered correctly?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point because an accurate swab is critical no matter who it is from, whether a child, a pensioner or someone in a care home. The ability to take the swabs accurately and to ensure their validity is important. That is why there are people available in the test centres who can provide guidance. They will not actually take the physical swab, but they will provide guidance and help. As I said, there is a video online that is accessible to guide parents through the process.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Obviously, the testing of young children is naturally going to be very challenging, particularly if it is a self-testing kit. Is the Department of Health looking at what assistance could be made available by GPs in

the COVID screening of the under fives through the COVID centres?

Mr Swann: That is not an area that has been progressed. We are using the national testing site, and, as I said, we guide parents to use the home testing kits where they are available. I would definitely advise that, where parents are guided to get their child tested, they should. My colleagues in the Public Health Agency have advised that the testing data shows that, up until last Thursday, over 10,000 children under the age of 10 have been tested via the national testing initiative in Northern Ireland. It shows that that avenue is working and is accessible. That includes over 4,500 children under five, and the majority of those have been tested in the past three to four weeks. The avenue of testing and testing accessibility is working for us, but I will take the Member's comments away and see whether they are of an advantage somewhere.

COVID-19: Pillar 2 Testing

2. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Health what actions he has taken to improve pillar 2 COVID-19 testing. (AQO 680/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Pillar 2 testing is delivered through the participation in the national testing programme managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London. I have discussed the importance of pillar 2 testing capacity directly with my ministerial counterpart in London on a number of occasions. My officials are in daily contact with officials in DHSC to ensure that Northern Ireland capacity is optimised through our participation in the national programme. Currently, in Northern Ireland, we have four drive-through fixed testing sites and six operational mobile testing units (MTU), with two more MTUs due to be operational shortly. The mobile testing units are deployed in towns and villages across Northern Ireland in response to local need. There is also the home-test option delivered directly to a person's home via postal order and/or the satellite test-kit option. That is being used to support a regular programme of testing in our care homes.

Demand for testing has increased significantly across the UK in recent weeks, and I am aware that the national testing programme is experiencing an exceptionally high demand. Overall, however, testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department, and active discussions are under way to further enhance capacity across all aspects of our testing

programme, because optimising available testing capacity will continue to be, for my officials and me, a key priority in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr McHugh: On testing, we have seen increased problems and growing public frustration in accessing COVID-19 test centres, with people being directed in some cases to Scotland and even to Wales. Does the Minister accept that we need a locally based, accessible testing programme?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. When the Chair of the Health Committee asked a question for urgent oral answer last week, I addressed a number of those points. I highlighted the importance of our pillar 1 and pillar 2 systems. Pillar 1 is managed by my Department. Pillar 2, the national programme that we rely on heavily, is supported by access through the national testing programme, which has worked well for us in Northern Ireland. We have had difficulties in accessing, but, as I said last week in answer to the question for urgent oral answer, those were due to the computer-based booking programme that looked at who was booking a test and the closest test site but did not take into consideration the Irish Sea. My Welsh counterpart, Vaughan Gething, was having the same problem with the Bristol Channel. The programme was looking for the closest testing site rather than at one that was actually accessible.

Many of those problems and issues have been worked through, and we are not seeing the same challenges or problems with accessing a test. It was, I think, 'The Times' that ran a poll on five postcodes in every local authority by testing them once an hour every hour for 24 hours. Out of the local districts in Northern Ireland, only one did not hit 100% accessibility for testing, and that was Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, which was shown an 80% rise. However, it was a great poll, as it demonstrated our accessibility to the national testing programme. However, I caution those who go on to the portal simply to see where tests are without needing one: please think of the system's capacity.

Ms S Bradley: If extra capacity is to go into any system, will the Minister consider the people in Kilkeel and the Mourne, who are still, despite the technical errors in the system having been ironed out, being requested to make unreasonable journeys, given that those people may be symptomatic?

Mr Swann: As I think I said in my answer to the substantive question, when we see the increase of prevalence in COVID-19 in a specific area, we assign the mobile testing units to make sure that we can support the people in that area. That is how we target where the units access. We have four national testing sites across Northern Ireland to make sure that we can get access to the most central locations that we have for those fixed sites. However, we use and maximise the mobile testing units where appropriate.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his response. Once again, it is worth noting that, without access to the United Kingdom's pillar 2 network, our ability to test the consistently large numbers that we are testing would be severely restrained. Can the Minister comment on whether he is considering expanding our own domestic pillar 1 capacity?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. As I said in the substantive answer, that work is always ongoing, and we do it through our partners in C-TRIC in the west, through the Almac Group, through the universities, and even through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and the Department of Agriculture, where we look to see where the capacity is in lab availability and access and also to ensure that we can continue to enhance and increase that capacity in pillar 1. That is vital for us; it is what we use for our health service testing programmes. It is also the pillar that we use for residents and staff in our care homes and through which we have identified outbreaks.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for all his efforts to date on COVID; we appreciate all the work that he has done. Can he give us some assurance on the quality of the COVID test in order to give the public real confidence that it is effective and accurate? The accuracy of the test is an issue of concern among the public. What quality assurance systems are in place, Minister?

Mr Swann: The tests are all accredited through the appropriate channels before they are utilised in any of our testing sites, as is the case across the United Kingdom. There have been calls for the introduction of the new rapid 90-minute or two-hour testing kits, but we are waiting on accreditation to make sure that those tests are accurate in terms of quality and reproducibility to make sure that we reduce, as far as possible, the number of false positives. We know that there are false positives in the system, but I would rather err on the side of caution and have somebody work under the

assumption that they are positive than send somebody who is positive out under the assumption that they are negative.

Mr Gildernew: In relation to pillar 2, the Minister has acknowledged that there have been difficulties in booking tests. Is he aware that there are increasing difficulties with the return of test results and the time involved in that? That appears to be impacting on children's tests more heavily, which is making more people more anxious and concerned. Is the Minister aware of that? Does he receive information back from the centre on it?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I have had conversations about the timeliness of the return of results with my counterparts across the United Kingdom, because that is crucial. It also feeds into our test, trace and protect system, because the sooner that we can identify a positive case, the better those systems can fully interact to make sure that we get on top of alerting the contacts of an individual who has tested positive.

As the Member rightly identifies, the timely return of a test is crucial for parents who are looking for reassurance for their child. I know that the Member raised a specific case with the BBC yesterday. If he wants to pass on the specific details of that to me, I would be happy to look into it for him.

COVID-19: App for Under-18s

3. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the development of a COVID-19 track and trace app for under-18s. (AQO 681/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The Department of Health is launching a new version of the app for under-18s before the end of September. That will help schools, further education colleges and universities to provide additional protection to their students and staff.

Mr McGrath: Most MLAs will have had contact from concerned constituents about young people gathering in groups in the community, not least in areas such as the Holylands. What action is the Minister and, indeed, the Executive taking to try to address the issue with young people?

Mr Swann: In regard to the actions of young people, what I will say — I have said this before — is that what we are seeing in the Holylands is

not reflective of the entirety of young people across Northern Ireland, who I think have sacrificed quite a bit during the first lockdown of Northern Ireland, so it is unfair and unjust to target and label everyone in the same way. A very small cohort of individuals in the Holylands is showing a blatant disregard for not just their safety, if they were to contract COVID and take it home, but that of their friends, family and older relatives.

The Executive Office has established a cross-departmental working group to look at compliance with and enforcement of COVID regulations. That has met twice specifically on the work in the Holylands. The meetings included the Department for Communities, the Executive Office, my Department, the police and both universities. The working group has shown a positive, coordinated response for, I think, the first time to antisocial behaviour in the Holylands. COVID has really given it that added impetus.

From what I am led to believe in the last update, 55 COVID notices have been issued by the PSNI, 31 of which were issued in one house. That shows the disregard for the messaging that the universities are putting out. In that same period of time, there were also two arrests: one for drug abuse and one for assault. There is not just a breach of COVID regulations; there is also antisocial behaviour that is now being tackled, and that is for the greater benefit of Holylands residents.

2.15 pm

Mrs Barton: Given the spike in COVID-19 cases in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland, which is leading to a spillover into Northern Ireland, how valuable is it that the Northern Ireland app is interoperable with the Republic of Ireland version?

Mr Swann: The app that we launched a few weeks ago is working well for us in Northern Ireland. We have had quite a number of downloads and activations, with 352,000 individuals downloading it. Nearly 2,000 notifications have gone out to people saying that they have been in contact with someone who has now tested positive. That works, and it is an advantage of the app. One of the working premises that we had, since starting to explore the app, was to make sure that, no matter what we developed in Northern Ireland, it was able to talk to the same app in the Republic of Ireland. Not just North/South but east-west: I welcome the fact that Scotland has now produced its app on the same platform and with the same set-up

as ours. All three should eventually be able to talk. It works, and it gives us the reassurance that, for anyone crossing the border, when necessary, if they have the app, they will talk to each other.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, with pupils back at school, can you outline the steps being taken to minimise the spread of COVID-19 in schools?

Mr Swann: That question would be more specifically directed to the Minister of Education. The Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser regularly met Department of Education officials and the Education Authority officials to make sure that we gave as much input into the guidance for schools as was necessary to support principals, teachers and all workers across the school sector — from caretakers to canteen workers — to make sure they got the advice and guidance that, we thought, they needed to support the school cohort. The Department of Health, over the last number of weeks, has established a direct line in the Public Health Agency for school principals. They can ring the Public Health Agency if they have a specific enquiry and get that answered directly to provide reassurance for them, their staff and parents.

Ms Bradshaw: I just want to come back to the issue of the Holylands. Minister, you mentioned the house that 35 people came out of: that has been going on since June. House parties have been going on for months and months. Will you bring forward guidance for houses in multiple occupancy, given the unique circumstances, where you could have nine people in one house from different parts of the country?

Mr Swann: It is not only from June that the parties and antisocial behaviour have been going on in the Holylands from the universities, and houses of multiple occupancy has expanded there. There is work going on through the Executive's enforcement working group to see what other avenues, legislation or regulations can be brought forward, and the Justice Minister may be — I am not sure — involved in that.

With regard to the specifics of houses in multiple occupancy, there needs to be care and caution that any regulation based solely on houses of multiple occupancy is equitable across the entirety of Northern Ireland and anybody who is a resident in a house of multiple occupancy, not just students in the Holylands but those in such housing because of social need or a lack of housing in certain areas. They cannot be penalised adversely by

any regulation or guidance brought in specifically to deal with antisocial behaviour in the Holylands.

Hospital Car-parking Charges: Healthcare Staff

4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to reconsider the car-parking charges healthcare staff pay currently in hospital settings. (AQO 682/17-22)

Mr Swann: First, I want to say that I fully support our Health and Social Care staff. Again, I want to put on record my thanks for the magnificent job that they did during the initial COVID-19 surge and continue to do to provide the best care for the people of Northern Ireland in such challenging and pressurised circumstances.

You will be aware that I secured financial support of £2 million back in March for the provision of free car-parking for Health and Social Care staff for a three-month period. That ended on 30 June. That was in recognition of the commitment that our staff were making to keep the health service going during the initial COVID-19 surge. Although the initial free car parking period has concluded, I will keep the position under review in the context of the evolving position as regards the prevalence and impact of COVID-19. The current policy was set in 2012, and decisions on how it is applied are for each health and social care trust to determine. Charging is an important mechanism on sites where space is limited, such as the Royal Victoria Hospital, for example, to control demand and encourage the regular turnover of spaces so as to provide sufficient spaces for patients and visitors. I am aware that the Belfast Trust is currently conducting a review of its car parking charges and, in the context of its review, the trust has recently agreed with relevant stakeholders a set of car parking access criteria for staff that will prioritise the limited parking that is available on the basis of business need and the availability of alternative travel options. The trust is also seeking to harmonise parking fees across its hospital sites.

It is worth noting that it costs £9 million to cover the cost of parking, and we currently recover £8 million through income. Even if I was able to find the funding to cover the loss of the income generated from staff car parking, there is still not sufficient space to provide free car parking for all our staff, particularly at sites such as the Royal Victoria Hospital where space is limited. Doing so would not only create significant

accessibility issues for patients and visitors but require significant capital investment to address the capacity issues, whether through the construction of new car parks or the putting in place of park-and-ride facilities for staff at locations adjacent to hospitals.

Mr Carroll: Does the Minister agree that the latest move to remove free car parking from healthcare workers is a further kick in the teeth for the people who kept us safe during the pandemic and that it is extra insulting considering that it occurred at around the time that MLAs' expenses were increased?

Mr Swann: I will not comment on the point on MLAs' expenses; that was not a decision taken by my Department. I say to the Member that it is only the Belfast Trust and the South Eastern Trust that charge staff for parking. The Northern, Southern and Western Trusts do not routinely charge staff for car parking. There are, however, voluntary pay schemes in the Northern and Southern Trusts whereby some staff have chosen to pay £30 a month for a designated parking space. There is not the same application across all the trusts, and that is why I wait to see what the Belfast Trust's consultation with stakeholders and staff produces.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his recognition of the sterling work of the staff and his constant support for them throughout the pandemic.

With regard to car parking, many of our sites are shrinking, as he rightly pointed out — the South Eastern Trust's Lagan Valley Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, in particular. Will the Minister agree with me and commit himself to some work with his Executive colleagues, particularly the Department for Infrastructure, with regard to sustainable transport, which would, in fact, improve the environment and improve mental and physical health?

Mr Swann: The Member's question gets to the crux: it is about the accessibility of parking and the mode of how people go to work. I welcome the commitments made and the steps already taken by the Minister for Infrastructure in supporting a wide number of workers across the health and social care system with regard to access to public transport. That provision is an example that shows that, during the pandemic and up to now, the Department of Health and the Department for Infrastructure have worked hand in hand to support our staff in getting to and from work.

Mr Lynch: The Minister will be aware that my party colleague Fra McCann is bringing forward a private Member's Bill. Does he agree that car parking charges for staff disproportionately affect those living in rural areas, because of lack of transport?

Mr Swann: I am aware that the Member's colleague is bringing forward a Bill on the subject, and that is why it is important to highlight the fact that it is up to each trust how it implements those staffing charges. As I said to Mr Carroll, there is a divergence across our trusts.

We have known for a long time that access to public transport in rural areas needs to be addressed. That accessibility is crucial, especially when it comes to staff working at specific shift times and people who want to visit loved ones in hospital but have no accessible public transport system to support them. It is important that, as I mentioned in the answer to Mr Butler, we have seen good working between our Department and the Department for Infrastructure. It is also important that we see that work continue and develop in the public transport system to support our health and care workers and our health and care facilities. It is also important that the Executive give my colleague in Infrastructure the support that she needs with rural transport.

Reshaping Stroke Care: Update

5. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health for an update, including timescales, on the implementation of 'Reshaping Stroke Care'. (AQO 683/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a consequence of the need to prioritise the response to the coronavirus pandemic over the past few months, work on a range of projects, including 'Reshaping Stroke Care', has been paused. While I believe that that was the right thing to do, I appreciate the wider impact that it will have had for stroke patients across Northern Ireland. I assure you that reshaping stroke care remains a key priority, and I recognise the urgent need for the reform of stroke services in Northern Ireland. Over 19,000 people responded to the consultation on 'Reshaping Stroke Care', and my officials have completed an analysis of responses. I have asked for further analysis to be undertaken regarding the staffing requirements for the hyper-acute stroke network proposed in the consultation, and that work is currently under way. I intend to consider that analysis alongside the consultation analysis and the evidence base for reform in

reaching my decision, and I will update the House accordingly.

Mr O'Toole: Understandably, the attention of the Department has been reoriented towards COVID-19 for the past six months, but 'Reshaping Stroke Care' focused on several things, particularly the absolute need for early intervention and the importance of in-community care around rehabilitation. We can be sure that both of those things, unfortunately, will have been devastated over the past six months and that people will be receiving much worse outcomes. Is his Department or the trusts looking at how to make interventions now to compensate, where possible, people who have suffered strokes and have had, unfortunately, very poor care outcomes over the past six months?

Mr Swann: Again, the Member makes a vital point when he takes into consideration the approach that we have taken to re-engaging and rebuilding our services. We have done it in that three-month block to make sure that the patients who need that additional support receive it, that it is done in a safe manner and that our staff are supported in the provision of those services. That three-monthly interaction and re-engagement of our trusts has been timely in the way that we have approached this, and it is about making sure that we can provide that support, especially to those who have suffered stroke. One of the messages that we continued to put out through the worst of the pandemic was that anyone who needed that assistance or thought that they were having stroke or cardiac symptoms should present to our emergency departments and to our GPs to make sure that they could get onto that care pathway as soon as possible.

Ms Ennis: Minister, transformation is a critical piece of work, and we have had consultations on the reassessment of stroke services and breast assessment services. Can the Minister explain why he has not yet published and refuses to publish the new criteria for transforming services?

Mr Swann: I do not accept the Member's premise that I am refusing to do it, and I do not think that she meant it in that form, because I have received support from the Member's party and her party colleagues in the Executive on the work that we have brought forward. The Health Minister was from her party when the work started.

One of the things that Bengoa indicated was that any transformation in our health service

would involve running a transformation health service alongside the current health service, so there would be a significant need for input not just of finance but of resource in the shape of people working in the service. That was going to be challenging pre-COVID, and, in my Department and across the health and social care trusts, we are trying not just to run a parallel health service where we are trying to get our key services back on track while we support the COVID services but to look at transformation, although that is coming forward at a slower pace than we would like. It is still going on, so it is not that it has stopped or that I am refusing; it is just that we are now trying to run three health services in Northern Ireland, where, in January, running one was challenging enough.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions.

2.30 pm

Holylands Working Group

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health whether the Holylands working group has visited the area or, indeed, whether the group plans, at any stage, to be on the ground to see at first-hand the dire state of the area and the multi-systemic problems that need to be addressed therein. (AQT 381/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member because I know that it is an issue that she has genuinely and seriously campaigned on during her time in elected office. It is not just because it is now popular to do so; it is an issue that she has worked very closely on. I have not been to the Holylands, but the working group has representation from both the universities, the PSNI and the local council, whose representatives are able to report on a night-to-night basis on what they have seen and the interactions that they have had.

Ms Bailey: I asked that, Minister, because you mentioned that parties in the Holylands have been happening for as long as the expansion of HMOs in the area has been happening. I see that as a very simplistic statement to make, and I stress to the Minister that government and the statutory agencies have taken a hands-off approach in the area for decades on the issues of regeneration. Can we take any hope at all that the establishment of this working group will continue to rectify this long after COVID?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member, and, as I said, I recognise her seriousness in this. If it was solely a Health issue, I think that we could progress it a lot more expediently, but it is a cross-departmental issue and it involves the PSNI and the universities. Personally, I think that we have seen more engagement in the past number of weeks in addressing what is antisocial behaviour in the Holylands with regard to COVID and restricting the spread of COVID than we have previously. I sincerely hope — I mean this — that what we look at in addressing the current issue actually addresses the long-term future for those residents who live in the Holylands and call it home, rather than just the landlords who often have been exploiting the housing base that is in there for their financial advantage. That is why I am looking forward to the working group's recommendations. If we have to take some of them through as health regulations under the Coronavirus Act 2020, they will not just be for now but for the long term.

COVID-19 Regulations: Sports Fixtures

T2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, in the light of the scenes witnessed yesterday in Omagh at the Tyrone County GAA final and in video clips that came out overnight and this morning, which show slogans being chanted while no social distancing is being observed, whether the COVID-19 regulations are working, which is not to take away from Dungannon's victory but to acknowledge that there are no winners in the spread of COVID-19. (AQT 382/17-22)

Mr Swann: Numerous copies of those videos and pictures have been sent to me. They are a disappointment because one of the things that we were able to do very early on in the pandemic was engage with the three sporting codes, and the three sporting codes came up with sets of individual guidance, rules and regulations that their sports and disciplinary procedures could take forward. On what we have seen and what has been widely reproduced across social media, I do not think that that in any way is in keeping with what those sporting codes and bodies would expect of some of their players, and definitely not of their supporters. This virus does not respect any sporting definition, any game or any team. Therefore, when I saw those large-scale breaches of social-distancing regulations, it concerned me. The Member is right: there are no winners when we see that sort of outpouring on social media and across the media.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for your answer so far. Considering the work that you and the Executive are doing — I must add that it is sterling work — to try to control the pandemic, has Tyrone GAA apologised to you or the Executive?

Mr Swann: Not as far as I am aware.

Maternity Units: COVID-19 Restrictions

T3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the restrictions on birth partners attending antenatal hospital appointments and spending time with mother and baby during and after birth. (AQT 383/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As I am sure that he is aware, it is a very emotive and special time for parents. However, there are challenges for anyone who needs to access hospital, whether as a visitor or a patient, that we are taking into consideration. The Chief Nursing Officer will be in contact with all trust directors this afternoon to look at the enforcement and guidance that we have for hospital visiting across the entire system, because we have seen that, with the specific postcode approach that we have looked at over the past few days, there is a differential across the hospital system. It will not be ideal — it is not ideal — but we are trying to protect the mother to the full extent that our healthcare system can and to protect the staff as well.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Assembly appreciates the need to control transmission, particularly in our hospitals, but does the Minister accept that those restrictions are causing significant distress, and will he consider relaxing restrictions to allow partners to attend antenatal appointments and scans, to be present throughout labour and to remain with the mother and baby for longer than one hour post-birth?

Mr Swann: The Member has a very specific list of asks there. As I said, I have asked the Chief Nursing Officer — she is engaging with all trusts — to see what guidance we can provide to make sure that there is consistency. Where we see that differential, we can see that it causes stress and undue challenge, not just to the mothers but to their birthing partners as well.

It is not an easy time for access to our hospitals. I am not going to give any

commitment to a relaxation of restrictions. That may change before the week is out, because it is critical that we look after the physical well-being of the mother and baby, but I am also acutely aware of the mental support that comes from the presence of a birthing partner. It is not that this is an easy, blanket no; it is something that we are doing and want to do proportionally to make sure that those physical and mental supports are there.

Ambulance Service: South Eastern Trust

T4. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to assist the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, particularly within the South Eastern Trust, to stop ambulances having to queue, sometimes for hours on end, outside the Ulster Hospital's emergency department before being able to release a patient for triage. (AQT 384/17-22)

Mr Swann: We are increasingly seeing challenges for our Ambulance Service, especially in recent weeks and days, where we have seen a number of COVID cases in the Ambulance Service. Therefore, we are seeing a decrease in the number of available staff.

When it comes to waiting times, specifically at the Ulster Hospital, it is a challenge that we are addressing. It is a challenge that the South Eastern Trust is acutely aware of, but due to social distancing and a lack of space in the facility, it becomes even more challenging to sort out the flow of patients there.

One thing that I am acutely aware of, as is the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, is that every hour that an ambulance sits outside a hospital waiting to discharge someone is an hour lost where it could actually be on the road. Therefore, they are introducing the hospital ambulance liaison officer (HALO) system, where we have coordination from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in each accident and emergency department.

Ms Armstrong: Just in follow up to that, I will not ask about what is happening with maternity services at the Ulster Hospital, where miscarriages are also happening without partners present. Is it time, then, given the pressure on accident and emergency departments, for GPs to return to face-to-face appointments, thereby reducing the number of people turning up at A&E when they should be going to their GP?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. She may be aware that that too was the subject of a question for urgent oral answer last week. We are working with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association committee of general practitioners to make sure that GPs are seeing everyone who needs to be seen. We want to dispel the assumption that GPs are deliberately restricting face-to-face access. They are doing a lot of work, and it was last week, I think, when I was able to say that they had had up to 8,000 face-to-face appointments. That number continues to increase, but, again, it is about making sure that patients are entering a safe environment and that we support staff working in GP practices as well. Anyone who needs a face-to-face consultation, I am assured, should have access to it. That is something that I continue to take up. If the Member has individual constituents that she wants to address to me, I am happy to take that forward with the Royal College.

GP Facilities: East Antrim

T5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health whether he will, as soon as it is safe to do so, visit some GP surgeries in East Antrim, given that although Ms Armstrong highlighted the pressures on A&E and in our hospitals, there is equal pressure on our GP services, with many of the GPs in East Antrim operating in aging health trust facilities, some of which date back to the 1960s, making caring for patients and maintaining a social distance more difficult. (AQT 385/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for working into topical questions what he has asked in questions for written and oral answer. I am grateful to the Member for continuing to champion the healthcare system in his constituency of East Antrim. I will happily take up that invite when, as the Member said, it is safe to do so.

Mr Beggs: Thanks for that response, Minister. There has been limited investment, particularly in primary healthcare facilities in my constituency, and I ask you to review those to ensure that there is equal treatment for patients throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: I am grateful for the dedication of the health and social care professionals across Northern Ireland who have been working tirelessly to deliver services at this challenging time. In East Antrim, practices reconfigured quickly to protect patients and staff and embrace new ways of working, such as virtual

consultations. Practices across the East Antrim Federation recently developed plans to individually deliver flu vaccinations in their own premises or in clusters, and there has been an integrated approach to that work. For example, in Larne, all five practices will provide flu vaccinations locally in the town, in conjunction with the local council, which has provided premises. So, there is that ongoing work. I am aware of the need in East Antrim, and if I cannot visit the Member's constituency, I will be happy to meet him to discuss the subject.

Mr Speaker: As Christopher Stalford is not in his place, I will move on to Karen Mullan.

Community Crisis Intervention Service: Derry

T7. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Health for an assurance that the people of Derry will not lose access to the community crisis intervention service given that there was considerable disappointment after last week's Adjournment debate when he failed to commit to maintaining that service. (AQT 387/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware that I have agreed to provide an additional £60,000, in addition to the previous £32,000, to enable that service to continue until the end of March. A separate funding arrangement is being explored for the service thereafter by the council and extern, and I committed by supporting that piece of work last week in the Adjournment debate. A review into mental health crisis services is commencing and will be completed by March 2021.

My commitment to the crisis intervention service in Londonderry is not in question. It has been there, and the second tranche of money that I have provided is to allow it, in conjunction with the council, to bring forward a funding proposal that I am led to believe is well developed and should be well received by the body that it is going to for that funding. It should provide more longer-term financial support than simply what we are doing through the Department currently.

Ms Mullan: Thank you for your answer. I know that that is being worked up, but we need to ensure that there are no gaps in provision. Can you commit to ensuring that those services continue and we do not allow gaps to appear in the trust areas?

Mr Swann: The Member's point is well made. That is specifically why we signed off on that additional £60,000 to provide the surety of that gap between the last moneys that we provided and the access and, hopefully, the start of a future funding stream. We provided the £60,000 to allow that work to continue but also to support the vital work that the Londonderry crisis intervention service provides at present.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a couple of minutes to allow the Minister and other Members to come into the Chamber for the next item.

2.45 pm

Infrastructure

Road Resurfacing Projects: North Down

1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what road resurfacing projects are planned for north Down during this financial year. (AQO 694/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I am pleased to confirm that my Department's programme of planned road resurfacing schemes is under way in the north Down area and includes schemes at Church Drive, Bangor; Cultra Avenue, Holywood; Main Street, Conlig; and Tower Road, Conlig. Clearly, many more schemes and programmes are being developed across the north Down area. Those will be included in council reports that officials are preparing and intend to issue to councils in due course.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell me when the Kinnegar area of Holywood will be resurfaced? Will she also commit to visiting the area with me, along with residents, to address a number of surfacing, roads and flooding issues in the area?

Ms Mallon: I do not have the specific details at hand, but I am happy to write to the Member and to engage with her and with residents.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister provide an update on essential maintenance to ensure road safety, including gully clearing and grass-verge cutting? In particular, will she account for the delays in major pothole repairs?

Ms Mallon: As the Member will be aware, the Department for Infrastructure has suffered from a funding deficit for many years. In fact, when his party colleague held the Ministry, a significant amount of money was taken from the Department and, in all honesty, it has not fully recovered. We have had to scale back services such as gully cleaning and so forth, but we still try to do what we can and I was pleased to be able to maintain the maintenance budget with my allocation this year. I would certainly like to be in a position in which I could do so much more, but, unfortunately, due to funding constraints, we are delivering the maximum service that we can at this stage. I will continue to make the case to Executive colleagues.

Mr Muir: People in north Down are very disappointed that such a low number of roads will be resurfaced in this financial year. Will the Minister commit to bidding for additional funding in the October monitoring round to ensure that north Down and all areas in Northern Ireland get the investment that they deserve?

Ms Mallon: Yes, I will make additional bids in the October monitoring round. I have said before on the Floor of the House that the Department for Infrastructure touches on people's everyday lives, from street lights to potholes and from bridges to how people get to and from work. I would like to be in a position to do a lot more and will continue to make the case. I have always argued that if we, as an Executive, are to have the ambition of winning people's hearts and minds, we need to get the basics right. That very much involves the level and maintenance of our roads network.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Minister, the 2019 audit report stated that the trunk road network is in a better condition than was first estimated. Would the Minister consider prioritising rural roads in any of her budgets? Clearly, there have been a number of complaints about rural roads in general.

Ms Mallon: One of my commitments as Minister is to tackle regional imbalance. That is why I have set aside £10 million for a rural roads fund to address the very issues that the Member has highlighted.

Mr Buckley: The Member is right to raise the issue of resurfacing. Some three months ago, I raised in the House with the Minister the plight of Birchwood Manor in my constituency. A meeting and the hope of progress were promised: to date, no meeting and no progress. Does the Minister think that it is acceptable that,

some 10 years after the street's completion, ratepayers have no finished surface and that there are raised ironworks, lighting issues and serious sewage issues?

Ms Mallon: What I can commit to, when I go back up to the office, is to ask officials to meet you on-site to try to address the issues that you have raised, where we possibly can. I do not know whether you requested the site meeting with me in the Chamber. As a Department, and I include myself in this, as a result of the COVID restrictions, we certainly have not been able to have as many face-to-face meetings as we would have liked, but I am happy to take the Member's issue away.

Road Network: Winter Readiness

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, as a consequence of repair projects having been delayed by COVID-19, for her assessment of how well situated the road network is to deal with winter conditions. (AQO 695/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although the COVID-19 pandemic led to some initial delays in the commencement of the 2020-21 road maintenance programmes, those are now well under way. It is envisaged that a significant proportion of the resurfacing programme will be delivered before the onset of the winter period. Prior to the start of each winter season, my Department carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. That planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place; that all winter service equipment is in satisfactory working order; and that there are adequate supplies of salt. There are also arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period, if necessary.

Although the Department targets the limited resources available for gritting at the busier through routes, on many other routes that do not qualify for inclusion in the gritting schedule, salt bins or grit piles are provided for use by the public on a self-help basis.

Subject to the availability of funding, a full winter service will operate from 19 October this year until 5 April 2021 and will have approximately 300 staff and 130 gritters available and ready to salt main roads, in order to help drivers across Northern Ireland deal with the wintry conditions.

Mr Allister: Given that one of the Minister's predecessors, Danny Kennedy, was starved of

funding to cut the grass verges adequately or fix the potholes, and given what she has just said about matters being able to be done subject to funding, has she any fears that she might obtain the same treatment as a single member of the Executive?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is fair enough to say that there are significant challenges when you are a single Member from a party on the Executive. That having been said, I have provided robust detail to Executive colleagues and to the Finance Minister on the importance of ensuring that we invest in our infrastructure, for the reasons that a number of Members have highlighted in examples of streets and other places in their constituencies but also to assist our recovery from COVID. I recently submitted an Executive paper in which I set out the case, which I believe is compelling, for ensuring that infrastructure is front and centre of our recovery from COVID and in order to face the challenges of Brexit. I will continue to make the case, and I hope that the same fate does not befall me as did Danny Kennedy.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Minister commit to adding the B47 to the gritting schedule? This is a rural road that connects rural communities in Cranagh and Plumbridge with services in Draperstown and Magherafelt in my constituency. At various points throughout most winters, the road becomes totally inaccessible, leaving people rurally isolated.

Ms Mallon: I receive many requests of that nature, and I recognise the seriousness with which Members put those queries to me and how sincere they are.

At present, we salt 28% of our total road network, and that carries 80% of traffic volumes. That costs between £5 million and £7 million annually. If we were to increase that to salting 90% of traffic volumes, that cost would double, to between £10 million and £14 million. If we were to increase that to salting 100%, the cost would increase further, to around £28 million. We fund our winter gritting services, annually, through monitoring round bids. I have submitted a bid to the Finance Minister for this year's winter gritting services. I am keen to try to do more, and I look to colleagues to help me make the case to the Finance Minister to ensure that we receive additional funding to enhance our services.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answers. With regard to enhancement of the

roads network, it is good to see progress on the A6, which is a strategic road for travel across the North. Was the progress of that work unduly affected by COVID? Will you provide a time frame for completion of that route?

Ms Mallon: I recognise the crucial need for the completion of the A6, and I am 100% committed to its delivery. Unfortunately, there had been slippage due to COVID-19, but I am pleased that the project is back on track and that we are due to see similar completion rates and date to those we expected pre-COVID.

Coastal Erosion

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's work in addressing coastal erosion since the publication of the 'Baseline Study and Gap Analysis of Coastal Erosion Risk Management NI'. (AQO 696/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has been working collaboratively with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on coastal erosion risk management issues. The two Departments commissioned 'Baseline Study and Gap Analysis of Coastal Erosion Risk Management NI', which was published in January 2019. The study collated existing data relating to coastal erosion and undertook a high-level vulnerability assessment. The primary conclusion from that assessment was that there is currently insufficient data to reliably inform coastal management decision-making.

The study identified a number of key issues for consideration in determining the way forward. The coastal forum, whose membership includes DFI, DAERA, the seven councils with a coastline, and the National Trust, is working collaboratively to address those issues. A draft coastal forum work programme has been developed. As part of that, a project is under way to provide a comprehensive coastal survey and vulnerability assessment. The survey, which is led by DAERA, will provide a comprehensive data baseline for our coast, and subsequent surveys — perhaps every three or five years — and will develop a picture of how and when the coastline is changing. Other work progressed includes a position statement to assist councils with their consideration of coastal change when preparing local development plans.

The Member established the coastal forum when she was Minister for Regional Development and remains committed to the issue. I assure her that I am supportive of the

coastal forum and the collaborative work that is progressing to devise solutions to the problems facing our coastline.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome the study, but it tells us what we already knew back in 2016, which is that there is insufficient data and that a comprehensive shoreline study is required. Is the Minister satisfied that the current mechanism of oversight from her Department and DAERA is sufficient to deliver and implement a coastal erosion risk management strategy? Or, should one Department take the lead?

Ms Mallon: I intend to discuss with the Minister of Environment how we can take that issue forward. In the absence of the Assembly, the forum was jointly chaired by the permanent secretaries of both Departments, so I am happy to work with my ministerial counterpart to try to move the issue forward.

Mr Beggs: In July of this year, DEFRA published a new policy statement on flood and coastal erosion risk management, which aims to create greater resilience in flood and coastal risk management. Will the Minister advise of the outcome of the evaluation of her approach — the homeowner flood protection grant? Is she open to ideas that have been adopted in other parts of the United Kingdom, as well as those relating to infrastructure and flood defence, and to looking at natural defences and at how resilience can be built into housing and to taking a community and catchment-centred approach to coming up with solutions?

Ms Mallon: I am. I believe that we should not be reinventing the wheel and that we should be learning from best practice, globally. I am also supportive of the approach that the Member has outlined. We need to be building resilience, and we need to look at our natural environment as an aid and protection against flooding. We also need to recognise that we are in a climate emergency. We need to do everything that we can to address that. On a small scale, I have set aside £20 million for the blue/green fund. I have also been keen to see if we can pilot sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) with housing associations, for example, so that we are embedding resilience and climate action in the development and design of housing schemes, and at the centre of our communities. I am, therefore, keen to do what we can to progress that and to take the ideas of Members and others.

3.00 pm

Ms Rogan: Coastal erosion is a big issue in my constituency, South Down, as it impacts on land, property and infrastructure. Does the Minister agree that we need the strongest possible measures to address that challenge and provide coastal communities with long-term sustainable answers?

Ms Mallon: In short, I do. One of the difficulties, as the Chair of the Committee pointed out, is that no one Department has overall responsibility for that area. That does not mean that we should not be ambitious and try to work together. That is why I am supportive of the collaborative approach being taken forward by the coastal forum. I will continue to do what I can to support it.

Fix Your Bike Voucher Scheme

4. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to implement a scheme offering bicycle repair vouchers, similar to the Fix your Bike scheme in England. (AQO 697/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the Department for Transport's Fix your Bike voucher scheme in England. I understand that the scheme was introduced at the end of June this year. The aim of the scheme is to encourage more people to embrace cycling, boost the number of commuting and leisure trips and reduce the number of short journeys made by private cars. As the Member indicates in his question, however, the scheme is aimed at providing assistance for bicycle repair or refurbishment. In effect, the vouchers provide a grant of up to £50 towards the repair and servicing of bicycles to encourage owners to start using their old bikes again. It does not provide any assistance, though, for people who do not own a bicycle to purchase one. For many, the fact that they cannot afford a bicycle is the real barrier to cycling. It is regrettable that the scheme does not address that reality.

I have asked my officials to monitor closely the progress of the scheme to determine its effectiveness, the value for money and the benefits that might accrue to Northern Ireland were such a scheme to be introduced here. I am mindful, however, that a similar scheme in Northern Ireland could cost around £700,000, and, unfortunately, given the resource budget allocated to my Department and the significant pressures as a result, the scheme would be currently unaffordable without additional funding being provided to the Department for Infrastructure

Mr Blair: The Minister's answer at least leaned towards a semi-commitment on the issue. In the light of that, if we were to identify the merits of the scheme for Northern Ireland, would the Minister consider introducing a prioritisation structure whereby those in most need got help first?

Ms Mallon: I have asked my officials to consider that. We are considering ways in which it might be possible to make bicycles more easily available to those not in employment or unable to avail themselves of the current schemes. I am looking in particular at schoolchildren to see what we can do there.

The Cycle to Work scheme is available for employers throughout Northern Ireland. It is a salary sacrifice scheme operating between individual employers and HMRC. It helps employees to get access to a bicycle with significant savings. There is a Northern Ireland Civil Service scheme, and many other employers have their own schemes. I would be keen to do what we can to maximise the schemes that exist. I am also keen to see what we can do to assist those who cannot afford to get a bicycle through the blue/green fund and my walking and cycling champion.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the Minister's announcement last week of £2.8 million for six greenway projects and thank her for her commitment to that. I caveat that with the fact that neither the Ballymoney to Ballycastle greenway nor the Glens of Antrim greenway from Ballymena to Cushendall in my constituency were successful. Will there be additional funding for greenway projects that did not succeed in the current funding round?

Ms Mallon: I appreciate that it was a positive announcement but understand that it will be met with disappointment by others who have not seen the advancement of schemes in their area. I am caught in a bind in terms of the need to get capital money spent quickly. We reached out to all councils. I was clear to emphasise that this is just the first step. I cannot pre-empt what allocations might be made to my Department, but I am committed to enhancing the blue/green fund and doing what we can to enhance our greenway experience across Northern Ireland. I look forward to working with the Member and, hopefully, seeing progress in his constituency.

A5: Irish Government Commitment

5. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement she has had with the Irish Government to ensure the original

commitment for the A5 project is honoured. (AQO 698/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities and improving road safety. There are so many communities, particularly in rural parts west of the Bann, that can benefit from investment in the A5 project. The A5 is also a commitment of the Executive and of the Irish and British Governments and is specifically referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I am determined to deliver progress. A public inquiry for the project concluded in March 2020, and my officials received an interim report from the commissioner on 2 September. Officials are considering the issues raised and recommendations made in the report in addition to taking legal advice before I decide on the next steps for this very important scheme.

The Irish Government reaffirmed their commitment of £75 million to the project in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The importance of the A5 was also discussed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting. I very much welcome that commitment. I have had initial discussions with the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan, and will meet him again later this month. I look forward to further discussion on how we can work together in partnership to deliver on this much-needed project for citizens across our island.

Ms C Kelly: It is vital that the Irish Government honour their original commitment to the A5 project, and, of course, this also opens up possibilities to expedite the construction process. Minister, will you assure us that you will pursue this urgent matter with the Irish Government, who are, of course, led by your party's Fianna Fáil partners?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that I will always do what I can to maximise funding. We live in difficult financial times, and, certainly, I will not be found wanting in working with anyone in any political party across this island to ensure that we can deliver improvements and enhance the life of all our citizens.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, I am sure that you will join me in wishing a speedy recovery to our colleague Daniel McCrossan, who would ask a supplementary if he were here this afternoon. Do you have an indicative time frame for the work that you outlined in your earlier answer?

Ms Mallon: I want to extend to our party colleague Daniel our best wishes. No doubt, if

he were here, he would very much ask that question. It is a hobby horse of his.

As I said, the public inquiry was held earlier this year, and it concluded in March. My Department received the interim report on 2 September. It raised issues that are being carefully considered by officials. We are also taking legal advice on that. I hope to be in a position very soon to update the House on the next steps.

Mrs Barton: Does the Minister accept that the A5 has been specified at a level above what the traffic volume normally justifies, which means that a new route is being adopted and existing roads are largely being disregarded? Therefore, with the growing cost estimates and the absence of the promised £400 million from the Republic, can it now proceed only with the loss of many other infrastructure projects, such as other roads, cycle routes and upgrading projects?

Ms Mallon: While finances are always tight, it is not always is a question of "either/or". Even if I were not the Minister for Infrastructure, I would say that infrastructure and investment in it are a catalyst for change. They are an economic driver and critical tools for tackling the climate emergency. That is being demonstrated by Governments across the world. The A5 is an Executive flagship project and is referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach', so it is very much a firm commitment of the Executive.

Vehicles of Historic Interest: MOT Exemptions

6. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will bring legislation to the Assembly to implement MOT exemptions for vehicles of historic interest. (AQO 699/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I announced on 2 July that I intended to introduce the exemption of vehicles of historic interest from periodic roadworthiness testing in Northern Ireland. The exemption will align Northern Ireland legislation with that in GB and will apply to vehicles that were first registered at least 40 years ago, are no longer in production and have not been significantly modified. The exemption will not apply to vehicles that are still in public service.

I advise the Member that the draft regulations required to introduce the exemption recently received legal clearance and were laid in the Assembly on 18 September 2020. They are subject to the Assembly's statutory period that

applies under the negative resolution procedure. It is anticipated that they will come into force on 12 October. I know how passionate the Member is. He has been an active campaigner on the issue on behalf of the vintage vehicle community. I hope that this news and this success make him happy.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister not only for her kind words but for her positive consideration of the scheme and for bringing it to its implementation stage. I hope that I have plagued you in a pleasant manner; even though it was a regular occurrence, we never managed to fall out.

Minister, do you agree that historical vehicle owners deserve credit for their mostly unrecognised charitable work? They put hours into their vehicles while raising huge sums of money for charities. I convey thanks and appreciation on behalf of all the enthusiasts whom I have lobbied for.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his kind words. This was not an issue that was particularly on my radar until I took up this post, but you very kindly and very actively made sure that it was on my radar; I thank you for that. You showed me up close the great work of the historical vehicle community, particularly the work that it does for charities. It does so without seeking recognition, but we have a responsibility to acknowledge and recognise the many groups and communities across Northern Ireland that make a huge contribution quietly but hugely effectively.

Mr Speaker: I may call you "Mr Happy Harry".

Mr Lynch: Will the Minister provide us with an update on whether the Department is exploring biannual testing for certain vehicles, as happens in the Twenty-six Counties?

Ms Mallon: The Member will know that I advised the Committee that I was keen to explore that. I have asked my officials to move to a call for evidence. We hope that that will be completed by the end of this year, after which I will be able to take stock and decide on next steps.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her announcement. It will help in a very small way the current situation with regard to the MOT backlog.

As the Minister will be aware, temporary exemption certificates (TECs) are no longer being issued for four-year-old cars. As a result,

I have been contacted by many constituents struggling to get through to the booking line to get an MOT secured. What is being done to ensure that that is ended and people are able to get their MOT booked?

Ms Mallon: That has been an issue. We have seen a huge increase in the number of calls to the booking centre. Currently, vehicle test bookings can be made only through the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) call centre. Customers have been experiencing difficulties in getting through, and, for that, I apologise. To mitigate the issue and the general high volume of calls being handled by call agents, the DVA is introducing a call-messaging service to redirect calls to nirect. Capita has also agreed in principle to extend its opening hours by an additional two hours from 5.00 pm to 7.00 pm from Monday through to Wednesday to provide additional capacity. Those measures are to be implemented from Wednesday 23 September.

To further alleviate pressure on the Capita call centre, the DVA will continue to engage directly with the haulage industry, particularly operators with large fleets, to facilitate bookings at local test centres, where possible. Members should encourage their constituents to check the status of their vehicle online. They should go to — if I remember it correctly — www.gov.uk/check-mot-status to see the status of their vehicle. A number of vehicles have been given temporary exemption certificates and have no need to go for an MOT, so I encourage Members to direct their constituents to that website.

Galliaugh Shore, Enniskillen: Sewerage Issues

7. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on action she has taken regarding the sewerage issues at Galliaugh Shore, Enniskillen. (AQO 700/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This is, undoubtedly, an extremely distressing situation for residents of Galliaugh Shore. This is, as, I know, the Member is aware, a very complex issue in a private development, where a developer has not entered into an agreement with Northern Ireland Water to adopt the sewers in the development. The developer has subsequently gone into liquidation, and the sewerage infrastructure is overflowing and causing pollution. While the matter is not of the residents' making, neither my Department nor Northern Ireland Water has legal responsibility for addressing the issue. However, I am sensitive to the residents' extreme distress.

I have, therefore, written to Conor Murphy, Minister of Finance, to seek an urgent meeting to discuss Galliaugh Shore and other private development sites with inadequate private sewerage infrastructure, as well as the funding shortfall facing Northern Ireland Water which is inhibiting it from being able to meet its statutory obligations. My hope is that, working together, a solution can be found to those issues.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. I call Ms Clare Bailey. Clare, since you won the number-one spot in the ballot for both Ministers today, would you like to share your lottery ticket numbers?

Ms Bailey: No chance, Mr Speaker; no chance. It will be the first number one that I get. *[Laughter.]*

Camlough Hydro Storage Scheme

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, albeit that she welcomed her announcement last week about the North/South interconnector, which is a good first step forward for our long underfunded energy infrastructure, whether she has had any discussions with her officials about resurrecting the Camlough hydro storage scheme. (AQT 391/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have not had any discussions with officials on that matter, but I am keen to raise it with them later on.

Ms Bailey: It would be good if the Minister could, because this is key. Consumers in Northern Ireland have been paying very high energy rates and I see this as one of the reasons, along with the lack of storage and infrastructure, why we need to get that balance. The scheme started 40 years ago and a lot of work was done, but it has stalled. In the current context, this a good opportunity not just to lower prices and increase availability but for a great, green job-creation scheme.

Ms Mallon: I share the Member's view. We have the importance of securing the supply of energy but also, as the Member has pointed out, the importance of ensuring that it is affordable to people. We are keen to do what we can to ensure that we have security of supply but also to bring down prices. It is very important too that, where we can, we maximise

the opportunities to increase the provision of renewable energies.

DVA Booking Line: Capacity

T2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having listened with interest to Mr Muir's question about the difficulty that people are having in trying to get through on the DVA line to book vehicle tests and me having sort of got lost in her answer, which was a bit convoluted, why her Department is not building capacity into the DVA's booking line. (AQT 392/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is building capacity. That is why I said that, in Capita, we are increasing the number of hours that the service is available. Its hours will be extended and we will have additional staff answering. One of the other challenges is that a number of people are calling the call centre with additional queries, which is putting pressure on the system. That is why we are now putting in the automated service to better direct people to where they need to go for help. We are also doing what we can to lift capacity and pressures off the system by engaging directly with our hauliers, for example, so that they do not have to go through the call-booking system. We are putting in a number of measures to increase our capacity and to redirect those who are calling the centre but for whom that is not the best number for them to get the help that they actually need.

Mr Sheehan: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for that answer. What is the Department doing to address the backlog in driving tests?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that we have reinstated a number of practical driving tests for different vehicles. We are working through priority workers and those who had their tests cancelled. I think that that is a fair and balanced approach. We have recruited two new vehicle examiners. Their training will take 10 days, so they are due to start in 10 days. We are also in the process of recruiting an additional 12 temporary vehicle examiners in the next few weeks. The purpose of that is that, at present, we have 40 dual role examiners who can carry out both practical driving tests and vehicle examinations. By bringing in the additional vehicle examiner capacity, we will be freeing up those people to carry out practical driving tests. In addition, we are exploring extending into the evening the hours when practical driving tests can be carried out, and the possibility of carrying out tests on a Sunday.

However, as I am sure that the Member will appreciate, we need to make sure that there are proper driving conditions against which to assess the candidates.

River Moyola: Flood Mitigation Measures

T3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for details of any flood mitigation measures that will be introduced along the course of the River Moyola, given that she will be aware of repeated severe flooding from that river, about which he has had several meetings with the Rivers Agency over the past number of years. (AQT 393/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question, and I am aware that he has been raising the issue for some time on behalf of his constituents. The measures being undertaken on the designated stretches of the Moyola river include the inspection and repair of the existing flood defences. That work involves the removal of heavy vegetation, treatment of invasive species, and repair and reinstatement of the existing earth and flood defences. Sections of the Moyola river are maintained every year, and that watercourse maintenance work includes the removal of channel silt and aquatic weed growth and of obstructions from the channel that restrict the free flow of water. The maintenance may also include upgrade or replacement, if necessary, of flap valves.

Mr McGlone: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra chuimsitheach sin. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Specifically, what measures can be introduced or speeded up at River Road, Draperstown and at the Broagh, Castledawson?

Ms Mallon: My officials are aware of the 10 River Road issue and have advised that a financially viable flood alleviation scheme at 10 River Road to reduce flood impacts is unlikely. However, the Department suggested that the owner consider the homeowner flood protection grant scheme, and I confirm that we have received the application from the homeowner and are keen to work with them.

In respect of Broagh — I hope that my pronunciation of that is right — the project team involved with the ongoing construction of the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme has commissioned its consultant to investigate the incident and seek to determine the cause of the flooding. At that stage, the team will consider what mitigation measures might be appropriate.

That process is likely to take two months. I am happy to keep the Member fully updated.

Translink: Financial Position

T4. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on Translink's financial position and whether it will have the reserves that it will need to operate legally in this financial year and in 2021-22, following the news of its plans to make £20 million in cost reductions. (AQT 394/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question in which she referred to the efficiency savings and potential — well, likely — redundancies at Translink. COVID-19 continues to have a major impact on passenger numbers and has seen Translink face a significant decline in income. There have been allocations from the Executive for Translink. That is very welcome and is recognition of the fact that it is a critical public service. I have a bid in currently.

It is concerning that the savings will lead to redundancies. While it is an operational matter for Translink and the accounting officer, I have asked that, where possible, we explore the voluntary redundancy aspect. It is a hugely challenging time.

In respect of the position facing my Department, it is hugely concerning, but I will continue to work with the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues to try to secure the resources that we need to do our job and be able to deliver critical public services, particularly our public transport and Northern Ireland Water.

Ms Armstrong: Tomorrow is "no car" day. As the Minister said, public transport is a critical public service. However, I have concerns that the rural, non-economically viable services may bite the big one, to be quite honest, if Translink gets into trouble. Can the Minister provide an assurance that rural areas will not suffer more as a result of the pressures?

Ms Mallon: I have been assured that the efficiency savings of £20 million this time round will not impact on services. I have to also point out that, if further savings and cuts are required, it will impact on services. That is why I was pleased, previously, to secure a commitment from the Executive that we are committed to having a publicly owned public transport network. The issue for us is this: if we believe that we should have a publicly owned public transport network that operates on need, not profit, which is particularly important to our rural communities, we absolutely have to fund it.

COVID-19: Impact on DFI Services

T5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has made an assessment of the impact of the worrying spike in COVID-19 cases on service delivery and recovery in her Department. (AQT 395/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Like all Members, I am deeply concerned at the increased levels of COVID-19 in our community, and, as Member of the Assembly and a member of the Executive, I will always put the health and safety of our population first. Every day is challenging for all of us, with rule changes, changes to services and changes to family life, and I know that people want clarity and a clear plan.

While my Department has put in place a clear plan for our services, I have to be honest with the public and say that nothing is sure with this virus and no one can say with certainty that services will not be affected if there are future restrictions. I can, however, advise that DFI continues to do all that it can by following strictly the health advice and also doing what it can to minimise disruption to the public. My senior team is meeting regularly to discuss and plan for our response and our recovery from COVID-19. With infection rates increasing, we all have to be prepared. I am confident that my Department is focused on progressing the restoration of services while maintaining a firm focus on responding to COVID-19, with contingency planning in place should we face a second wave. I ask Members and the wider public to remain on their guard and to work together by washing our hands, keeping to social distancing and following the advice of the Health Minister to keep one another safe.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, thank you and your Department for your diligence in giving clear messages. There is some confusion on school buses where there are other service users, particularly in rural areas, because some of our children and young people wear masks and some do not have to. That is probably because of the height of some of our young people. They may well be under the age for having to wear a mask but look much older. It is causing confusion. Therefore, Minister, along with the Education Minister, could you provide some reassurance to transport operators and service users?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. That is why I moved to make face coverings mandatory on the public transport network. Obviously, there are clear exemption

categories, but it is mandatory for those aged 13 and above. I understand that a different approach has been taken on school transport, and I did engage with the Education Minister. To my mind, it would have been more beneficial to have uniformity in approach. Translink is engaging with schools so that we are encouraging our young people and making it clear to them that, when they are on the public transport network, they must wear a face covering, but we are strongly encouraging them to do that when they are on school transport as well. I encourage all of us, as elected representatives and as parents, to ensure that our children have face coverings, because that will keep them and other passengers safe.

Free Public Transport

T6. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the availability of free public transport for people who are fleeing domestic abuse, as announced in July. (AQT 396/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member points out, by working with the Justice Minister, Women's Aid and others who are involved in this very important work, we introduced free transport for those who are fleeing domestic abuse. My understanding is that the uptake has been small, but, even if it helps one person leave an abusive relationship, it will very much have been worth it.

Ms Bradshaw: I appreciate that it was really brought in because of the COVID lockdown. Given the small numbers, are you minded to continue it?

Ms Mallon: I am committed to continuing it. Yes, it came in against the backdrop of COVID, but I would have been keen to progress it without that.

Mr Speaker: I call John Blair. I do not think that you will get to ask a supplementary question.

Cycle Parking

T7. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with one car-parking space representing enough space for approximately 12 bicycles, whether she will commit to incorporating cycle parking in future park-and-ride plans, given that although he welcomes the announcement of the first phase of this year's park-and-ride programme, he notes that it contains no mention of cycle parking. (AQT 397/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am committed to doing that. The park-and-ride schemes are at various stages. Some will move to land acquisition but a number of them are at the detailed design stage, and I have said to my officials that we should be maximising active travel. For me, it is the combination: we need to encourage people to walk and cycle to our bus stations, train stations and halts, but we must make sure that they have the space to safely secure their bicycles, so that will feature in the design.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Our time for topical questions is up.

Members will be aware that I have accepted questions for urgent oral answer that were tabled by Justin McNulty and Doug Beattie. Normally, these would be taken now. However, the Ministers involved have requested that I defer these questions to the end of scheduled business. This is to allow the Ministers to attend an emergency meeting of the Executive that is to take place very shortly. I understand that this meeting is critical to the Executive's ongoing management of COVID-19. On that basis, I have, of course, agreed to their request. The questions for urgent oral answer will be taken immediately after the debate on promoting dementia-friendly policy. Revised indicative timings have been issued and are available in the Business Office. I ask Members to take their ease while we get ready for the next item on the agenda.

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

Private Members' Business

Honouring the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North/South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour their commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

Mr Muir: Normalisation is the process by which ideas, actions, behaviours or events that society previously considered extreme and undesirable come to be accepted as within the bounds of acceptability. Normalisation can be a force for good, but we must also be wary of it. In recent years, at local and international level, we have had to continue to challenge normalisation. It is not normal or acceptable to go without a Government for three years. It is not normal or acceptable for the President of the United States of America to fuel racism and lie continually on social media. Today, we must recognise the absurdity of what we are debating. We, as an Assembly that was founded by an international treaty, are compelled to ask —.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: No. We are compelled to ask our sovereign Government, the same sovereign Government that signed the aforementioned Good Friday Agreement, to respect international law by not unilaterally breaking another international treaty. I should not have to ask my Government to obey the law; nor should anyone else.

I am not here today as an enthusiastic supporter of the Northern Ireland protocol. Unlike members of other parties, I actively campaigned against Brexit before the referendum and afterwards so that these decisions would not be necessary. However, they are necessary, and the threat by the UK Government to unilaterally walk away is utterly reckless. Brexit, which my party always said would be a disaster for Northern Ireland, makes regulatory and customs checks necessary. Unicorn/fantasy solutions do not solve the problem; they just take us, full circle, back to the reality that Brexit is bad for Northern Ireland and cannot be implemented without friction. We are in a fine mess that was signed, sealed and delivered by the DUP, which was a cheerleader for Brexit in 2016.

In an acknowledgement that checks may be necessary and that they must be undertaken in the Irish Sea, the Northern Ireland protocol was the agreed mechanism for managing them. It was hailed, less than a year ago, as a negotiating success by the British Prime Minister, who called it:

"an oven-ready deal."

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I note that he said:

"signed, sealed and delivered by the DUP".

Does he acknowledge that, on three occasions, the DUP not only voted against the Northern Ireland protocol but were vocal in their opposition to it?

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

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

During the debate on Brexit in 2016, the Alliance Party and others made it very clear what the implications of Brexit would be, and we are now living with them. Northern Ireland voted against Brexit with a very clear knowledge of its implications.

Walking away from the Northern Ireland protocol, as the UK Government have threatened to, risks serious implications and sets a dangerous precedent. As Margaret Thatcher once said:

"Britain does not renounce Treaties. Indeed, to do so would damage our own integrity as well as international relations."

How the Conservative Party has changed. To threaten to collapse the Northern Ireland protocol, necessitating a hard border in Ireland, in order to avoid exit declarations while, at the same time, destroying the international reputation of the UK, is a bizarre way to try to support businesses in Northern Ireland.

We have worked for decades to create a society in this place where you cannot pick and choose the laws that you are going to abide by. We are asking people to abide by laws and regulations that create a tremendous strain on their lives. We must not normalise the approach of the UK Government, and I am happy to condemn it as being utterly unacceptable. My party calls on the UK Government to honour their commitments to an international treaty. It is a worrying state of affairs to have to do so. I support the motion.

Mr McNulty: The Ireland protocol contains vital protections for the North and for the whole island of Ireland. The protocol is no one's first choice for our island, but it is a necessary response and compromise that has been forced by the hard Brexit ideology of the right wing ideologues in Downing Street. The Internal Market Bill is blatantly irresponsible instrument that seeks to override the Ireland protocol; it recklessly threatens the Good Friday Agreement in substance and in spirit.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentions the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as many have. The motion talks about protecting the Good Friday Agreement "in all its dimensions". Does he not recognise that fundamental to the basis of the Belfast Agreement is the principle of consent, which means that it is for the people of Northern Ireland to decide their constitutional future and, as such, remain a full and integral member of the United Kingdom. How does the protocol protect that?

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

Mr McNulty: The Member's party did not consent to the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that Northern Ireland did not consent to Brexit and that the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to Remain?

Mr McNulty: Mr Buckley's party did not consent to the Good Friday Agreement, although it did consent to Brexit, which is the source of all the

problems here. This island did not consent to Brexit.

Businesses want to see the protocol implemented in a way that works, businesses want maximum access to the UK and EU markets and cross-border workers — frontier workers — want to know that they will not be impacted. There are still unanswered questions. Businesses want and need clear and unambiguous information on where they stand and what the future holds so that they can plan and prepare.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for giving way. Businesses have welcomed the Internal Market Bill because it tries to address some of the problems that they have with the protocol. Will the parties not get on the side of business and minimise the damage now rather than going back to this ideological debate all the time?

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for his comments, but the businesses that I know have not welcomed it.

Businesses and communities know that the way to achieve a compromise is for the UK to abide by its original obligations and work constructively to implement the Ireland protocol. It is very simple. I support the motion.

Ms Bailey: I support the motion. The willingness of the UK Government to unilaterally move to change the EU withdrawal agreement protocol — a protocol that they painstakingly devised, agreed and signed off with the EU — which would, as the current Secretary of State unequivocally stated to the House of Commons last week, break international law, should be roundly rejected by all in this House. The EU and the UK Government agreed the protocol as the best way to secure peace in Northern Ireland and it cannot and should not be allowed to be changed unilaterally. The narrative from some that the move is needed as a safety net or — the irony — as a backstop, should also not go unchallenged.

It has not been the EU negotiators who have been consistently threatening a no-deal Brexit. That has always been the threat from the UK Government. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has openly stated that he believed that he could get a no-deal Brexit through the Commons. He said:

"I think that MPs on both sides of the House also understand that they will face mortal retribution from the electorate unless we get on and do it".

No such threats have come from the EU negotiators. They have consistently repeated that Brexit is bad for us all. The majority in this House also agreed that there is no good Brexit for Northern Ireland. While the protocol is imperfect, it guarantees that whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on this island. It will protect the Good Friday Agreement and our place in the internal market and it further ensures that trade from Northern Ireland to GB remains unobstructed. That is the central ask from most businesses here at home.

The Prime Minister has told us many times that in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, we have got a deal that is oven-ready. We have just got to put it in at gas mark 4, give it 20 minutes and Bob's your uncle. *[Laughter.]* In the Conservative Party manifesto, Boris Johnson himself wrote:

"With a new Parliament and a sensible majority Government, we can get that deal through in days."

Good luck. However, while we have all listened to his lies and spin for years, this latest move to brazenly break international law should be taken as a new level of duplicitous governance, and the Green Party will not be on record as supporting it.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: No, you have had plenty, thanks.

Many others will also not be seen to be complicit in this either. Many resignations have already happened from people with more integrity and self-respect than this Tory Government. For example, Jonathan Jones, the Treasury Solicitor and permanent secretary of the Government's own legal department was the sixth senior Whitehall official to resign this year amid growing tensions between the Prime Minister and staff at the top of the Civil Service. His departure follows the exit of Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill, Simon McDonald from the Foreign Office, Philip Rutman from the Home Office, Richard Heaton from the Ministry of Justice and Jonathan Slater from the Department of Education.

If Brexit was simply about economics, it would have been sorted long ago. Trade deals today go way beyond negotiations about tariffs on goods, whether they move north, south, east or west. Either way, Northern Ireland is not set to benefit. Trade deals affect how we regulate big business and foreign investment, how much we

charge for our medicines, the standards of the foods that we eat and the environment that we create. In short, trade deals shape what sort of society we will live in.

This move from the UK Government is setting us up in the eyes of the world as a rogue state. That is not something that any of us should be supporting. Northern Ireland continues to live in a fragile peace process and we should reject any and all attempts to undermine our peace agreements. For that reason, the Green Party will support the motion.

Mr Allister: The key question for everyone who is supporting the motion is not whether they can get over their ideology and get over 2016 but whether they really care about the people of Northern Ireland. In supporting the protocol, they are supporting that which will crucify business in Northern Ireland. They are supporting the imposition of exit declarations on everything that passes from Northern Ireland to GB and tariffs on everything that passes from GB to Northern Ireland.

Let us just pause and remember what the balance is: £11 billion a year of goods from GB to Northern Ireland; £2 billion from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland. Yet the proponents of the motion — Sinn Féin, the SDLP and their lackeys in the Alliance Party — want to strangle business in Northern Ireland. They want to make life difficult. They want, in fact, to submit Northern Ireland to hundreds of laws over which we have no say and about which we cannot even debate. They want to submit us to a foreign court to which we have no input. That is the essence of what those who peddle the motion support. Of course, they cloak it quite disingenuously as support for the Belfast Agreement.

3.45 pm

Let us just take that. I have the Belfast Agreement here. I would like to ask a question of all these proponents of the Belfast Agreement, belatedly Sinn Féin — of course, it did not support it initially — the SDLP, which is always very up front in its support, and the Alliance Party likewise: can any of them point me to a single paragraph in this document that says that the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland could not leave the EU? Can anyone point me to a single paragraph in this document that says that there could not be regulations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? I am waiting.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Very well, Mr O'Toole. Give me the paragraph. I am not looking for hyperbole. I am looking for facts. I am looking for the cold data. Give me chapter and verse of what you proclaim says that you cannot have regulations between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. May I invite him to look at strand two of the Good Friday Agreement? He will find in that, among the list of, I believe, a dozen North/South implementation areas, one that includes EU bodies and EU spending. The idea that European Union membership is irrelevant to the Good Friday Agreement is not relevant. Will he tell me whether some form of regulatory threshold between the island of Great Britain and the island of Ireland — between GB and NI — is unacceptable? Is it unacceptable to him to have the current all-island sanitary and phytosanitary area?

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

Mr Allister: Chapter and verse: which clause or paragraph says that you cannot have regulations between Northern Ireland and the Republic? Which clause says that you cannot have a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic? Which clause says that you must trash article 6 of the Act of Union? None of them — not a single one. Yet the proponents tell us, "You have to protect the precious Belfast Agreement", when it does not say a word about any of these things. That is the most disingenuous spin that there has been in the whole Remain debate: to dress up and pretend to the ridiculous point where presidential candidates repeat the same lies and where a Member of the House, Mr McHugh, tells us that the American Government are guarantors of this agreement. None of that is here. What is here is a supposed recognition of the integrity of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, yet everything about the protocol — everything — is in the business of destroying that integrity. That, of course, is why Sinn Féin is an enthusiast.

When I talk about the hypocrisy of all this, something is brought home very strongly to me. I hear the mover of the motion — a convicted bomber — talk about the rule of law, about things being "unconscionable" and about human rights. A bomber, talking about that which is unconscionable. Really? Talking about human rights. Really? That is the hypocrisy that reeks from the mover of the motion, who is one of the most avid demanders of the Belfast Agreement in all its parts. However, she sat

silent when I challenged her: which part of the Belfast Agreement does this proposal uphold? Not a single one. I say to the House, therefore —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member bring his remarks to a conclusion, please?

Mr Allister: — rightly, to reject the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarraimse ar Gerry Carroll faoi choinne cainte. Gerry, you have four minutes. OK.

Mr Carroll: Thank you. The latest move by Boris Johnson will surprise no one. The Tories and the privileged elite who support them do not care how it will impact on people here. All along, the Tories have ignored what people think, how they voted in the referendum and, ultimately, the reality of life for people who live on a divided island, especially those who live in border towns and communities. Just because it may not be a surprise does not make it any less repugnant that the Tories would be willing to throw people under a bus in such a callous way. The Internal Market Bill might be a tactical ploy by the Etonian to get a better deal from the EU in negotiations, but who could really rule out the Tories who are, once again, willing to disregard people here in a bid to essentially get a deal that suits British capitalism. Johnson and the Tories put billionaire bosses first from the coronavirus pandemic through to Brexit.

What this latest saga has given verve to is the need for people here to govern for themselves and not be repeatedly dictated to by London, be that through the issue of Brexit or, indeed, the coronavirus pandemic. Far too often through the pandemic, Executive parties here have followed suit and danced to the tune of an out of touch Conservative Government. Johnson and the Tories have demonstrated over and over again that they are not worried that their stand-off with the EU could lead to the return of a hard border in Ireland. This latest move once again threatens the possibility of a hard border. The people of Ireland, North and South, have made it clear to Westminster, Brussels, the Dáil and Stormont that they do not want and will not tolerate the return of a hard border. Under no circumstances will a hard border be allowed to return.

These latest shenanigans will no doubt add momentum to the call for a border poll for a united Ireland and the ending of the 100-year disaster that has been partition. The renewed argument for democratic self-determination is

not unique to the North. We have seen emerging conversations around national governance in Scotland, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Quebec and many other places. Westminster and the EU have set their face against these democratic movements. The vision of a new Ireland, a socialist Ireland, rejecting the neoliberalism of the elites in Westminster and Brussels is gaining momentum.

The Northern Ireland protocol, as the motion suggests, is definitely far from perfect and does have fundamental flaws within it. However, it is clear that the Internal Market Bill is an attempt by Boris Johnson to bolster the strengths and, fundamentally, the profits of British corporations, whilst risking a no-deal crash out of the European Union and the beginning of a war over tariffs. The way that the British state has rolled out its limited testing and contract tracing programmes gives an indication of how Messrs Cummings and Johnson view the state in modern society. The Tories have poured £10 billion of public money into the likes of Serco and other private corporations to run England's test and trace programme and it has been an absolute disaster. While only £300 million of additional funding has been offered to local authorities to support the test and trace programme. Who do they put in charge to run such an important system; not a health expert, but a loyal Tory baroness, a former chief executive of TalkTalk. Something that you would probably expect to see in an episode of 'The Thick of It', but this is government policy in the middle of a health pandemic.

Despite the Tories criticising the left over its view of a state that intervenes in the economy and protects people's lives, the Tories essentially want to do the same. They want to intervene in the economy in a way that will increase the wealth and the power of major corporations that are based in Britain, and that is a complete and utter disgrace.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close please?

Mr Carroll: I will do. That is why Cummings and Johnson are looking towards the state to intervene in such a way as to bolster their mates. The Internal Market Bill would result in an effective power grab and massively elevate the powers of the Secretary of State whilst riding roughshod over the devolved Administrations —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to conclude please.

Mr Carroll: — and I find that unacceptable.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarraimse ar an Dochtúir Caoimhe Archibald le críoch a chur leis an mholadh. I call Dr Caoimhe Archibald to wind on the motion.

Dr Archibald: A fortnight ago we stood here amidst the speculation of what the Internal Market Bill would contain and, despite what Mr Givan asserted, we were all very exercised about seeing the details. It is fair to say that, on publication, it was worse than feared and showed that the British Government are intent on tearing up the protocol in the withdrawal agreement and the very necessary protections in it: protections painstakingly negotiated, agreed to, and ratified by that same British Government. While that comes as no surprise to most of us on this island, their blatant renegeing on their commitments — to the point of admitting an intention to break international law — has been met with outrage and condemnation, not just from the European Union or the United States but from the ranks of their own diplomats, Tory MPs and former British Prime Ministers.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Can I get through a bit? Then I will come back.

The intention to disregard an agreement that they committed to in an international treaty fewer than 12 months ago has shown the British Government of being incapable of living up to their commitments. It is, of course, worth reminding ourselves, as the motion outlines and as others have mentioned, that people here did not consent to Brexit. The protocol is an imperfect compromise, and that was referred to by several Members: Mr O'Toole, Mr Dickson, Mr McHugh and Mr Muir. However, it goes some way to mitigating what are the negative outworkings of Brexit. It was negotiated to protect our economy, North/South cooperation and, of course, the Good Friday Agreement.

The nonsensical claims that the Bill is designed to protect the Good Friday Agreement are perverse and have rightly been met with disbelief and ridicule. The Bill, as my colleague Martina Anderson outlined, undermines all three strands of the agreement. It curtails the powers of the Assembly and the Executive, with the Scottish and Welsh Administrations also criticising it as a power grab.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Go ahead.

Mr Allister: Will the Member tell us which paragraph of the Belfast Agreement the Bill infringes? The Member has obviously never read section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 or she would have known that the agreement was passed subject to the sovereignty of Parliament.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. I have read the Good Friday Agreement; I am across it and the details of it.

Mr Allister: Can you tell me?

Dr Archibald: I am moving on, thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will Members please not make comments from a sedentary position and interrupt other Members?

Dr Archibald: Following the publication of the Bill, we had renewed reports in the British press about Boris Johnson's intention to roll back protections in the ECHR, which was also referred to by Martina Anderson. Article 2 of the protocol commits to "no diminution of rights", including the rights in the ECHR and the Good Friday Agreement contained in the annex of the protocol.

When the British Government threaten to override parts of the protocol, it causes alarm bells to ring about what else they might attempt to undermine. That reinforces the necessity of the withdrawal agreement and the protocol being fully implemented to protect our economy, our communities and our peace agreements.

Mr O'Toole: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. I will be brief. Claims have been made about the implementation of the protocol and about blockades, for example. I am sure that the Member is aware that article 16 of the protocol has a standing safeguard against "serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties", including against the kinds of things that people claim will happen. In a sense, the powers to protect against the kind of disruptions that Boris Johnson claims are in the Bill already exist in the protocol.

Dr Archibald: The Member is quite right: the claims being made are quite ludicrous.

As other contributors mentioned, the international community, not just in the EU, is looking on —.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: I am sorry; I am running out of time.

We have to wonder why on earth any country with which the British Government might want to do a future deal would believe that it would be worth making an agreement with such a Government.

With that, I want to pick up on other contributors' points. Mr Givan lamented the fettering of trade by the protocol. However, it never fails to bemuse me that Brexiteers wilfully ignore the link between their campaigning for Brexit and the problems that have now resulted. As Mr McGuigan said, it is Brexit that is the problem. As Clare Bailey highlighted, the protocol is there to protect all of that.

Let us deal with other issues of trade. The DUP and UUP Members have often talked about, and they talked about it today, the importance of the British market. I concur, as did many Members who supported the motion. It is a vital market. We want to see as little friction as possible in trade. The most recent figures, from 2016, show that total exports to the South, the EU and the rest of the world now exceed sales to Britain. When it comes to goods, which, of course, is what the protocol refers to in terms of unfettered access, the figures are £6.5 billion in sales to Britain, £8.7 billion to the South, the EU and the rest of the world. When we look at the rest of the world, we see that, of sales worth £3.5 billion, the top five countries account for the majority of them. Number one is the United States, which is worth as much as the next four countries combined.

For the Members opposite, let us be clear: the only people threatening the free trade agreement with the United States are those who are trying to wriggle out of their commitments and, in the process, override the protections in the protocol. The next biggest country is Canada, and there is no free trade agreement with it yet. It is the same for Thailand, it is the same for Australia and it is the same for China.

4.00 pm

The Economy Minister, in her role, has consistently said that her top priority is to seek to ensure that Northern Ireland firms have

unfettered access to the internal market in the United Kingdom. The Economy Minister has also indicated that she advised Executive colleagues that she is not willing to bring forward an LCM on the Trade Bill because she does not have the necessary reassurances that the North is able to be a full participant in future UK trade deals. What has she done about seeking reassurances that we can have access to existing EU free trade agreements through the protocol? Has she lobbied for that? I ask that because that is also a very significant issue. Putting all our eggs in one basket and focusing on unfettered access to the detriment of other trade agreements amounts to negligence.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: No.

Matthew O'Toole highlighted the important issue of divergence in services and what sometimes gets lost in the discussion with the focus on trade and goods. It is one of the imperfections of the protocol and where energies need to be focused in trying to minimise those divergences.

Steve Aiken said that the EU does not care about the North. It cared enough to make it a priority in the negotiations. It cared enough to insist that issues with the North were resolved as part of the withdrawal agreement exactly because of the wrangling that we are now seeing.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Sorry.

He and his colleagues also mentioned state aid. The irony, of course, is that we have Brexiteers and unionists talking about state aid as though, by leaving the EU, they will be shaking off the shackles that have restricted them in using it, when Britain is, in fact, amongst the bottom five countries in terms of spend on state aid as a percentage of GDP. Germany, Denmark and Hungary all spend four times as much as Britain. It is, of course, how state aid is used that is the issue, and the countries that they will be seeking to do free trade agreements with, such as Japan, will be looking for commitments on state aid.

A number of Members — Martina Anderson, Pat Catney and Philip McGuigan — referred to the integrated nature of our supply chains, a fact that cannot be ignored when we talk about the importance of the British market. We need

to recognise that. In seeking to ensure unfettered access to the British market, which, as Clare Bailey pointed out, is included in the protocol, there can be no compromising on the protections, because the protocol is not just about trade; it is, vitally, about rights and the protections of communities and our peace process.

By taking the path that they have taken, the British Government and Tory Ministers have shown, once again, their complete disregard for our peace, our economy, businesses, jobs and the livelihoods of people on this island. What our businesses and communities, more broadly, have been crying out for is certainty, and this Bill has done the exact opposite of creating certainty. The ongoing negotiations require all parties to contribute in good faith. There are difficult issues to resolve — issues that Mr Allister referred to — such as exit declarations and tariffs, and those are part of the negotiations. That is without even considering important issues not included in the protocol such as mutual recognition of professional qualifications and access to EU funding schemes.

We cannot sit back and allow our businesses, economy and hard-won peace to be collateral damage. We will continue to work in partnership with all those who are willing here in the Assembly and the Executive, in Dublin, in Brussels and across the EU to protect the best interests of citizens across this island. The withdrawal agreement is an international agreement. It needs to be maintained and upheld in order to protect our economy and our peace agreements. I urge Members to support the motion.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I think that we may have a Division. Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that we should continue to uphold social distancing and that those who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber. Thank you.

Members, resume your seats. Before I put the question, I again remind those Members present that if possible, it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division. *[Laughter.]* The things I have to read; the things I have to read. *[Laughter.]*

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): OK, Members. Before the Assembly divides, I want to remind you that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly currently has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I also remind Members to ensure that social distancing continues to be observed while the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 36.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Anderson and Dr Archibald

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken and Mr Middleton

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Mr Blair voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson [Teller, Ayes], Dr Archibald [Teller, Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North/South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour their commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will suspend the sitting for a couple of minutes for a comfort break.

The sitting was suspended at 4.22 pm and resumed at 4.25 pm.

Promoting Dementia-friendly Policy

Ms P Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the need to prioritise and enhance the health and well-being of every person living with dementia, and that of their carers, in Northern Ireland; highlights the importance of earlier and better diagnosis, effective community and home-based support, as well as high-quality inpatient and residential care in realising better outcomes; notes that transforming public understanding and ending stigma about dementia is integral to ensuring local services and activities are more accessible, and everyday life made easier and more enjoyable, for those affected; acknowledges the role that the devolved institutions can play in embedding cultural change to this end; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to implement a dementia-friendly approach to their responsibilities and decision-making moving forward.

I start by thanking the Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place today —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): If I could just interrupt for a wee moment to outline the rest of the business, please, Paula? Thank you for moving the motion. There is a wee bit of detail. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. I now ask you to continue, please. Thank you.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker. Apologies for not moving it first and then sitting down in my place. I have to get used to doing that.

I just want to start by saying thank you to the Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place today and to all the parties that signed the all-party motion.

I first met Martin Riley and Michael Keenan from the Alzheimer's Society back in February, and we had a discussion about bringing a motion to the Assembly around May. Then COVID hit, and we are where we are now. I am glad to say that this debate is taking place on World Alzheimer's Day, and what is even more special is that the strapline for this year is, "Let's talk about dementia". I hope that, through this debate, we can reduce some of the stigma and we can talk openly about how we, as an

Assembly, want to bring about changes when it comes to dealing with people with dementia.

I am not going to come off with too many facts and figures; I will leave that to people who are better than me at that. However, at present, there are 22,000 people living in Northern Ireland with dementia. That is a scary figure.

When I was looking through all of the packs of information that we received, something struck me as I read that. It brought back to me a very early memory. When I was a child, I had an aunt who died of dementia when she was in her early 40s. She would have been in her late 30s when she first had the signs of Alzheimer's. It was actually a very rare genetic form of Alzheimer's disease. I remember seeing that as a child and not fully understanding what it was. I saw that my aunt needed help going to the bathroom or needed help to be fed. At that time, as I say, I was a child, just approaching my teenage years, and things were not discussed in front of us in our house. My mum and dad never openly discussed those things, so I never really knew what was going on. However, what I do remember was that, when my auntie died, she left behind two very young boys without a mummy and their daddy without a wife. So that just shows, yet again, that Alzheimer's and dementia can hit at any age.

As I moved further on, I remembered my granny Browning, who was fun-loving and full of mischief. She kept the whole family going. I come from a really matriarchal family, and she was the east-Belfast woman, the matriarch of the family, who did everything for us. I have so many fond memories of my granny and, every Saturday, having to walk the Newtownards, Cregagh, Castlereagh or Woodstock roads, and that was done on a monthly cycle, especially to go and look at all the handbag shops.

4.30 pm

I remember then, as a teenager, my granny was diagnosed with vascular dementia. I saw this fun-loving woman with a bit of devilment in her change dramatically. My granny was really fortunate because she came from a big east Belfast family. She had four daughters, four sons and numerous grandchildren, so we were really fortunate that we were able to keep my granny at home. We were all able to look after her. We all had our days that we had to spend with her. I remember all those. We laugh about some of the stuff that she did and some of the memories that we have. She was always just wanting her ma. She just kept saying to me, "Where's my ma? My ma will be looking for me. Where's my ma?", but then she thought her ma

was my auntie because she lived with my auntie. I have happy and sad memories of my granny and the effects that Alzheimer's and dementia has on people.

Most of us in the Chamber will have some experience of Alzheimer's or dementia in our lives. When you look at the statistics for Northern Ireland, it is clear that we are all bound to have some experience of it. We want to highlight this special day with today's motion. We want to highlight World Alzheimer's Day, but we also want to encourage not only our Health Minister but all our Executive to do whatever they can to promote living well with dementia. As I said earlier, people in any age group can get it. People who are working and bringing up families have diagnoses of Alzheimer's. None of us know what is ahead for us.

Over the past six months, the impact of COVID-19 on people living with dementia has been devastating. We also know that, in Northern Ireland, over 30% of those who have died had dementia mentioned on their death certificate. I do not have the statistics — others in the room may well have them — to say how many of those deaths were in care homes and how many were in their own homes. There are issues, and those are maybe for another day and another debate for the Health Committee when we look at care homes and how COVID-19 manifested itself and some of the failings around that.

During COVID, social isolation has been a major factor for many people suffering or living with dementia, not only those living in private nursing homes or residential accommodation but all those living at home. I have spoken to many friends and family who said that they had to make judgement calls during COVID-19 to go and visit their parents. They knew that, for some of their parents and elderly relatives, the social isolation and lack of confidence would play a major part in how they would come out the other side of COVID-19. Many families have had to make those judgement calls and have done so for the right reasons.

Many Members were probably glad to hear that I had left the Health Committee. I liked to wax lyrical about my life before I became an MLA, but I will just mention it a little. Before I was an MLA, I worked for our wonderful health service, and I am proud to say that I worked for it. I worked in elder care and had many wonderful experiences, especially with people who were living with dementia and their families. I saw at first hand the lack of services in place for those people, the lack of respite and the lack of care

provision. I saw a fact somewhere in all that paperwork about care costs in Northern Ireland. It said in my paperwork that £120 million was spent in 2019 on healthcare, £340 million was spent on social care and £350 million was spent on unpaid care.

I have been here since 2011, and we have had various policies and strategies where we have looked at dementia and pathways for dementia, and we still come up short. Our Health Minister is not with us this afternoon; he is in a meeting. I know that it is not a new problem, but it has landed on his table. It has been around for years, and it is something that we still have to grapple with. We still have to make a difference to people's lives because we want people to have healthy lives. We want them to live longer, but we need to put that support in place not only for the person living with dementia but for their carers and the amount of unpaid work that they do. Without them, our health service would fall absolutely to its knees.

Just before I finish, I want to say that good work is being done; it is not all negative. Last year, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was awarded Dementia-friendly Large Organisation of the Year in Northern Ireland by the Alzheimer's Society. That is something that we should shout about and be proud of. That organisation took it on itself to do the training and to recognise that, when it sends someone out to someone with dementia, they should deal with them in the right way.

Dementia is something for our entire Executive and not just our Health Minister. I am sure that someone else will mention it later, but we all know the figures for how many people will be living with dementia in Northern Ireland in the years ahead and the money that it will cost to manage that. We need to put efficient plans in place now to deal with that.

Mr Gildernew: I am delighted to be associated with the motion and to have been asked to be. It is an area of huge importance to all MLAs and our whole society. I also met representatives of the Alzheimer's Society in early February, and I have to say that they impressed me with their level of detail, as they always do.

We know that over 14,700 people here live with dementia, and that figure is expected to rise to 20,000. It is an issue that we will have to grapple with. In my previous role as a social worker in the older persons team in the south Tyrone area, I worked with many families who were struggling with the issues that dementia brings and, indeed, the additional pain and worry that people have when they are trying to

plan care for their loved ones. They have to negotiate a lot of issues around capacity to make decisions and how to include the person's voice and their wishes in settings in which family members may have different views and the person may have strong views. With all the other pressures, it can be difficult for everyone's voice to be heard and for the issues for that person to be dealt with in a way that reflects everyone's wishes fairly.

In my time as an MLA, I have come across some serious issues relating to deprivation of liberty that arise from dementia care. At times, I have also found that the health and social care system can be difficult to navigate for people who are trying to explore the wishes of their loved ones and to retain as much as possible of their normal way of living or way of going on, as we often talk about here. Sometimes, it can be easier to wrap people up in cotton wool. That gives everyone the comfort of knowing that they are safe, but people may not be able to live their life in as full a way as they did or, indeed, as they are capable of, despite the issues associated with dementia. There are issues there, and we need to look at how we engage with families and support them.

Having worked with it in my role as a social worker, I know that the Alzheimer's Society provides fantastic support to a range of people; in fact, it provides bespoke individual family planning sessions that I have found invaluable. One of the things that I discovered as a social worker was that the services are not always there and, often, you have to rely on the community and voluntary sector to provide additional input into cases. It does that very well, and we need to ensure that it is supported to do that.

I am conscious that the 'Power to People' report flagged up the issue of carers' rights and how we need those rights to be put on a statutory basis. Carers should have the right to know what to expect and what they can expect. I am working on putting together an all-party group on carers, and I hope that many of the Members here today will join me in that. It is important that that is an area of focus for the Assembly. It impacts on so many of us, and informal family carers provide a huge amount of care to the system. We need to reciprocate and recognise that and support those carers.

There are even cross-cutting planning issues, such as how we plan dementia-friendly towns, cities and streetscapes in future. There are very simple steps that we can build into planning that will allow people to continue to live at home longer and to engage in their community longer.

It is important that we try to gather that learning and implement it in such a way that we genuinely have departmental cross-cutting. I recognise that the Minister has not been able to be here today; no doubt, he would have been. While there is a focus on him to lead, all our Executive colleagues should assist with that. I also urge the Minister to consider the issue of carers legislation and to bring it forward as soon as is possible.

I support the motion and welcome today's debate and the chance to say, on World Alzheimer's Day, "Let's talk about dementia".

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the DUP for giving up its slot today in order for the House to be able to progress, on World Alzheimer's Day, this cross-party motion. As it is for previous contributors, the issue is something that is dear to our hearts. There are few of us who do not have family members who are suffering from dementia. In my case, it was my grandfather, who had presenile dementia. His symptoms started to display from his late fifties. That points to the increase in numbers that we see today of people with dementia in their fifties. Some, indeed, are in their forties.

Dementia has a number of different causes. There is vascular dementia, Alzheimer's dementia and Lewy body dementia, which is particularly nasty, not that there is any good form of dementia. I have a friend who is having to care for her 69-year-old husband, who has received that dreadful diagnosis. That demonstrates the need to have tailor-made services. There is a lack of support services, particularly for people in the younger age groups, who may be only in their fifties. The majority of people in nursing homes or elsewhere in the care sector are in their seventies or 80-plus, however. That is a particular area of concern. As many know, people with Down's syndrome live much longer lives, thankfully, but some are also suffering from dementia in their fifties. That is another specialty area — a niche market, if you like — in which particular needs must be addressed.

I know that COVID-19 has had a huge impact on people with dementia and their carers. We hear the stories of people not understanding why they cannot see their loved ones and not understanding FaceTime, but COVID-19 has also shone a spotlight on the social care sector, which is an area that has been neglected. In Northern Ireland, we are more fortunate, in that we have a joined-up health and social care sector, unlike in GB. Nonetheless, the social care sector in particular has suffered from a huge lack of investment.

I know that the Minister would be here, had that been possible, but I want to raise with his Department the huge problem that exists as we struggle to get back to some sort of normality or new normality over the coming weeks and months. Support mechanisms have not been put in place, not just for families who are caring for loved ones with dementia but for day-care services, rehabilitation services and home-help services. We have not heard much about how health trusts are responding to the particular challenges of COVID by working with carers and supporting them and by giving a quality of life to those who are suffering from dementia and other illnesses.

Other Members spoke about the need for investment, as have I, but some of the asks from the Alzheimer's survey are not necessarily for big-money investments but are about things being done differently and about uniformity and consistency across trusts. It is, as Mr Gildernew said, about preparing and about people being able to get their diagnosis early so that they can make informed decisions.

How many of us have been faced with people in our constituency offices who believe that wishes have not been presented in wills, and those wills have been the subject of family disputes? Sometimes, the law is not clear about the point of reasoning, if you like, at which a will can be made and adhered to. I have had to deal with at least two cases in which there have been disputes, and they will be fought in courts. We need clarity around the element of the legal system that relates to people who want to make informed early decisions, at a time, perhaps, when other people are trying to interfere in the will and testament. That must be halted. The Law Society and others are giving clear guidance to their membership about giving —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — the correct direction to families and carers to ensure that dementia sufferers' wishes are adhered to.

4.45 pm

Mr Chambers: I do not believe that there is one word in the motion with which anyone in the House could disagree. Dementia is often a catch-all phrase. However, in reality, there are over 200 subtypes of dementia, the most common of which are, of course, Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Across the types, the impact can be debilitating. It can rob

people of their memories, thoughts and relationships. It can also be particularly difficult for the families affected, as they can only watch when their loved ones remain often physically healthy but, mentally, slipping away. As our population ages, there is no doubt that dementia is going to become a growing problem. We should, therefore, be planning and taking steps to prepare for that.

Dementia is, perhaps, seen as some sort of a new medical condition, but, in reality, it has always been among us. I doubt there is a family who has not been touched by it. The reason we are so aware of dementia is testament to the success of our NHS and its medical practitioners in increasing the life expectancy of our citizens over recent decades. In its early stages, it is an invisible condition and can be excused as simply the forgetfulness that we associate with the ageing process. However, it is a condition that has no regard for age, social condition or standing. Over 22,000 people are living with dementia in Northern Ireland, and as many as 1,600 of those sufferers are under the age of 65. That reinforces the point made by Paula Bradley.

Thankfully, there is much more awareness of the condition now, so the Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports continued efforts to dementia-proof our health service for future years. That should start with our health service staff so that they can spot the signals and, perhaps, pre-empt the practical but important challenges of communication and surroundings.

There is no cure. The only comfort that we can draw is that, unlike back in the day, when much less was known about dementia, and patients could have found themselves in a locked-down hospital ward or even in an asylum with no stimulation to help them through the day, we now have nursing homes that deal exclusively with the care of dementia patients and staff who are trained to deal with their mood changes. There is also a growing body of evidence to suggest that it is possible to reduce an individual's risk of dementia. Research here, the rest of the UK and internationally suggests that smoking, excessive drinking and lack of physical activity, for instance, can contribute to a higher risk of an individual getting dementia later in life. With that in mind, healthcare practitioners and public health bodies can aid the population to reduce or mitigate the risk of developing dementia along with other conditions, such as diabetes.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention and pay tribute to the many tens of thousands of people locally — family members, staff,

volunteers and support groups and associations — who care for people with dementia. Without them, our social care system would not be able to cope, and there is no doubt that the quality of life of those whom they care for would be severely impacted.

It is important to note that it is not a failure when a family has to make the hard and heart-wrenching decision to allow a loved one to go into professional care. Carers drive themselves to the limit. They compromise their own health to keep loved ones in their own home. My family has been there.

The Ulster Unionist Party has no hesitation in fully supporting the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion. From the strength of feeling I see in the Chamber, I am sure that it will get all-party support.

As many have mentioned, a key aspect of the motion is carers. It is estimated by the charity Together in Dementia Every Day (TIDE) that carers for people living with dementia are, in effect, paid 20p per hour for their work, yet their contribution in the most difficult of circumstances is invaluable to us all.

The motion talks about:

"effective ... home-based support".

That can, to some extent, be the luck of the draw. Some live in tightly bound communities with plenty of neighbours to help out; others are less fortunate. The issue then becomes not just lack of support but lack of knowledge about how to get support. That is why the motion implies a need to raise awareness across the community so that people who develop dementia, and their carers, know that if, sadly, the time comes, that support is there and that we do all we can to avoid people living in isolation.

I pay tribute to dementia navigators. I came across a constituent a year and a half ago who was at her wits' end. She was caring for her husband and was very isolated. I told her about the navigators, and a few weeks later, when she telephoned me back, she was a changed woman. She was thrilled with the support that she got. The support is there; we just need to connect the dots.

We are fortunate in Northern Ireland in that the rates of dementia diagnosis are among the highest and quickest in the UK. However, it remains, perhaps, harder than it should to secure a diagnosis, and the differential between

trusts remains a concern. Diagnosis is vital for a host of reasons, not least to gain access to the right treatment and a pathway that can enable people with dementia still to live life to the fullest extent possible.

I will add one key point to the motion, from personal experience. The issues for people with dementia and their carers often extend well beyond the health service, and, indeed, well beyond public services, such as entering into telephone contracts accidentally or, via scams, cancelled. My father-in-law at one point had six telephones. He just kept taking out a new contract, and then had to keep going back to explain his circumstances. He did not have his full dementia diagnosis at that point, so it was difficult.

The next part of the process is recognising and making necessary legal arrangements for power of attorney and suchlike, and all aspects of caring for people with dementia. Those can draw little attention but cause the greatest practical difficulties, particularly at the outset.

There needs to be awareness of dementia across all sectors, particularly the role played by carers, and in not just caring directly but in managing so many other things, from access to the right healthcare to household administration and finance. A lot of carers themselves are elderly and may have health conditions. It is a trying time for people in their retirement years. The Assembly is right to focus on the health service and the broad public services but we must also recognise those broader issues.

For people who live with it, dementia brings significant change. That often leads to other difficulties, such as depression, itself quite possibly undiagnosed among those in the early onset stages. For carers, too, it brings a form of living grief. Organisations such as the Alzheimer's Society, Dementia UK and TIDE, which began operating in Northern Ireland in the past year or so, are increasing their work in that area having realised that it is such a vital issue.

When we speak of removing stigma, there is also the stigma for carers, or, at least, the sense of not wishing to trouble others with their own sense of living grief. We have to consider that as well.

It is something that we all need to be prepared for, given our ageing population and the inevitable increase in the number of us who will have to care for people with dementia. That is why I am keen to support the motion for dementia-friendly neighbourhoods. Some great

work goes on around that in my constituency of South Belfast where thought goes into how we get everyone involved — the police, the shops, the schools and all the voluntary organisations — to make life easier for people with dementia and their carers in everything from ensuring ongoing access to services and assistance to designing streets and shops in such a way that they can continue to get out and about and be independent for as long as possible.

This is an enormous challenge for us all, but it is one that matters a lot. I support the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I support the motion. I thank Members from across the House for tabling the motion for debate on this particular day, which is, of course, World Alzheimer's Day.

For any of us who have watched someone with dementia and the dementia progress over time, the motion really resonates. While many illnesses, whether they are cancer or COVID, are cruel, dementia is just that: it is cruel. It is cruel on the sufferer and cruel on their family and their loved ones, and it is hugely challenging for those who are tasked with caring duties.

We have a problem here in Northern Ireland, and that is the rising prevalence of dementia. While statistics indicate that just shy of 15,000 people here in Northern Ireland have a diagnosis of dementia, that number could be much more and even be as high as 22,000, which the Member who moved the motion mentioned. Each of those people represents a loved one, a family and a duty of care. While that represents a huge challenge, according to the LSE, the problem could be much bigger come 2040, when it estimates that we could have a 95% rise in cases and some 43,000 people suffering from dementia.

What we are doing now simply will not meet the need and the challenges that we will face with such a potential rise in cases. Therefore, we need to look at a new strategy. We need to look at it now in order to meet that growing demand by 2040. We are currently using a 10-year-old strategy, but as we are now learning daily, science and treatments change and data and research can revolutionise how we care for people and secure better outcomes for patients.

We need to look at substantial investment in this area of care. By 2040, we could be looking at a cost of £2.3 billion. To help to achieve that, it is vital that longer-term reforms are interlinked. Those include the review and reform of Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care and of independent nursing and

residential care homes, taking due account and cognisance of the dementia needs that are in our communities.

We must also provide the support and recognition that our unpaid carers are due and deserve. Those heroes, and they are heroes, must be supported and not taken for granted. Their role is vital in not just providing care but in maintaining that independence and home living that so many dementia sufferers value so much. The demands on those people are significant, and it must not be forgotten that while there is a physical demand, there is also a significant mental and emotional demand. Therefore, we must ensure that a blanket of support is around our carers, and I urge the Minister, who, I am glad to see, has arrived from the Executive meeting, to look specifically at how carers right across society can be better supported and recognised.

My colleagues will address other aspects of this pressing issue, but I cannot press enough the need for action now. The patient must be first, and the families and carers must be supported. I support the motion.

Ms Flynn: I thank all the Members and all the parties that have been involved in tabling the motion. Listening to what Paula Bradshaw and to some of what Dolores Kelly said about their experiences triggered some thoughts for me about a family member who is living with dementia at the moment. I am sure that a lot of us in the Chamber can relate to those issues.

I fully support the motion and the efforts of Members to work towards a truly dementia-friendly society. Some of the figures and statistics that are involved have struck me not because they are high but because they do not show the full picture. A few Members quoted figures that say that there are just under 15,000 people on the dementia register. However, that is a conservative figure, with an estimate of 22,000, which has been quoted, suggested by the Department of Health.

It is so important that the stigma and pressure around dementia care are addressed not only for the person with the diagnosis but for their family, carers and community. I wish to pose a question to every Member who is here today, and it is one that I know that at least one or some of you have already faced or will face.

The question is this: what would you like your personal reaction to be if you heard that your loved one had received a dementia diagnosis? Would you like it to be one of anxiety, with concerns about who will help with the potential

caring responsibilities, such as collecting medication or helping with household tasks, or would you want it to be a sense of relief and hope? We should do all that we can to ensure that it is the latter, where there is a feeling of relief that your loved one finally has that diagnosis and, more importantly, a suitable pathway of support and care and a feeling of hope that, with that diagnosis and recognition, supports and changes will be put in place to allow that person to continue to live a fulfilled life. I strongly believe that that is possible. That is what a dementia-friendly society is. Of course, as other Members have referenced, that will require a broader Executive approach, with all Ministers and Departments stepping up to the task. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, particularly about his plans to reform social care and deliver accessible and supportive services for those with dementia and am happy to support the motion.

5.00 pm

Mr Easton: Over half of the UK public know somebody who has dementia. Many of us in the Chamber know someone or probably have a family member who has dementia. Dementia is a life-limiting disease with no curative treatment. The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, which accounts for over 50% of cases. Vascular dementia accounts for 20%, and the remainder include frontal lobe dementia and alcohol-related dementia. When a person has dementia, the brain nerve cells are damaged and die faster than normal without replacement. It is a worldwide health issue, with 35 million cases reported in 2010. That number is expected to double by 2030. There are some stark statistics from Alzheimer's Research UK: over 500,000 people in the UK have a dementia diagnosis. Around 15,000 people in Northern Ireland have a dementia diagnosis, although, as other Members have said, separate research has indicated that that could be 22,000. From 2006-07 to 2015-16, the number of people on the dementia register rose from 9,500 to over 13,000, which is an increase of 43%. One in three people born in 2015 will develop dementia in their lifetime. If that were reflected in the Chamber, 30 Members out of 90, if born in 2015, would develop dementia. That is frightening if you think about it. In 2014, one in 14 people aged over 65 and one in 79 of the whole population across the United Kingdom had dementia. In Northern Ireland, there is a 73% local diagnosis rate, which is significantly higher than any other part of the UK.

There is also a huge financial cost associated with care. The London School of Economics

and Political Science care policy and evaluation centre calculated that, in 2019, care costs, as were mentioned, were £120 million for healthcare, £340 million for social care and £350 million for unpaid care. Overall costs will increase by 192% by 2040, with a total annual cost of £2.3 billion. The regional dementia care pathway was established by the Health and Social Care Board to set out a vision for improving the services and support arrangements available for people with dementia, their families and their carers. It aims to deliver on the recommendations of the 2011 Northern Ireland dementia strategy entitled 'Improving Dementia Services in Northern Ireland'. The dementia improvement collaborative was established by the Health and Social Care Board in spring 2015. It recognised the need to improve dementia care, particularly in the area of waiting times for memory assessments and follow-on reviews. A Health and Social Care Board review of dementia services in Northern Ireland recognised the need to develop a standardised dementia care pathway to ensure high-quality care in the right place and by the right people. A dementia innovation lab was also established in the summer of 2015 to review the long-term implications of dementia for Northern Ireland.

The current dementia strategy for Northern Ireland is almost a decade old. It is time to rethink and redouble our approach. Much of the good and valuable work being undertaken across health and social care trusts has stemmed from the 2011 strategy and recommendations. We need to assess whether it is still relevant and ensure that the evidence base is up to date and, most of all, patient-centred. We want to see the traditional focus on tackling dementia expanded from a simple care provision basis to a dementia-friendly approach throughout all our homes and communities. There are real barriers to people with dementia accessing important community services and activities. We need to change public perceptions of the disease in order to make tangible differences to the quality of life of those affected. It is vital that we take steps now to put in place approaches, ambitions and sustainable funding arrangements to meet the rising demand in coming years. I support the motion.

Ms Anderson: Tá me ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo. I will speak in favour of the motion, which is especially welcome as today is World Alzheimer's Day.

As Pam said, there is no doubt that dementia is an utterly horrendous disease: witnessing the shock on a loved one's face when they realise that they have just repeated themselves;

noticing the quiet panic when they realise that something is wrong with them but they do not know what it is; or seeing the frustration that a loved one expresses when they cannot remember something or forget what they wanted to say or do. Like Paula and Dolores, I will recount my personal story. Along with my family and a fantastic team of carers to whom we are truly indebted, I cared dearly for our mother, Betty, who suffered from Alzheimer's for 17 and a half years. Bit by bit, we lost the strong, strict, independent mother who looked after us, as we, her children, began to look after her. Sometimes, we felt hopeless, trying our best to hold on to the mother whom we knew and loved, showing her pictures, singing her favourite songs or talking about her past to trigger memories. However, day by day, more of my mother's memories slipped away. While she forgot some of our names, we never forgot her. She was our mother until the day that she died.

As recognised by the motion, families need "effective community and home-based support". That is the case whether they are large families, blessed because they can share the caring responsibilities — I know that to be true and can attest that even they struggle — or smaller families who must opt for residential care so that their loved one gets the care that they need. The motion states that we:

"need to prioritise and enhance the health and wellbeing of every person living with dementia, and that of their carers ... and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to implement a dementia-friendly approach to their responsibilities and decision-making".

I can attest that the system needs reform, serious reform, if it is to adopt such a dementia-friendly approach. One of the things that it could do is to accept families' and carers' ability to know even the right size of incontinence pads for their loved ones. The system takes it out of the best of families. It makes them jump through hoops and wait for weeks and months of assessments and form-filling before the right size of pads are approved. Families struggle for far too long as they wait for domiciliary care packages to be approved. Minister, that needs urgent attention.

It is a cocktail of emotions, an aching hurt, because someone whom you love cannot speak up for themselves. They need you to be their voice, yet it is like howling at the moon. You are left feeling utterly helpless as you endeavour to make their life just a little better. The fact that they suffer from dementia does

not mean that they have lost their right to dignity. My mother — four stone in weight and not able to walk, talk or feed herself — cried out with tears of fright when the system insisted that she be hoisted out of her bed rather than manually lifted onto a chair and wheeled into the bathroom. If we refused the hoist, the carers would be withdrawn. We needed those precious carers. It is cruel that families are given ultimatums at a time when they need the support most.

That is just one example of the failings in the system. The motion will not end the pain and suffering that dementia causes, but calling out bad practices, trying to end the stigma and stating that local services must be more accessible is so necessary for so many people. Everyone in the room, if they have not done so already, will probably, one day, need access to such services for themselves or for someone whom they love deeply.

Ms Bunting: Before I move to my remarks, I declare that I am the proposed chairman of the all-party group on terminal illness, which is awaiting the approval of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and previously sponsored the Walk for a World without Dementia event in this estate. Prior to touching on the substance of the issue, I commend the Alzheimer's Society, Marie Curie and the East Belfast Community Development Agency, which have worked extremely hard, with others, to make east Belfast dementia-friendly and to teach us what it is like and what, in practice, can be done to assist those with the condition. It is because of work like that that I lament the loss of the RADAR centre, which was such a fabulous facility for practical demonstration.

I am advised that over 14,700 people are on the dementia register in Northern Ireland, although the true number of people living with the condition here is estimated to be closer to over 20,000. The occurrence of cases is expected to grow significantly in the years ahead due to our ageing population, as we have discussed. Dementia accounted for 13% of deaths in Northern Ireland in 2018, and it is important to note that that number was 11% higher than in 2016. We can and should expect the trends to continue in tandem with the growing prevalence of the condition locally.

Evidence suggests that there are issues and barriers that prevent some people with dementia and their loved ones from accessing the appropriate, high-quality care and support that they need, including at the end of life. I wish to focus primarily on the end of life.

It is estimated that around 70% of people in care homes have dementia or severe memory problems. Care homes have been and will continue to be the setting in which a large number of people with dementia spend the end of their life. It is, therefore, critical that care home staff have the experience, skills and training required to deliver high-quality palliative care. Unfortunately, while some homes do their best, that is not always the case. High staff turnover, inadequate staffing levels and lack of access to training due to time pressures and funding issues all make it difficult to equip care home staff with the skills that they need to provide complex care to dying residents. Many care homes provide excellent care for residents with dementia — Palmerston in my constituency is a shining example — but that is not universal. It is vital that improving knowledge and competency in palliative care and supporting people with terminal conditions like dementia is prioritised as part of the social care reform agenda.

I turn to the context of hospitals. People with dementia will often live with comorbidities and complex needs. While emergency admissions to hospital are sometimes necessary, the symptoms of dementia make hospital a uniquely ill-suited care setting. The busy A&E environment and disruption resulting from emergency admission can exacerbate confusion and cause serious distress to the individual and their loved ones. It is, therefore, in the best interests of many people with dementia that emergency trips to hospital are avoided or minimised where possible, especially when they are approaching the end of their life. It is estimated that, in 2015, there were over 2,560 emergency admissions to hospital in Northern Ireland of people with dementia in the last year of their life. While some of those admissions will undoubtedly have been necessary, it is reasonable to assume that a significant number could have been avoided with greater support in the community. Action to address the issue and build greater resources and care capacity in community settings should be pursued as a matter of urgency across health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland.

5.15 pm

Finally, I wish to address the matter of support for dementia carers. Caring for someone with dementia is a demanding experience. Carers will largely be responsible for tasks such as, to name but a few, providing personal care to their loved one, administering medication, collecting prescriptions, preparing meals, maintaining the home and coordinating care among a wide range of health and social care professionals

and providers. In many cases, this role is 24/7, round the clock and can leave carers feeling burned out, especially as many dementia carers are spouses and are likely to be in the older-age category and living with their own health complaints. Training and information to help them perform their caring role and access to respite is therefore vital.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I had other remarks, but I will conclude by saying this: it is clear that some people with dementia in Northern Ireland, as well as their carers and loved ones, are missing out on the high-quality care and support that they need throughout the disease trajectory, including at the end of life. With so many more dementia —

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

Ms Bunting: — deaths expected in the coming years, it is critical that we address these barriers and gaps in care as a matter of urgency. I commend colleagues for bringing this issue to the House, and I am proud to support the motion.

Mr Sheehan: The only disagreement during the debate so far has been about the number of people in the North who have been diagnosed with dementia. It has varied between 15,000 and 22,000-plus. One thing is for sure and I am sure that we all agree that, given our ageing population, the number of people diagnosed with dementia will increase very significantly over the next number of years. We will all take account of that.

Everybody here has had some experience with dementia. Some very close family members have been diagnosed with it. I remember that, when we were youngsters, my mother's aunt had to come to live with us because she had dementia. Eventually, with four kids about the house, it was impossible for my mother to look after her, and the decision that Alan talked about, when families have to decide to put their loved one into care, had to happen.

I also had a friend, not much older than me, who was a great athlete in his youth. He played soccer for Distillery and was one of their top strikers in the 1970s. He was also captain of the Antrim Gaelic football team. He was diagnosed in his early 60s with a very aggressive form of dementia, and, as it turned out, he died a few months ago from COVID. We need to take account of that fact that it appears that dementia is one of the significant risk factors in

contracting COVID. Those are some things that we need to take account of.

It was also mentioned that, back in 2018, almost 15% of all deaths were attributable to dementia. Of course, dementia is an incurable, progressive neurodegenerative disease. As I say, there is no cure for it yet. I am sure that plenty of research is going on, but, to date, nothing has transpired that will cure it. Symptoms may start off quite mild and progressively get worse or, in cases where it is an aggressive strain, the deterioration can be quite quick. As the condition deteriorates, there is a need for greater care and greater support for people who are caring for those who are diagnosed. It is critical that we address the deficiencies in care as a matter of urgency.

A lot of the problems have already been touched on. For example, in care homes — I think that Joanne Bunting mentioned it — up to 70% of residents are suffering from dementia of one degree of severity or another. Many people in care homes are seeing out their last days there, and the staff need the appropriate training and skills to deal with people at the end of their lives. We all know of excellent care homes that are doing that, but, of course, there are other care homes that are not so good. There is not a universal level of care across the piece. That is no great surprise given the high turnover of staff in the care sector. Often, staffing levels are inadequate in the first place. Staff lack the access and time to take up training, and, of course, there are always funding issues. In fact, often, carers in the care sector are on the very bottom rung of the ladder: there is no career progression; they receive the minimum wage and so on and so forth.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. As well as the points that the Member raised, we share concerns — concerns that have been raised with me and, I am sure, with him — about some care home owners refusing to allow people access to a trade union and not allowing trade unions on to their site to organise.

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

Mr Sheehan: I do not disagree with that.

It is difficult to provide care home staff with the training and the skills that they require when trying to deliver and provide complex end-of-life care to patients who are, literally, going to die. It is important that proper resources are put into our care sector. It is important that our carers

are supported. It is also important that the people who care for those who, fortunately, are able to remain at home get the proper support that they need and deserve. There is a high incidence of mental ill health among carers. Often, carers are elderly, not in great health and they face —

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

Mr Sheehan: A higher than average number of those carers take antidepressants. We need to address the issues. We need to deal with it, and we need to deal with it urgently.

Mr Dickson: I am pleased to speak to the motion, tabled in my name and the names of Members from parties across the House, which seeks a dementia-friendly approach to daily life. Today is World Alzheimer's Day, and it is time to break the silence and put in motion work towards a society that supports people living with dementia and their carers in every way possible, including research to find new treatments to halt this cruel disease. Approximately 22,000 people are living with dementia in Northern Ireland, and I doubt that a single person here today is not aware of dementia in some form. Personally, I have seen former work colleagues face the condition, as well as a close family member, who is in the care of the Northern Trust. His family are very grateful to the trust for the care that he receives. I have seen, at first hand, the strain that this places on individuals and families. So, today, I pay tribute to the thousands of carers across Northern Ireland who help to ensure the well-being of people living with dementia. It has been a particularly difficult year, but our carers helped to keep our society going, and we must never forget this. Unpaid carers need better support from our health system. Paid carers need fair pay and conditions for the vital and difficult job that they do.

We must not shy away from talking about dementia and what we can do to make the lives of people living with it and their loved ones better. That means ensuring their well-being and their dignity. It also means ensuring, where possible, the inclusion of dementia sufferers in decision-making about their future. I believe that everyone here wants Northern Ireland to be a model of best practice in supporting dementia patients and their families. We want our society to be inclusive of people with dementia, and one of the greatest examples of that is in my constituency: a dementia choir set up by my Alliance friend Alderman Gerardine Mulvenna, who is not only a member of Mid and East

Borough Council but its dementia champion, and the choir shows what an impact this role can have. The This is Me choir is for people with dementia, their carers and their family members, but it is also inclusive of those experiencing loneliness, widowed people and the vulnerable. The choir brings joy and companionship to those living with dementia and their families. Even during lockdown, they were able to keep going online. I pay tribute to Gerardine and people like her for all the work that they do for people who live with dementia in mid and east Antrim and the participants of the choir. In particular, I thank the Northern Trust for its support of the initiative.

We need to be diagnosing and managing dementia earlier. GP practices and referrals for patients are, of course, where we need to be focussing. We need to ensure that the system is well-funded and accessible to all. The Department's regional strategy on improving dementia services has developed memory clinics in each of the trusts. I would be grateful if the Minister could give us an update on how they are functioning in the current environment and how the work of the dementia navigators is continuing.

It is important that we ensure for those living with dementia that wider public services are accessible to them, that their dignity and well-being are maintained and that daily life is made easier for them and their carers. That covers a wide range of responsibilities, so it should be an Executive-wide initiative and local councils should be included in decision-making so that key services are delivered at the local level.

Dementia is not something that we can ignore; it is part of our lives. We must ensure that consideration for those with the condition and their carers is integrated into the planning and delivery of services to ensure dignity and well-being for all.

Mr Carroll: I am in favour of the motion; I thank the Members who brought it to the House and stand in solidarity with those who have been pressing for better legislation for many years to cater for and protect our loved ones who have dementia. Proper review and reform of the measures that are in place to allow people with dementia to live fully and safely is long overdue.

In particular, I want to speak to the situation that is facing people with dementia in our care homes. Since the beginning of the crisis, those in care homes have felt its effects very sharply. We know how many care homes endured the pandemic with little to no PPE at all for far too long, how little testing was put in place for those

who arguably needed it more than most and how residents were discharged from hospitals and placed straight into care homes without being tested. I hope, for the sake of residents and the carers involved, that they will one day be armed with answers on who decided that their care should be deprioritised. Hopefully, accountability will follow. The Health Committee is looking at some of those issues.

One facet of the crisis facing those in care homes, including dementia sufferers, has not been the subject of rigorous debate but has had a debilitating impact on their ability to survive the pandemic. Care home residents who live with dementia have endured seven or eight months without seeing any of their loved ones. They have been calling for clarity and action on the matter, and the response has been lacking. Some families have been stopped from visiting their relatives at their bedroom windows, whilst car park visits have been banned and access to carers has been limited.

While the restrictions behind those measures are in place to stop care home residents falling ill with COVID-19, those with dementia and their families are speaking out about how some of the most vulnerable members of society are coming to harm as a result of those measures, which were not made in consultation with those on the front line of care. It seems incredible that our bars and work places have been flooded with workers and punters and that that is deemed to be safe and yet resuming care home visits, which can alter the living experience of some of the most vulnerable people in our society and communities, is not. I am not just speaking about the elderly and those who are vulnerable; many young people with disabilities are in the same position. As the massive political drive to get the economy restarted has overhauled the regulations, those people have been left feeling forgotten about and, to be frank, let down.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for raising that point. There are increasing concerns about the level of elder abuse, which is quite often hidden. Therefore, I appreciate his very well-made point on checking in on the most vulnerable.

5.30 pm

Mr Carroll: That is a concern that has to be raised and I thank the Member for mentioning it today.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister and the Executive to review priorities going forward and to seriously consider where the recent spikes in the pandemic are coming from. I cannot see how anyone could come to the conclusion that people with dementia or other conditions in care homes are spreading the virus compared with the tens of thousands of people who are in our cities and town centres every weekend. If our regulations do not reflect that reality, the Executive's approach needs to be seriously reconsidered.

Finally, I welcome the work that is being done by the Alzheimer's Society and Marie Curie, which has already been mentioned. Both organisations have corresponded with us to remind us of the numbers of people who had dementia who have died with COVID and the numbers of deaths in general from dementia in our society.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, who will have up to 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I will begin by apologising to the proposers of the motion and those who have already spoken before I was able to join the debate. I will review their contributions in Hansard to make sure that I get the full flavour of what they said. I thank the proposers of the motion because it provides us with an opportunity to consider the importance of dementia services across Northern Ireland. It is notable and appropriate that we are discussing the motion on what is World Alzheimer's Day.

Since coming into the Chamber for the debate, I have listened intently to those Members who have spoken in support of the motion. Like many, I cannot fail to be moved by the various contributions and the personal experiences that have been brought to the fore in the Chamber today. Too often, people outside the Chamber forget that many of the issues that are debated here reflect personal experience and are of personal importance to us. I thank those Members who have contributed those very personal stories because not only do they reinforce the message that is coming forward from the debate, but that when we speak as politicians in a debate such as this, we do so from a heartfelt understanding and a desire to get things right not just for society but for our loved ones as well.

As has been said a number of times, the term "dementia" can be used to describe a number of symptoms, including a decline in memory, reasoning and communication skills and the gradual loss of skills that are needed to carry out daily activities. As Ms Anderson said, that is where the frustration comes into the lives of many of those strong personalities. It is a hard situation for families to manage because they see a loved one changing from the person that they once were and they see that decline almost on a daily basis.

Dementia has a profound effect on the people who experience it and on their families. As has been said, we all know of family members, friends or acquaintances who have been touched by dementia and we know the impact that it has on those around them and the sufferers themselves. As Mr Sheehan said, it is no respecter of physical activity or ability. When the deterioration starts, it is something that needs management and support. It is a cruel disease that can strike at any time and at any person. As Mr Dickson and others said, there is no cure, but we can deliver support.

One of the impacts of better standards of healthcare is that we have an increasingly ageing population which, in turn, means that the number of people who live with dementia is increasing. There are over 22,000 people living with dementia in Northern Ireland, 15,000 of whom have had a confirmed diagnosis. As many as 1,600 people under the age of 65 have dementia, so it is not age-specific.

A new case of dementia is diagnosed every four seconds in the world. Mr Sheehan said that the only thing that we have disagreed about is the statistics. However, as Ms Flynn's contribution reminded us, let us not forget that those are not statistics; those are people and their families and loved ones who have to support them and endure what is a very cruel disease and diagnosis. By that metric, if we continue at this rate, by 2051, the ageing of Northern Ireland's population means that the number of cases of dementia will rise to over 60,000. That is a major social, economic and healthcare challenge well into the future.

It is heartbreaking to think of increasing numbers of families enduring the unspeakable pain of watching those loved ones slip away — husbands and wives, even sons and daughters — and finding that their loved ones no longer even recognise them. Ms Cameron's and Mr Dickson's contributions referred to the support networks and to the heroes on whom we depend. Mr Sheehan and Mr Chambers — I missed his contribution as well — talked about that challenging point that comes to families

when they have to take the incredibly difficult decision that they are no longer able to cope and that they have to look elsewhere.

As was said, there is currently no cure for any type of dementia. Recently, there have been significant advances in our understanding of the factors that contribute to prevention, together with improved diagnosis and treatment of dementia. For longer than should have been the case, this awful condition has been mistaken simply as being a part of the ageing process. Across the four home nations and in the Republic of Ireland, political Administrations have continually identified as a priority the need to promote greater understanding of the causes of dementia, to work to find a cure, to modify the risk factors and to improve standards of care for people living with dementia.

As was said, my Department has produced a regional strategy, albeit back in 2011, with the aim of improving services for people with dementia and their carers. The strategy, among other things, helped to develop memory clinics across the five trusts — Mr Dickson mentioned those — which provide a timely diagnosis for people with dementia, and information and support in order to inform decisions about their future care and treatment.

The Delivering Social Change initiative was launched in September 2014, and it covered three broad project areas: dementia care, early intervention/transformation and shared education. The Delivering Social Change dementia signature project, which provided a joint funding package of £6 25 million, with some of that money coming from Atlantic Philanthropies, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department of Health, was a precursor to what the motion asks for: cross-departmental working and support for a dementia strategy. This was intended to transform the commissioning, design and delivery of dementia services into the future, and to improve the quality of care and support for people living with dementia. The legacy funding from the project provided £2 million recurrent, which has been invested in the dementia service improvement leads, of whom there are two for each health and social care trust, the dementia navigators, of whom there are also two for each health and social care trust, and dementia companions, of whom there are 44 across the region.

Phase 1 was completed in March 2018 and included a number of developments of which Members may be aware. There was a major public awareness campaign, Still Me, addressing the stigma around dementia, 11

information booklets were produced on a range of dementia-related issues, there was a training programme on delirium for health and social care staff, and a new dementia website located as part of nidirect. The training and development work stream included the recruitment of dementia navigators and champions, and the training covered 2,463 carers. There was also the publication of the dementia learning and development framework.

The second funding package — phase 2 — was just over £7 million, and it was made available through the Delivering Social Change initiative. That project included the development of technical solutions in training and communication, support to people with dementia and carers, data collection and analysis, research projects and data analytical projects. The aims of the programme were to build on existing Connected Health infrastructure in order to improve the patient journey for people with dementia and better support for families and carers, and it has sought to build the capacity and the capability to collect new dementia data to improve the planning and delivery of effective services.

A dementia patient portal was also developed as part of the phase 2 project. That portal is to secure user-friendly web-based tools, designed for patients and registered carers to manage their patient record and communicate with healthcare providers.

Phase 2 also provided resources to establish the General Practitioner Intelligence Platform (GPIP) and the recruitment of an analytical team. That will, amongst other things, allow the creation of a dementia disease register and provide an analytical platform to help improve care. GPIP is a hugely ambitious development for the health and social care sector. When implementation is complete, it will enable the routine collection of a broad data set of granular codified activity and registered data from GP clinical systems. It will create the potential to establish multiple virtual disease registers. With data linkage to other hospital and community service data sets, it will enable the development of advanced population health data. That facilitates the vision of health wellbeing in 2026 as was set out in the Bengoa report.

As has been mentioned by contributors today, the sector has facilitated engagement with people with dementia and carers and has been able to deliver flexible person-centred services across the region. I know that, for example, in my constituency, and Mr Dickson referred to it as well, the Northern Trust is committed to helping businesses adapt their services to meet

the needs of people with dementia and their carers. The trust works with the councils, the chambers of commerce, the Alzheimer's Society and many other partners to raise awareness and deliver training and support to many businesses to become dementia-friendly. To date, they have made a difference by establishing dementia-friendly town centres in Coleraine, Ballymoney, Ballycastle and in Larne. In addition, the villages of Glenarm, Ballygally, Carnlough and Cushendall have participated in dementia friendly information sessions. The work is going on. Ms Bradshaw referred to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive being awarded status as a dementia-friendly organisation.

As Mr Dickson also referenced, the importance of local government and the contribution that his party colleague Ms Gerardine Mulvenna makes as the local council's dementia champion and her work through the 'This is Me' choir, a very valuable asset, not just to the council area, but to those people and families who engage with it.

As with other services, responding to the current pandemic has had a major impact on the delivery of dementia services, which is being reflected in increased waiting lists for initial diagnosis and reviews. It has also had an impact on the provision of residential, day and domiciliary care services. Necessarily, health and social care trusts have had to rethink and redesign the way in which they respond to people with dementia and their carers; so too has the voluntary and community sector and there has been evidence of imaginative person-centred practice that must not be lost when this pandemic passes.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. I am sure he, like many of us, is dealing with personal independence payment (PIP) applications. If there is a delay in diagnosis, and yet the condition is so obvious on the demands that it places on carers, would the Minister consider writing to the Minister for Communities to accept a GP indication that the person is on the waiting list for a confirmed diagnosis for dementia? That would allow the carers to buy in additional resources to help them in their caring role.

Mr Swann: That is certainly an issue that I will look at and engage with the Minister for Communities, now that the Member has raised it, to see if there is an easier and better way to support not just those who are awaiting the diagnosis, but also the support that is needed for the families.

In regard to the regional dementia care pathway, 14 of their recommendations in the regional strategy referred to the development of the memory services. In order to address those recommendations, an agreed dementia care pathway has been developed. It is important to note that specific work has also been taken forward to ensure that the pathway supports adults with learning difficulties who also develop dementia. Although no funding has yet been identified to support the implementation of the pathway, integrated care partnerships, local commissioning groups and the trusts have been working with the voluntary and community sector and people with dementia and carers, to establish service innovations and prototype sites in each of the trust areas. Full implementation of the pathway is likely to be achieved across the region within the next number of years.

Members from Ms Bunting through to Mr Carroll, have registered and spoken about the impact of people with dementia in the care home setting, especially at this very challenging time.

There have also been particular impacts on those with dementia in care home settings and their relatives, and challenges have presented with visiting restrictions. While such restrictions are a necessary measure to try to prevent and control the transmission of COVID-19 in care homes, they have been very difficult for care home residents and their families.

5.45 pm

At this time, such guidance must continue to reflect the Executive's priority to minimise the risk of transmission of the virus in care home settings. However, the guidance must also recognise the very real need for residents and families to see one another. In that context, the guidelines published by my Department are intended to support visiting while balancing the ongoing risks posed by COVID-19 —

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

Mr Swann: — to residents, staff and families.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am happy to support the motion, how it was tabled, and the Members who tabled it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you. Before we move to the Member who will make a winding-up speech, I have a few comments to make to extend the sitting.

As business in the Order Paper is not expected to be disposed of by 6.00 pm, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business has been completed.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not have much faith in myself sticking to my 10 minutes. However, I will try to finish in that time.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on the debate on promoting dementia-friendly policy in the North and to speak in support of the motion. One of the things that we learn quickly when we enter public service as elected representatives is the scrutiny that our lives are placed under, whether through the media or, increasingly, social media. The life of an elected representative is often seen by some as a life detached from the lived human experience. However, I am sure that everyone in the Chamber has encountered the devastating effects of dementia on someone in our lives. In this debate, I have heard all sides and all Members talking about their very personal stories, and that allows us to show the human side that there can be to politics as we discussed this issue. It has been a nice debate and motion to be part of.

I welcome the fact that the motion is a cross-party one, and I thank the DUP for foregoing their turn in order to allow this cross-party motion to take place. That sends a clear message to the tens of thousands of people across the North who have been impacted by the condition or who care for those who are living with it. The fact that we have all come here together today to be unified in our approach in discussing and caring for those who are affected has been a particularly nice touch.

Dementia is a heartbreaking condition. It takes the people we cared about and breaks them down into someone that we must care for. Statistics show that there are between 14,000 and 22,000 people living with the condition, although that may be just the surface; there may be many more. We have been told that dementia accounts for about 13% of all deaths here. Whilst those statistics are shocking, they do, however, give us a picture of the heroic work being done by those in our care homes and why a dementia-friendly policy is so badly needed.

Many care homes provide excellent, round-the-clock care every day, but it is, as has been recognised, a sector in which there is a very

high turnover of staff, yet continuity is critical when working with people with dementia and in understanding how to care for them. Working out their individual quirks to make their life more comfortable can be done more easily if you have long-term staff. Trying to challenge the high turnover of staff in the care sector is something that we should be doing. It may have something to do with low wages and difficult conditions, yet it is something that we should be working to eradicate.

To say that caring for a loved one or a patient with dementia is not easy would be an understatement. The demands that it places on a carer are monumental, as you try to make sense of the condition that is so cruel in its affliction. Carers for such a person can go through a range of mourning as well, as was highlighted. They mourn for the person at the outset of the diagnosis, knowing what is ahead. They mourn as the condition develops: a once patient and gentle person may become aggressive as the condition continues its assault on their mind. They mourn for the life that the person has left behind. Finally, they are left to grieve the passing of that person. We understand that, in one third of all COVID-related deaths, dementia was also on the certificate. I know that the Health Committee, of which I am a member, will conduct an investigation into the care home sector's handling of COVID. Hopefully, we can examine that to see whether any practices can be replicated or improved to be able to help those who have dementia.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. On the basis of placing dementia in today's COVID scenario, the Minister and others have rightly pointed out the difficult decision that a family have to make when they feel that they can no longer care for a loved one. Those decisions are possibly being postponed or delayed because families are hesitant about putting their loved one into a care setting under such circumstances. Perhaps we will see that come out in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for her intervention. Absolutely, it is such a critical and massive step to place a loved one in a care home but to do so under the current circumstances would be very difficult. It is a decision that families will put off and put off and put off. Again, that may be to the detriment of the care overall for the family and for the care of the loved one.

That helps me to dovetail into my next point about the carers of those living with dementia

often feeling isolated, lonely and forgotten. That is unacceptable. One of the cruellest ironies of dementia is that the people who care for those who have lost their cherished memories are often the ones who are forgotten. Certainly, the ethos of the SDLP and others has long been about bringing people in from the cold and not forgetting them. I commend the work of the APG on preventing loneliness, which is chaired by my colleague Sinéad Bradley.

It is anticipated, based on projected numbers, that dementia diagnoses will double by 2040, with the North having the highest projected increase. Therefore, our response to this disease, which is an indiscriminating illness, must increase proportionately to be able to deal with that.

I know that this is a cross-party motion, so I will take a few of the points raised by one rep from each party to give the breadth of views on it. Paula Bradley began by highlighting some of the true impacts of dementia, which can be that children are left behind and husbands and wives are left grieving. That is a real concern for people, and they know that maybe years in advance when the condition starts. She also mentioned the roguish spirit of her grandmother, and I could not help but feel that that is maybe a family trait and that there is something in the genetics. I am sure that we will continue to find that out. Again, she started off by mentioning, as many, many others did, the importance of help and support for carers and how that is absolutely critical, because they are contributing a great amount to society by taking a massive burden off the health service.

The Chair of the Health Committee, Colm Gildernew, highlighted the impact of the condition on those who are suffering. He mentioned his professional work as a social worker and that of social workers right across the North as they try to help families. He also highlighted the importance of the charitable and voluntary sectors. I think that many of us got photographs today with some of those from the charitable and voluntary sectors to help support them in the work that they do.

My colleague Dolores Kelly mentioned the issues and concerns about COVID and the impact that it is having. The Minister gave what was a very extensive and detailed response. It was a ministerial contribution that told us lots and lots about the things that are happening and are taking place and about the help and support that are there. That is good, because sometimes Ministers come in to be defensive and talk about the things that they are trying to do, but there was plenty of detail in your

response, and I know that that will be appreciated. I know that Dolores mentioned the limited visits for people in care homes and how that is having an impact.

Alan Chambers mentioned the impact of people living longer; people are living longer and therefore it is a condition that we are going to see an increase of.

Paula Bradshaw mentioned how support is available and various projects. She highlighted the dementia navigators and how they can help. Matching people to the help and support that is available is a critical job for all of us. People may be feeling lonely and isolated but there is help and support out there, and we should be trying to connect them.

It has been highlighted that no patient should be waiting for more than nine weeks for dementia services. We have to reduce that because we know that some trusts are not hitting that target and we must do all that we can to try to pull together and provide the support, through the Executive and the House, so that trusts are able to get that number right down. Somebody else mentioned — I forget who it was — that early diagnosis is key to being able to provide the appropriate services and interventions.

I have said that COVID-19 is teaching us many lessons about healthcare, caring, loneliness and isolation. Unless we are willing to learn from these vital lessons and, more importantly, to act on them, we will be doomed to repeat them

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

Mr McGrath: All those who receive care, whether at home, in a care home, in hospital or hospices deserve every dignity that we can afford them. Members, we cannot lose sight of this. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the need to prioritise and enhance the health and well-being of every person living with dementia, and that of their carers, in Northern Ireland; highlights the importance of earlier and better diagnosis, effective community and home-based support, as well as high-quality inpatient and residential care in realising better outcomes; notes that transforming public understanding and ending

stigma about dementia is integral to ensuring local services and activities are more accessible, and everyday life made easier and more enjoyable, for those affected; acknowledges the role that the devolved institutions can play in embedding cultural change to this end; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to implement a dementia-friendly approach to their responsibilities and decision-making moving forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the business on the Order Paper. I invite Members to take their ease while we prepare for the question for urgent oral answer to the Health Minister.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

COVID-19: Outbreak in Daisy Hill Hospital

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

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health for an update on the COVID-19 outbreak that has resulted in three deaths at Daisy Hill Hospital.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister of Health, I thank the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice for attending the Chamber this evening, notwithstanding the fact that there was an emergency Executive meeting. Thank you very much.

6.00 pm

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I want to take the opportunity to provide the House with an update on a very serious situation at Daisy Hill Hospital. As Members will know, on Friday, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust confirmed that 11 patients and 21 staff connected with the male medical ward at Daisy Hill had tested positive for COVID-19 and that 67 staff contacts were off work and self-isolating. At that point, three of the patients who had tested positive had sadly passed away, and, tragically, I can now inform Members that, over the weekend, a further two patients have lost their lives. I want to again express my deepest sympathy to the families, who have been plunged into grief in these particularly difficult circumstances.

Thorough investigations are absolutely essential, and I am determined that no stone will be left unturned to ascertain the facts about these cases and any learning that we can take to prevent further reoccurrence. The deaths of these patients, along with the six deaths on the haematology ward at Craigavon Area Hospital, will be subject to a detailed review through the serious adverse incident (SAI) process. That investigation will be independently chaired, and its findings will be made public. There is also a piece of work connected to the learnings from

the outbreaks that is being delivered across all trusts. My Department and I are in regular contact with the Southern Trust, and I assure the public that all necessary measures are being taken, first, to control these outbreaks and, secondly, to investigate the circumstances that have caused them.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today and welcome his confirmation that an investigation will now take place. I hope that the Minister will join me today in communicating a strong message that Daisy Hill Hospital is a first-rate hospital with a committed and dedicated staff. Five families are grieving. My thoughts and prayers are with those families.

Minister, staff should not have to come to me. I hope that you will ensure that an appropriate mechanism will be put in place for staff to raise their concerns and for them to be listened to. I have a list of questions that patients, families and staff want answers to around testing protocols and delays, infection control and ward deep cleaning — lessons that were not learned from Craigavon. The overarching issue now, however, is that staff, patients, families and the wider community need to know that their hospital is safe and that they will be safe when in hospital. What actions have been taken and what additional resources have been put in place to ensure that that is the case? Can you reassure them today, Minister?

Mr Swann: With regard to the specific things that the Member has asked, I assure him, the staff and the families that we will do all we can to ensure the support of the staff, the patients and the loved ones, to support their work and the daily challenges that, he rightly acknowledges, the staff members face. They are supported. As the Member is saying, now is not the point of apportioning blame; this is about taking robust steps to ensure the future safeguarding of our staff and the patients in those vital hospital settings but also supporting the families who have lost loved ones at this critical juncture. That support, provision, assurance and communication must be there and must be strengthened while the SAI level 3 investigation goes on. It will take time, but they need those answers and those reassurances now. That is why my officials and I in regular contact with the senior leadership of the trust. The Member mentioned cleaning. I have been informed by the Southern Trust that enhanced environmental cleaning is being taken on five times a day and that, at the end of this outbreak, there will be a terminal clean of all the facilities.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his attendance this evening on this important matter. Of course, our thoughts are with the five families and their friends, who have now been thrust into grief prematurely.

Minister, can you confirm whether you will expedite as far as possible the timescale for the completion of the serious adverse incident review to help restore public confidence and implement stringent safety measures to protect staff and patients at Daisy Hill Hospital?

Mr Swann: I join the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee in sending condolences to the families and friends who have lost loved ones in the past number of days.

I said that the serious adverse incident would be at level 3, and I committed to publishing its findings, because I know that the validity of our SAI process has been challenged in the past. I reassure the House, the families and the staff that we will ensure that answers are sought to the questions that are being asked. I am informed that the chair will be in place by 25 September, which is the end of this week. That will ensure that that process can be commenced. The Southern Trust is working not just with the Public Health Agency here but with Public Health England to ensure that its management of the process is of the highest standard and to ensure that there is learning across the entirety of our health and social care system.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for coming to the House again this week on this important issue. I too have had a number of contacts over the past two weeks since the issue first arose in Daisy Hill. As with other Members, I have had concerned patients and families contact me about their safety in hospital and staff contact me about their safety in the workplace. I really welcome the reassurances that you have given here this evening, Minister.

As the weeks have gone on, this has been a major issue. When we hear news like this around a COVID outbreak, it obviously raises concerns. Daisy Hill has been without A&E for six months. I have been liaising with the trust on many occasions, and I really appreciate those engagements. Can you confirm today that this COVID outbreak will have no implication for the reopening of A&E in the next few weeks?

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her concern, but I am reluctant to join the two issues specifically together. The Southern Trust has

given specific timelines for opening the facility at Daisy Hill. It has been delayed, I think, and that has been communicated to elected Members. I have not received any update that it will be delayed further. A number of staff are off self-isolating, but that should be complete within the 14-day period, so the new date should be reinforced. I will check that with the trust and get back to the Member and other Members who are participating in today's questions to provide that reassurance or an update.

Ms S Bradley: I add my name to the condolences offered to all families who have lost loved ones due to COVID-19. I welcome the Minister coming to the House, because words of reassurance are needed. Specifically, can the Minister assure the patients, their families and the staff that all of the areas in Daisy Hill hospital that have been affected by COVID-19 have been subject to a deep clean under the instructions of the Public Health Agency on infection control? He mentioned that towards the latter end of his answer, but could he elaborate on that, please?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member on that specific point, because I am led to believe this afternoon that that is an issue that staff have raised. I am seeking assurances from the PHA and from the trust. I have been informed that staff have carried out enhanced environmental cleaning five times a day in those areas and that, at the end of the outbreak, which is determined by the Public Health Agency, there will be a terminal clean. I will seek further reassurance from the Public Health Agency and the Southern Trust to ensure that that is being done to the extent that the PHA requires it to be done.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. Are we getting to the point where some of the health services in this hospital may need to be moved to a neighbouring facility to accommodate this? I am concerned that some people may not turn up for appointments if they are concerned about hygiene control in this location.

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. It goes back to Mr McNulty's supplementary question regarding how we reassure the members of the public who have to present as patients and the staff. It is the job of the House collectively to provide that reassurance and encouragement to patients to come forward. If anyone is concerned, they should contact those who are organising their appointments, whether that is the consultant or the doctors, to make sure that that reassurance can be provided. I am not aware that the Southern Trust is

indicating that they want to relocate any of their services because of the outbreak, but, again, I will check that now that the Member has raised the issue, because it is an important one. We need as many people presenting for medical treatment as is possible during this period with the surges of COVID-19.

Mr Chambers: Minister, we all view hospitals as a place of safety and recovery, and we probably do not expect our loved ones to come into contact with something like COVID in that setting. However, hospitals suffer infections from time to time — MRSA and gastric infections spring to mind — and it does not necessarily represent negligence on the part of anyone. Does the Minister agree that it is impossible to completely exclude infections in hospitals, and can he assure the House that everyone involved is taking every step to mitigate this infection in Daisy Hill Hospital?

Mr Swann: I think that the immediate priority in the Southern Trust, working with the Public Health Agency here, and, as I said, that in England, is to ensure that their management of the outbreak is to the highest standard and to share that learning across our health and social care system. I will also take the opportunity again to reassure the staff and those who are working through these unprecedented times that, in caring for the patients and the loved ones, they are supported in their work and the daily challenges that they are presented with. As I said, this is not about apportioning blame; this is about taking robust steps to ensure the future safeguarding of our staff and the patients currently in the hospital and in all our hospital settings while also supporting the families.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to answer our concerns. Again, I add my thoughts and prayers for the families of those who have lost their loved ones at Daisy Hill and Craigavon hospitals in recent times. You have said that 21 staff have COVID and 67 staff are self-isolating: how is that level of staff loss affecting the day-to-day running of the hospital?

Mr Swann: The Member will be aware and under no doubt that, with that level of absence, there are adverse effects and there are certain services that are being stepped back. The trust is doing all that it can through reallocating staff and the utilisation of agency staff to make sure that we can deliver as many services as is safely possible at this minute in time. However, it is about making sure that we get the staff who have tested positive and those who are self-isolating supported during this period of self-

isolation so that we can get them back to work safely.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, on 7 September I asked an urgent oral question to you in the Chamber. On that day, you said to me that you were going to establish a serious adverse incident in Craigavon Area Hospital and that a chair would be appointed. At that stage, four people had died as a result of the outbreak on the haematology ward in Craigavon: it is now six. Five are dead as a result of the outbreak at Daisy Hill. The serious adverse incident has not been established and the chair has not been appointed. Does the Minister agree that time is not on our side? He has said that it is not the time to apportion blame — I agree with him — but something has gone wrong. A person, a process or equipment has let the system down, and, unless we get the serious incident investigation up and going, we will not know, which means that this could be repeated somewhere else.

Mr Swann: The Member brought the urgent oral question back, and I know that he has an adjournment debate tomorrow afternoon on this subject.

With regard to the serious adverse incident, the important bit is getting the right independent chair. As I said, they will be appointed by the end of this week. I have also asked that the Patient and Client Council in my Department makes sure that there a support mechanism for the families and staff who have to interact with the serious adverse incident. There is ongoing work through the PHA — through their inspection processes and their engagement with the trust and with the staff — to ensure that whatever learnings we need to do now are learned now. It is a matter of fact that the Chairperson of the Committee for Health has also raised these concerns.

The Member is right: there is no point in waiting until the SAI is complete; it is about learning what we can do now. That is why the PHA has engaged with Public Health England, which has seen similar outbreaks in similar conditions in hospitals across its jurisdiction, something that we did not see in the first wave. So, there are learnings there to be brought across. We are implementing them now. I can assure the Member that we and the trust are doing all that we physically and practically can to ensure that this does not happen again anywhere in Northern Ireland.

6.15 pm

Mr Buckley: I, too, would like to place on record my condolences to the families affected by this COVID-19 outbreak. Inevitably, as with other Members here, my attention turns also to the staff and the staffing pressures and, I hope, their ability to cope with what will come, even with general winter pressures.

Will the Minister provide an assessment of current health and social care workforce capacity within the Southern Trust, in light of the COVID-19 outbreaks? Will he outline what mitigations he will put in place to ensure that associated staff absences will not adversely impact patient safety or provision of vital front-line services?

Mr Swann: Again, in response to the Member, I do not have the specific, detailed figures with me, but I ask him to reflect on the answer that I gave to his party colleague Mr Irwin. It is about making sure that any provision of service that we deliver is done safely. Therefore, with the level of staff absence due to self-isolation, which is the right thing for the staff to do, there will be some downturn in service provision, but the trust is doing all that it can to ensure that that is minimal and that there is as little disruption as possible to service delivery at both the Craigavon and Daisy Hill hospital sites.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for coming in to give us his answers and, in particular, for his comments on rapid learning. Given the bereavements that we have seen, and I extend my condolences to every one of the families impacted, will the Minister outline what specific bereavement support and guidance has been put in place, both for those who have lost loved ones and those who are continuing to experience the impact of the disease and whose loved ones also need support?

Mr Swann: The Chairperson of the Health Committee raises a point about the crucial support mechanism that the health service does have to provide. As I said, I engaged with the Southern Trust — with the CEO and the chair — with regard to the initial outbreak in Craigavon to make sure that they brought in additional resources, not just to support the families but to support the staff as well, because this is a very challenging time as they manage this outbreak and the implications of what has happened. I have also asked the Patient and Client Council whether there is a role or remit for it to provide an independent or secondary support mechanism, should there be families or staff who want to avail themselves of a service or a listening ear outside the trust.

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

Justice

COVID-19: Restrictions in the Holylands

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what action she has taken to prevent breaches of COVID-19 regulations in the Holylands area of Belfast.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question they must continually rise in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The scenes that we have been witnessing in the Holylands area not just over recent weeks but for a number of years now have been a cause of real distress and anxiety for residents. It is a problem that predates the coronavirus pandemic but which has been exacerbated by it since it is now putting people's health in danger.

I have no hesitation in condemning such irresponsible and inconsiderate behaviour, whether it is by people living in the area or by others coming into the area for entertainment. I welcome the actions taken by the PSNI, Belfast City Council and others to deal with those caught breaching the public health regulations and making residents' lives a misery.

The Executive have collective responsibility to encourage people to comply with the COVID-19 restrictions, whether those are contained in guidance or given legal effect through regulations. Enforcement of public health restrictions is not the sole responsibility of my Department, nor am I, as Minister of Justice, leading this important piece of work.

A working group was recently set up by the Executive to assist in its response to compliance and enforcement, which is a cross-cutting matter. The working group is led by junior Ministers in the Executive Office for that reason. It held its first meeting on Wednesday 16 September. My Department is represented at senior official level, alongside a number of other Departments and statutory agencies.

Partnership working between all the relevant agencies is crucial at both strategic and local level to deliver a swift and coordinated

response to problematic behaviour, and I assure the Member that I and my Department will play a full part in that.

Mr Beattie: I genuinely thank the Minister for coming along because I know that she has a lot going on at this moment in time. I totally agree with her that these COVID breaches have their genesis in antisocial behaviour in the Holylands, which has been going on for an awful long time. Although I am not from Belfast, I have watched the residents being absolutely tortured by what is going on there.

I note that the DOJ did a review of antisocial behaviour in 2018, but we are still waiting for the output of that. I also note that Part 5 of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 allows for the police to stop antisocial behaviour due to excess alcohol in an area listed by a council, yet it has never used it. The Minister could legislate for public space petition orders, but she has not done so. Therefore, the question is: what has the Minister done and what measures has she brought before the Executive COVID enforcement working group, which I believe she should be heading and attending?

Mrs Long: With respect to the Member, the composition of the working group was not a matter for the Department of Justice; it was a matter for the Department of Health and the Executive Office, so I suggest that perhaps that is something that he should take up with them.

In terms of what we have brought forward, we have been facilitating the police to ask for additional powers where those are required. We have asked them specifically if they need additional actions taken, and, to date, where they have required additional powers, we have sought to have those implemented. However, they have not been asking for additional powers because many of the health regulations are effective in controlling what happens in people's homes. That is a very hard area for the police to have control over. This is a point that has been made repeatedly by the Executive, namely that we rely not on enforcement but on people being willing to comply with those regulations.

The complex issues in the Holylands go way beyond simply the coronavirus regulations. They extend into antisocial and, sometimes, criminal behaviour, and the police have been acting to deal with those issues in terms of criminality — there have been arrests — and also breaches of the coronavirus regulations.

Mr Givan: The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland will follow these regulations

and, indeed, do not need the law to get them to act with common sense, but where regulations are being used as the tool to best combat COVID-19, then if they are going to be implemented, for them to have any credibility, they need to be enforced. Where there are blatant breaches of the COVID regulations, like the Bobby Storey funeral or like what we have seen in the Holylands, it is vital that the police then act and enforce those regulations. What confidence does the Minister have that the PSNI are effectively policing these regulations when we have blatant breaches occurring?

Mrs Long: As the Chair of the Committee, the Member will know that it is not my responsibility to answer for or on behalf of the Chief Constable on operational matters. That is a matter that the Member would be best to take up with the Chief Constable directly or via one of his colleagues on the Policing Board, because that is the right forum in which to hold the police to account. I am accountable for the actions that are taken by the Department of Justice, not by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

However, I would direct the Member to the figures that are in the public domain on the work that has been done on enforcement. Some 116 COVID 1 notices — £60 fines — were handed out over the weekend and approximately 203 COVID notices have been handed out since 1 September. The PSNI have confirmed that most of those notices have been given out following attendance at houses where there have been disturbances. However, given that up to 15 people can meet outside, in larger crowds of people, it can be very difficult to distinguish one group of 15 from another. That is something that the Executive needs to return to in due course.

Of course, the difficulty with this all is trying to balance public health and civil liberties issues. As you rightly said, most people abide by it because they believe that it is the right thing to do, and it would be, I think, an unfortunate consequence if we were to penalise those who obey the restrictions and the law, simply because a few concerted individuals make an effort not to do so.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. I agree with her that it is a cross-departmental and cross-agency issue for all those involved. Since the Minister has answered that part of the question, does she have any update on any conversations that she has had with the landlords in the area and what those have amounted to? Of course, the

residents in the area are suffering. Are they being kept up to date by the various agencies, including, in particular, the Department, about what is going on?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for the issues that he has raised. He will be aware of the working group on the Holylands that Belfast City Council chairs to try to address those issues. It encompasses many of the agencies that he mentioned.

Since Friday, there has been a subgroup — a very focused subgroup — that is working on the COVID regulations and how those can be addressed in the current circumstances. Council officers — night-time noise officers, safer neighbour officers and ASB officers — are working together to report to the police. For example, noise offences can be followed up after the event, but COVID breaches will take precedence.

It is also clear that the universities have a responsibility and a role and, as I have said publicly today, I believe that landlords have a responsibility. If you have tenants who are causing a persistent and ongoing nuisance, not only to other full-time residents of the area but to other students who are there to study and not to be on a wrecking mission in that community, it would be completely unfair if that was allowed to continue. They are stakeholders in that community, they gain rent from those properties and they should be robust in dealing with their tenants where they are creating a nuisance or engaging in criminal activity. I would hope that landlords would engage positively and constructively with other agencies in the same way that the council and other residents' groups have done to date.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the Minister coming to the House and the question being asked. No one wants to demonise students, but it is clear that, in the Holylands, a group of students have behaved terribly in relation to the restrictions. I ask that the group that has been set up, as well as looking at the urgent issues around COVID enforcement, looks at many of the longer-term questions that have plagued inner-south Belfast and the Holylands neighbourhood, including the appalling behaviour of some of the HMO owners and some of the deeper cultural issues around student behaviour in that area. I know that it is not just in her Department's bailiwick, but can the Minister and the Executive look more broadly at turning that into a high-level, long-term group to look at issues in the Holylands?

Mrs Long: To be clear, the groups that have been set up under the auspices of the Executive are there to look specifically at the coronavirus regulations and the enforcement of them, which is an important but only one small part of the overall picture. It is important to recognise that we should not assume that one group is responsible for all the problems. It is not all students. In fact, the police have indicated to us that many of those who have received notices are not students at either of our universities, but are drawn to the area because there are students there and go on the rampage while they are there.

They are often visitors rather than residents.

6.30 pm

It is therefore a complex area, and one for which an approach needs to be taken forward. As someone who previously sat on Belfast City Council, I would argue very strongly, however, that the council is by far the best place for that approach to be taken forward, because it has many of the ongoing levers for planning; for enforcement of noise and statutory nuisance; for dealing with waste, which has also been a major problem in the area; and for all the other behaviours. The council is the right vehicle to take forward that longer-term approach, which is absolutely necessary. I absolutely agree with the Member on that.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, can you provide us with information on what your Department's role and responsibilities, if any, are on the new enforcement group?

Mrs Long: Yes. A number of new enforcement groups have been set up. First and foremost, a group has been set up by the Executive at a strategic level. That ministerial-led group is already working on looking at collaboration and operational challenges. The focus in that case has been on discussing the best mechanism for the provision of public health information to inform enforcement activity. It involves the PSNI, the local council, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the relevant Departments, including my own. Indeed, the Executive have also been working on a number of other subgroups, which look at reviewing relaxations, restrictions on travel and the hospitality sector, as well as the weekly four-nations stocktake. We all have an enforcement focus on those subgroups.

The Executive also agreed that a new ministerial subgroup would be established, chaired by TEO junior Ministers, on compliance

and enforcement, and it met for the first time on Wednesday 16 September. The discussion at that meeting centred on the current challenges in the Holylands. We have a DOJ representative at senior level on that group, which also includes the Minister of Health, a member from the PSNI, representatives from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser, and, as I say, representatives from DFC and TEO information service.

Ms Bailey: It is good to hear that the Minister has acknowledged that this is a long-term problem for the area. That problem is heightened by the added pressures and dangers from COVID. The Health Minister told the House earlier today that over 50 notices have been issued in the past few days in the Holylands area. That is good news. I certainly pity the fool who would go ahead with a house party in the area these days.

I ask the Minister whether she plans to be on the ground to experience at first hand the true extent of the antisocial and criminal behaviours that need to be dealt with in the area in the long term.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. I am not sure that it is wise for more people to be on the streets rather than fewer when we are asking people to take the COVID regulations seriously.

I am well aware of the problem. I served on Belfast City Council for over 10 years. Throughout that time, this was a major problem. I have visited the area many times. Our party headquarters is in the centre of the area. My colleague who is an MLA for the area is regularly on the ground to see what people are going through. We do not need to add more footfall to the area. I think that I can rely on those who are there to enforce the regulations to do so responsibly. I have met the residents many times on the issue. It is hugely frustrating that young people who have the privilege, and it is a privilege, of being able to go to university, of being able to study and of being able to further their life are behaving in such an inconsiderate and selfish manner. I have to say that we all understand what it is to be a student and to have fun. We have all been there, although that may be hard to believe when you look at some of us now. The problem here is not that young people are going to wake up tomorrow morning with a bad hangover; rather, they are going to wake up with a criminal record that marks them out for the rest of their life. They need to get a grip.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much, Minister, for coming to speak to us this evening. You have outlined a plethora of responses to do with the Holylands issue. You yourself have shown a considerable amount of knowledge of the issues that have been affecting the Holylands for a very long time. What we all think that this needs is senior leadership, a ministerial direction and somebody with your experience to take personal charge of this. Will you commit to getting it moving and taking charge of the issue yourself?

Mrs Long: I am delighted to hear that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party has such faith in me as an individual to be able to turn around such a long-standing problem in the Holylands. I point out to him, however, that the danger of the Minister taking on the issue is that people then focus entirely on police enforcement. That is what happens when the Minister of Justice takes responsibility for something. It is not a matter simply for the PSNI. Councils have responsibility for such matters as night-time noise. Belfast City Council has a night-time noise service, safer-neighbourhood officers and a houses in multiple occupancy unit. Queen's University, through its community engagements, is working with a wide range of partners on how it is going to return students. It is also looking at what sanctions will be applied to those students who receive penalty notices. The University of Ulster is also engaging with students who are living in problematic properties, and has maintained a presence on the ground throughout.

I am flattered that the Member believes that I could turn the issue around by taking leadership of the group, but I will resist the temptation to step into the shoes of my colleagues in the Executive Office whose job is to coordinate those cross-cutting matters.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for coming here this evening. We were shocked at the behaviour seen in the Holylands. What discussion has the Minister had with the Chief Constable around the consideration of cordoning off the area for a short time and restricting access to only residents and students who can prove that they are legitimate tenants with, perhaps, documentation from their landlord?

Mrs Long: I have had no conversations with the Chief Constable about that matter. To introduce some kind of a cordon sanitaire around the Holylands would be incredibly difficult, given the transient nature of the population, the multiplicity of businesses that

operate in that place by daytime and the number of services that operate there in the evening. However, I have talked at length with the Chief Constable about the enforcement and antisocial behaviour issues in the area. It is a conversation that I have had with previous Chief Constables.

The issue is not going to be easily resolved, and none of us should assume that it will be, but the coronavirus regulations provide an extra layer of challenge, as well as an extra opportunity to drive home to young people the risk that they are taking with their health. As I said previously, this is not just high jinx. People's property has been damaged, wing mirrors have been kicked off cars and windows have been smashed. It not minor and trivial. It has a significant impact on not just the residents who live there permanently, but other students who are there with a view to getting an education, not a criminal record.

Mr Frew: This is an activity that has blighted the area for many years. It is the case — it is true — that you are asking the police to police living rooms and gardens. Is it not the case that messaging must do the job in order to get compliance? Is that message shot to pieces when the Minister's Sinn Féin Executive colleagues wilfully and brutally flaunt the regulations and do not apologise or take responsibility for doing so? How does the Minister, who is the Justice Minister and a member of the Executive, fix that problem and give a concerted message?

Mrs Long: My recollection is that the incident in question has been apologised for. I ask the Member to speak to his colleagues who are displaying a deep and profound resistance to wearing masks, for example, and to following the other health advice that is being offered, because that behaviour is unhelpful. It is not just the Executive who have responsibilities in these issues, but every elected representative. Therefore I say, gently, to the Member that he should look at some of his colleagues who have been anything but exemplary in that regard.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, thank you for being here this evening to discuss the issue. You place a lot of blame on landlords. They may have some responsibility, but surely the bulk of responsibility lies with the tenant who signed the tenancy agreement and signed up to all the issues relating to that agreement. Therefore the responsibility is on the tenant more than the landlord. It is the tenant's responsibility to adhere to what is on the tenancy agreement, and to the COVID regulations.

Mrs Long: I have no problem in saying that it is entirely the responsibility of the tenant to adhere to the COVID regulations and to abide by their tenancy agreements. When they fail to do so, we look to enforcement. We have talked about the role that councils, the police and universities can play in enforcement. We are, therefore, looking at a multi-agency approach. I see no reason why landlords should not be part of that multi-agency approach, given that huge numbers of students are residing in those properties and are in the area because they have tenancies, and many of those who come to stay in the area are staying in those properties with their friends. There is a serious issue for landlords to address. You are absolutely right to say that it is not their fault that this is happening but they must take responsibility for those elements where they can have a positive impact.

That is a community in which they have invested by buying a home. It is also a community in which they have their business and make their money in the rents that they receive. They are invested in that community and should play a role, along with everyone else who is a stakeholder, in trying to improve the situation for all residents. Let us be clear: this is as much for the students as it is for the full-time residents of that neighbourhood.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes this item of business.

Adjourned at 6.40 pm.

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