



# Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 22 February 2021  
Volume 136, No 2

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 February 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Members, before we commence business today, I want to address two matters. First, over recent months, we have seen a very worrying trend of a variety of threats, attacks, vandalism and abuse, including of a sexually violent nature, on social media against a range of people, including Ministers, Members on all sides of the House, journalists and other figures, cultural organisations and ordinary families. Indeed, they are becoming so commonplace that one of my difficulties in the Chair, particularly when considering Matters of the Day, is that, recently, we could have had a discussion condemning specific threats at the start of our business every week.

I acknowledge that Members, including Linda Dillon, Mike Nesbitt, Matthew O'Toole and Michelle O'Neill, have all wanted to raise those issues recently, as have other Members. It is important in my role as Speaker that I record that the Assembly is built on the principle of this being a democratic society in which we uphold freedom of expression and the right of people to have different views and the ability to ask questions. Parties may wish to come together to explore how a substantive discussion on those issues could be added to the Order Paper in the time ahead. For today, however, I know that I speak for Members on every side of the House when I say, on behalf of the Assembly, that we absolutely condemn those who are behind all those threats, attacks and abuse, and we stand in solidarity with those who are on the receiving end of it.

I will move on to the second subject. I remind Members that today will be the first plenary sitting during which they may join the sitting remotely. I wrote to all Members on Friday 19 February to make provision for hybrid Assembly plenary proceedings in accordance with Standing Order 110, and I ask Members to familiarise themselves with that guidance. I thank all those Assembly staff who have worked hard over the past three weeks to put in place the practical and procedural measures to

allow this change, bearing in mind that the Assembly gave its approval only on 1 February.

I want to highlight a number of key points.

First, Members participating remotely should act in accordance with the same standards of decorum and behaviour as expected in the Chamber. Secondly, Members wishing to speak should ensure that their name is added to the speaking list in good time to be called. Thirdly, attending remotely does not impact on the quorum required in the Chamber under Standing Orders. Finally, when speaking remotely, Members will not see the clock. So, for timed contributions, we will advise Members from the Chair when their time is coming to an end.

Inevitably, when incorporating the greater use of technology, we are likely to have our fair share of technical problems. Hopefully, they will be minor, and, indeed, we might even have the odd comedy moment. However, we should keep in mind the reasons for undertaking this change. With the patience, support and good humour of all Members, I am sure that this new method will quickly become embedded in our business.

**Mr Buckley:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Tuesday, Ms Paula Bradshaw, Member for South Belfast, challenged the validity of the introduction of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill. Rightly, you ruled that the Bill's introduction had been properly carried out and that it was within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. At the Health Committee last Thursday, the Member continued to challenge your ruling, saying that the Bill's introduction should not have been allowed and requesting to see your legal advice. Is it in order for the Member for South Belfast to continue to challenge your authority? What action will be taken to deal with the Member and reassure the House that you will resist her efforts?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for his point of order. I do not want to rehearse my response to

Paula Bradshaw last week. Suffice to say, the procedures embraced by Paul Givan were totally consistent with Standing Orders and procedures and were totally correct. I have no doubt that, during the process of that legislation, there will be a lot of debate and scrutiny, as should be the case. I have no doubt that people, including human rights organisations, will ensure that their voice is heard as part of that scrutiny. The content of discussions at Committees is not for me to comment on, but the Member has put his point of view on the record and drawn the attention of the House to the remarks of Paula Bradshaw. I have not heard the recording or seen the Hansard report of the meeting; this has been raised only by you in the Chamber. I take note of it, and, suffice to say, anyone asking for the legal advice to the Speaker will simply be advised that that advice is, as always, privileged and will not be shared. The Member has put his concern on the record.

### **Public Petition: Extend the COVID Disruption Payment**

**Mr Speaker:** Mr John O'Dowd has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I wish to present this petition on behalf of the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), the student advocacy movement that speaks on behalf of our students who live locally. I will read out the wording of the petition:

*"On 4 February the Economy Minister announced that all full-time higher education students in ... universities and colleges would receive a £500 Covid Disruption Grant. But further education, part-time and non-EU international students have been denied this support. All students have experienced severe disruption throughout this pandemic and no one deserves to be left out. We want the Economy Minister to extend this payment scheme to include further education, part-time and non-EU international students. The Minister should also work with other Ministers in UK and Ireland to make sure that support is also available for students from [here] who study elsewhere."*

The petition has 3,313 signatures.

In conclusion, there is cross-party support for the petition and the work of the NUS-USI. It is particularly unfortunate that full-time students

studying in further education colleges, who are most likely to come from a lower-income background, have not been afforded this grant. Mr Speaker, I support the student movement in its work and in its continued call for this payment to be made to others. I will present the petition to you in due course.

**Mr Speaker:** As the Member knows, I would normally invite him to bring his petition to the Table. However, in light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in his place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office later. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once the petition is received, I will forward it to the Minister for the Economy and send a copy to the Committee.

### **Committee Membership**

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

*Resolved:*

*That Ms Paula Bradley replace Mr Gary Middleton as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Mr K Buchanan.]*

## Executive Committee Business

### The draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is two motions to approve two draft statutory rules (SRs) that relate to direct payments to farmers. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and I will then call the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both motions as listed in the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question on that motion will then be put. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

**Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I beg to move

*That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

*The following motion stood in the Order Paper:*

*That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).]*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motions.

**Mr Lyons:** The current direct agricultural support schemes, which include the basic payment scheme, are worth over £293 million annually to farmers in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the regulations that I am bringing forward today is to ensure that the current schemes continue to operate effectively and to implement improvements and simplifications wherever possible.

Leaving the EU has provided Northern Ireland with an unprecedented level of regional discretion and flexibility with regard to future agricultural support in Northern Ireland. As Minister Poots has said in the House, this is one of the most significant changes in policy affecting the agriculture sector in over 40 years.

We now have the opportunity to develop an agricultural support framework better suited to local needs: one of the benefits of leaving the EU and one that will provide for and secure long-term sustainability in our industry. The regulations that I am bringing forward today are the first step in that transition.

I move to the first regulation. The legislative amendments introduced in the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 will maintain the status quo as far as possible and are largely technical. No substantive policy changes are being made, and farmers will see no change on the ground as a result of the regulation.

EU regulation No 1307/2013 — the direct payments regulation — contains financial ceilings that are used to calculate direct payments to farmers across the UK. However, it includes financial ceilings only up to and including the 2020 claim year. The SR specifies the manner by which DAERA will determine the annual financial ceiling to calculate payments beyond 2020 in Northern Ireland. The ceiling for each future year must be equivalent to Northern Ireland's share of the UK national ceiling specified in the direct payments regulation for 2020.

The ceiling will no longer be specified in legislation but will be determined administratively. Setting the ceiling in legislation is no longer necessary, given that the context of allocating funds to EU member states is not applicable. The change will not alter the amount of money being paid to farmers, and the Department will remain constrained by the Treasury allocation.

The SR makes other minor amendments to ensure that the schemes can continue to operate effectively beyond 2020. That includes replacing some dates that were specific to the 2020 scheme year with equivalent dates that are not year-specific. It also removes from retained EU law provisions that are not applicable in Northern Ireland.

Similarly, it removes some provisions that are no longer operating in Northern Ireland, such as the requirement for beneficiaries to meet negative list rules and the ability to make payments in euro. Other amendments remove provisions that are not relevant beyond the 2020 scheme. For example, the SR removes rules concerning the transfer of funds from the 2020 direct payments budget to be used for rural development measures.

## 12.15 pm

I will move on to the second regulations, which are the Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021. The regulations give legal effect to the simplifications and improvements that my predecessor, Edwin Poots, announced in the Assembly on 17 November 2020. The simplifications are intended to make the direct agricultural support schemes simpler both for applicants and those administering them.

Part 2 removes the greening payment, with the money being incorporated into the basic payment scheme. The requirement not to plough environmentally sensitive green land is retained, as set out in article 32A of EU regulation 1307/2013. Greening requirements for crop rotation, ecological focus areas and retention of permanent grassland had a negligible impact in Northern Ireland, where over 90% of land is permanent grassland and there is an abundance of landscape features, such as hedges and sheughs, to meet ecological focus area requirements. Consequently, meeting greening requirements was largely an administrative exercise for farmers. Indeed, the greening requirements were counterproductive in Northern Ireland, where our cereal area continues to decline, which raises biodiversity concerns as grass becomes ever more dominant.

Part 3 limits the number of entitlements that can be allocated from, or increased in value from, the regional reserve to 90 for a young farmer/new entrant. That brings it into line with the 90 hectares limit for the young farmers' payment. It also removes a farm business's eligibility for the young farmers' payment after three unsuccessful applications from the 2022 scheme year onwards.

Part 4 makes a change to the over-declaration penalties so that they cannot exceed the amount of payment due prior to the penalty being applied. Part 5 removes the concept of a cross-border holding within the UK. Farms with land in more than one UK region will make separate applications to each paying agency and then be paid separately.

Part 6 changes the amount at which payments are capped from €150,000 to £190,000. That is a technical change to reflect the fact that capping did not apply to the greening payment and that the amounts are now incorporated into the basic payment. The aim is, as far as is possible, to have a neutral impact on capping.

Part 7 sets the minimum control rate for inspections at 1% for scheme applications, but the Department can increase it, should the error rate increase. Part 8 makes some technical changes to the provisions on coupled payments, which allows me to introduce a protein crop payment in 2021 and 2022.

Part 9 makes some consequential changes to the direct payments regulation. It also removes the 3% limit on the increase in the basic payment ceiling, giving the Department more flexibility to maximise expenditure of Treasury allocations for direct payments.

Together, the regulations will ensure that direct payments to farmers can continue smoothly in 2021, as well as making some significant improvements and, importantly, simplifications. I commend them to the Assembly.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chairperson and to outline the views of the Committee. Leaving the EU has brought about significant change from the common agricultural policy, and that will have an impact on our agri-food sector.

Policies will no longer have to follow CAP pillars 1 and 2, and that has required the Department to develop new approaches and support systems that will address the needs of agriculture and rural communities as well as the environment. Members are aware that direct payments are currently worth over £293 million annually, and are of significant importance to sustaining agriculture and supporting viable trading options. The Department continues to consider how future payments can support farming and rural communities while maintaining the sustainability and profitability of farming and the environment. That, of course, will take time, but, while that work is being explored and developed, it is important that payments continue under the existing schemes.

In his ministerial statement of 17 November 2020, Minister Poots spoke about his long-term vision for agriculture support. He referred to a number of simplifications and improvements that he intended to make regarding the rules that govern the direct payment scheme in the 2021 scheme year. The Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee heard from departmental officials at its meeting on 4 February 2021 that the SR for the Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations 2021 would maintain the status quo and that its provisions were largely technical in nature. Members were reassured

that there would be no substantive policy changes and, importantly, that farmers would see no change on the ground as a result of the regulations. The Department will receive its financial allocation from Treasury, and farmers will continue to be paid.

The Committee heard that the SR makes a few minor amendments to ensure that the schemes can operate effectively beyond 2020, including the replacement of some dates from the 2020 scheme year with equivalent dates that are not year-specific. Regulations will remove from the EU-retained law those provisions that are no longer applicable here, as well as the provisions that will no longer operate, such as the requirement for beneficiaries to meet negative list rules for the active farmer and the ability to make payments in euros. Other amendments will remove provisions that are not relevant beyond 2020.

The second SR that the Committee considered — the Direct Payment to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations 2021 — will give legal effect to the simplifications that Minister Poots announced in his ministerial statement. The Committee heard that they are intended to make direct agriculture support schemes, such as the basic payment scheme, easier for applicants and those who administer the schemes. The SR includes setting the minimum control rate for inspections at 1% for scheme applications, but gives the Department the flexibility to increase it should the error rate rise.

It was on that issue that the Committee received representation from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), as it had concerns about the reduction of inspections outlined in Part 7 of the regulations. The Committee received oral evidence from the RSPB and heard that the RSPB was of the view that more frequent and effective inspection would prevent environmental decline, such as decline in water quality. The RSPB stated that it was uncomfortable with the prospect of the bare minimum of inspection rates. We are glad that the RSPB raised the concerns because it allowed clarification from the Department. That meant that the RSPB and the Committee were content that the reductions referred to in the regulations will apply only to land eligibility.

Members also raised with the Department concerns about the unit entitlements for new entrants limited to 90 hectares. We were concerned that there was a danger that those changes could negatively impact on young farmers who are attempting to enter the agri-food business. The Department clarified that the reason behind the reduction in unit-size

entitlement was to bring it into line with the area that can be applied for under the young farmers' payment. It aligns the two to make them more workable and easier to administer, thereby making the process simpler. At its meeting on 4 February, the Committee agreed with the merits of the policies, and, at its meeting of 18 February, agreed that there would be no objection to that rule.

I will make some points in my capacity as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs. Sinn Féin welcomes the certainty that the regulation brings for this year, at least, especially with the impact of COVID on the sector and the negative implications of the hard Brexit imposed on them by the DUP and their Tory bedfellows. Sinn Féin welcomes the simplifications, such as the incorporation of the greening payment into the overall basic payment scheme and the reduction of inspections to 1%. Those simplifications make sense.

Anybody who represents a rural area will know that inspections have been the bane of the life of many farmers. They can result in the delay of the single farm payment being issued, particularly during the worst months of the year — the winter — when stock is in and there are additional costs, and, of course, Christmas. The decisions that have been made prove that the Department can be decisive when it wants to be. Sadly, however, that has not been the case for the Glenelly farmers, who have been waiting four years, and there is the same lack of progress from the Department on the TB strategy, the ammonia action plan, climate change legislation, a new rural policy and a new agriculture policy. I am sure that there are many other areas in which there has been a lack of progress and a lack of will to make progress.

I must also say that it is regrettable that the Minister has declined to meet the Committee. I read in the farming press that the Minister has been meeting stakeholders, assuring them that he will make decisions, yet, when the Committee requested to meet him to discuss his priorities, that request was turned down. It is good that he is here today, because it is an opportunity to see him face to face, an opportunity that we do not get in Committee.

In the shadow of Brexit and COVID, which are the two big threats to our farming and agri-food industry and rural communities, now is the time for maximal leadership and the pursuance of the maximal funding possible to support our hard-pressed rural communities, so it was really frustrating that, when the Finance Minister announced a number of weeks ago that £251.1



million of funding was available for allocation and specifically implored the AERA Minister to come forward with proposals, he did not. All we got were excuses that their need could not be identified and a fear that, had they got additional funding, they could not spend it by the end of the financial year. That, to me, was a lame excuse, particularly when all of the other Departments were bidding for funding and were in the same position as DAERA.

In that regard, I feel really strongly that the agricultural and rural communities have been let down by the Department on many of these issues, particularly that last one that I mentioned. I hope that the Minister and, indeed, his party reflect on that in the time ahead.

**Mr Irwin:** I declare an interest in the matter as a partner in a business that receives direct payments. This is an important motion, and the two pieces of Executive Committee business before the House today are important and necessary to ensure that we have a functional payment system to enable payments to be made in the coming year and to shape the future of direct payments going forward. The matter was discussed at some length in Committee a few weeks ago, when there was broad agreement that the matter should progress to the next stage, and I welcome the next step in the process today.

On the wider issue of payments in the future, there is an opportunity for meaningful change that can be taken with the very best interests of our agriculture industry and natural environment fully and firmly in mind. As I have said previously, farming and the environment very much go hand in hand, and one cannot realistically survive without the other. That is why support for farming and the environment is so vital. As we know, direct payments are worth around £293 million a year to the industry. That is of significant assistance, and, understandably, there has been much debate and insistence on the need for such payments to continue. Our agri-food industry is one of the most prized assets in Northern Ireland, securing many thousands of jobs across a great number of sectors. It is, of course, important that the industry is fully supported going forward to ensure the stability and full recovery of our economy post pandemic. The motion seeks to provide continuity for the industry in payments and processing, and farmers will see little difference in the procedure. No substantial policy changes are contained therein. For that reason, I support the motion.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for introducing the direct payment statutory rules

today. The SDLP is content to accept both statutory rules on direct payments to farmers but with some qualifications and reservations.

The statutory rules are necessary as a direct consequence of Brexit, and, without the rules, the legislation would not be in place to allow the operation of the existing direct payment scheme for farmers beyond the end of the 2020 scheme. However, to contextualise it, particularly with regard to the rural development funds, which have an impact on the wider rural community, as a result of Brexit, £34 million has been lost from previous available funding for rural development over the next three years. Simultaneously, we have the situation where £15.3 million over the next three years has been lost from the funding to support the bovine TB programme, which is crucial and underpins the functionality of rural communities, particularly farming communities and their ability move on.

The payments that we are talking about today are worth £293 million, as others have said, and have been the main income support schemes for farmers for many years. If they were to end suddenly, it would be a significant shock to the farming industry.

The fixed ceiling on payments, however, represents a decrease in income in real terms on a yearly basis due to inflation. This is a point for the Minister: we hear the Minister of Finance repeatedly request that Departments put forward bids. Is there any potential in the regulations for the Minister to add a supplementary bid for the funding that may be available? It might be helpful if the Minister would clarify that, as it could assist our rural communities.

### 12.30 pm

In Committee, I raised the issue of three unsuccessful applications to the young farmers' scheme. It might be helpful if the Minister looked at that. I ask for some clarity on it. Granted, it is understandable if there are three unsuccessful attempts and circumstances have not changed, but circumstances can and do change: the business may have additional farm acquisitions or whatever. What provision is there to allow for a change-of-circumstances application from the same individual or business party? It is important to clarify that. I am not talking about multiple repetitive applications to the same scheme with the same circumstances. It is, obviously, allowing for cases where circumstances do and can change.

The current level of funding has some guarantee attached, but, beyond the term of the current UK Parliament, there is no certainty over what will follow for the funding available for direct payments. Farmers, like most businesses, ask for certainty, and, rolling forward, we must make sure that there is a degree of certainty for the finance and funding that underpins the viability of their businesses. That is important for the food-producing and agri-food sector.

Farmers are also concerned that statutory rules are going through in the absence of a broader strategic framework for future agriculture support specifically for Northern Ireland. I have touched on some of them already. There is a need for a clear and explicit purpose for future agriculture funding that contributes to the delivery of wider strategic objectives for sustainable farming and land use within a sustainable environmental approach. When or if that will be forthcoming is not clear.

Even before circumstances dictated that the current Minister would be in place today, there had been significant slippage in the target dates for legislation and improved environmental strategies that should have been before the Assembly. I hope that we will see movement on those soon. The opportunity is there to use new and existing mechanisms of funding and regulation to combat the global crisis of climate change and ever-decreasing biodiversity. What is needed is imagination and the political will to do that. I hope that the Minister, while he is here, will demonstrate both those qualities in the time ahead, and, for the best of good reasons, I hope that that will be for a short time.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the amendments to the regulations. The regulations are the consequence of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the common agricultural policy. That is one of the most significant changes to agriculture policy for nearly 50 years. Policies will no longer have to comply with the common agricultural policy, which means that, eventually, Northern Ireland will be free to develop new approaches and support systems and build on the agri-food industry, which is already recognised as a world-class producer of food.

With that new approach, consideration will have to be given to environmental sustainability and improved resilience that address agriculture, the environment and rural needs. While the amendments to make the direct payments can be described as technical, if they are not in place, it will affect DAERA's ability to make direct payments to farmers and prevent its

effective function. Those payments are worth approximately £290 million per year to the industry. However, because the Department is constrained by the Treasury, the allocation will not change because the same method to calculate direct payments is used across the United Kingdom. While it will take time to develop policy for future payments, it is important that there is no impediment to payments that prevents simultaneous work towards a review to simplify the payments, which would be most welcome.

Some of the minor amendments to help with the direct payments include the removal of having to make the payments through the euro and the removal of non-specific dates, together with the intended simplification, for applicants and administrators, of the direct agricultural support schemes. There is also the removal of the greening payment and the money included in the basic farm payment. There is also a new minimum 1% inspection rate for scheme applications, but that can be increased, where necessary, by the Department. Finally, provision has been made to introduce a coupled payment in 2021 for protein crop payments.

I support the motion.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, your office, the Assembly secretariat and all officials for making possible remote access to Assembly debate following requests from me, my party colleague Kellie Armstrong and other Members. We are grateful for the work of officials in the interests of Members, staff and, of course, public health.

As a Member of the AERA Committee, I feel that it is imperative to stress from the outset the importance of the agri-food sector to the Northern Ireland economy. It represents around 10% of activity, which is considerably higher than the overall average of the rest of the UK. Furthermore, the profile of the agriculture sector and the associated industries in Northern Ireland varies considerably from those across the UK. The Northern Ireland industry, as colleagues will know, is built around quality rather than scale necessarily. Standards are fundamental and are a matter of pride to all stakeholders throughout the industry.

The United Kingdom's leaving the EU and the common agricultural policy is the most significant change in policy affecting the agri-food sector and agriculture in over 40 years. Environmental, food safety, animal welfare and labour issues are all now critical considerations

when developing new approaches and support systems that need to better address the needs of Northern Ireland agriculture, the environment and rural communities. There are also, as was mentioned, a broad range of farming and environmental stakeholders who deserve the opportunity to engage more fully in the development of future policy relating to the sector. In Northern Ireland, direct payments, as was pointed out, are worth over £293 million annually. Future payments need to support farming and rural communities while benefiting the sustainability and profitability of farming and, more crucially, the environment. It is my hope and that of many others that the natural environment and global challenges will feature more heavily and appropriately in future policy shaping. Maybe the Minister will reflect on that when he responds today. I further hope that the Minister will take an opportunity to address the Committee on that range of matters.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support what is before us to secure the continued passage of the regulations that are the subject of both motions.

**Mr Harvey:** We are used to having one John Blair; having eight today is certainly more interesting.

The direct payments to farmers regulations represent the much-needed continuation of the lifeline of support for the agriculture industry. I welcome the work done by the Department in bringing the regulations before the House today. The regulations will ensure that the relevant legislation is updated to ensure that farmers continue to receive support, thereby maintaining the status quo. The agriculture industry has experienced a turbulent year, like many other sectors, due to the impacts of COVID-19. The knock-on effects of the closure of hospitality and the difficulties being experienced because of the Northern Ireland protocol, to name but a few issues, have significantly impacted on the sector. It is therefore vital that farmers can be guaranteed the assistance given through the direct payments scheme. The regulations give that much-needed certainty and provide the necessary framework for the next scheme year.

The common agricultural policy accounted for 79% of the income of the industry in Northern Ireland between 2013 and 2019. Leaving the CAP allows us to chart a new course towards a support system that is tailored to the needs of the local industry and environment, unique to this jurisdiction and adaptable for the future. Last year, payments provided almost £300 million worth of support to the local agricultural

sector, a lifeline for many. As I stated, unlike CAP, the new scheme affords the opportunity for a flexible and bespoke approach to farming support. It is vital that the Department remember that for the future, that the scope and framework of the scheme are regularly reviewed and that the industry is allowed to play a direct part in this. We must use our new-found adaptability to our advantage.

The Minister recently set out his vision for the future. I welcome the direction of travel that he has outlined. A basic area-based payment that provides a safety net but still encourages productivity, the funding of coupled payments to directly target areas such as suckler cow and new breeder cow producers and the new agri-environment programme will all work together to incentivise growth and ensure that sustainability is at the heart of agriculture for the years ahead. I welcome the removal of the 3% limit on the increase of the basic payment scheme, which will also provide greater flexibility within the budget allocation. I am also glad to see the retention of the ban on the ploughing or conversion of environmentally sensitive permanent grassland and the increased penalties for breaches of those prohibitions. That sends out a clear message about the importance that the Department places on environmental protections.

Leaving the CAP allows us to remove many of the constraints placed on our environmental programmes. I look forward to the progression of further changes in this area. The changes provided for will give legal effect to a range of simplifications and improvements announced for the 2021 scheme year by the Minister in September. I support both motions.

**Ms Sheerin:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations and the Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations. I support them, as they remove a barrier to continued direct payments beyond 2020. At the outset, we must acknowledge that the SRs offer nothing more than short-term breathing space. They allow the single farm payment to continue but offer absolutely no assurance to our local farmers about what they can expect to earn going forward, given that we have now been dragged out of the EU against the expressed wishes of the majority of the population in the North.

As already outlined, EU-funded direct payments are currently worth over £293 million to our agricultural producers in the North. Every year, EU payments constitute 87% of our farmers' income. When those in our farming community

told us loudly and clearly that Brexit would be bad for agriculture, they were not exaggerating. The Tories have promised that direct payments will continue until the end of the current mandate, but you will forgive our local farmers for not relaxing on the basis of the word of the British Government alone. The British Government's inability to keep their word is something that, I know, my colleagues across the Benches are acutely aware of.

Uncertainty and confusion are the common themes amongst our rural populations. Remember that this does affect not just the people lambing sheep or planting potatoes but those in our farming community who support the machinery dealers, the scanning, clipping and fencing contractors, the vets, the family businesses that put up sheds and concrete yards and the small agri-shops that sell lime, fertiliser, diesel and feed.

When we are on the subject of single farm payment, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the double blow that was dealt to our mountain farmers in the wake of the Brexit decision. Minister, this time last year, your Department failed in its obligation to rural communities when your predecessor refused to acknowledge the will of the House and overturn your party colleague's decision to stop areas of natural constraint (ANC) funding to hill farmers.

Not only did you overturn the decision made by my colleague Michelle O'Neill to recognise the additional challenges faced by hill farmers and to compensate them accordingly but you put an end to the transition towards a flat rate, which she had implemented in a bid to create equality between all farmers, ensuring that hill farmers were no longer punished for poor soil quality. Unlike those who might avail themselves of the protein crop payment that you have referred to, mountain farmers do not have a range of choices for their land. What you and successive DUP Ministers have failed to understand is that hill farming without the ANC element and without an increased entitlement value is not viable. That is driving livestock off, instead of encouraging it on to, our hills.

#### 12.45 pm

We need to get money into the pockets of our hard-pressed farmers. Encouraging closed stocks and allowing our farmers to rear lambs and calves from birth ensure traceability and reduce the risk of disease. To act as though the old model was production-based ignores the vital contribution that hill farmers make towards our local food chain. As someone who has

grown up in a farming family and has seen at first hand the energy and effort that a farm consumes, I call this nothing short of an insult. Farming is a labour of love, without which none would survive.

At a time when we are turning towards an all-Ireland economy and when the sensible option for producer and consumer alike is to trade within the country — to go up or down the road instead of crossing the water — it makes absolutely no sense that farmers in the North will now be at a disadvantage because their counterparts in the Twenty-six Counties can still avail themselves of common agricultural policy funding but they cannot. My uncles in Donegal can get it, but my dad in Tyrone cannot.

Another group who are losing out as a result of Brexit and who have been failed by your Department, Minister, are the Lough Neagh fishing community. Despite repeated promises from as far back as last September, when your predecessor, Edwin Poots, in written format and in the Chamber, told me that they would receive the COVID-19 compensation package that they were promised and that other producers received, the fishing operators in Lough Neagh are still without that support. We are a year into the pandemic, Minister, and that is not acceptable. I welcome the regulations, and I hope for a change in attitude from the Agriculture Department so that we see money going back into rural communities.

**Mr McGuigan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the debate today on the SRs, the first of which is on direct payments to farmers. As a result of Brexit, the North is, obviously, now out of the common agricultural policy. The Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations will ensure the delivery of direct agricultural payments to farmers in 2021. I sit on the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, and that SR was considered on 4 February. As others have said, the Committee was more or less content with the policy. The SR maintains the status quo, and the amendments introduced are merely technical in nature. It outlines how DAERA will continue to determine the annual financial ceiling and calculate payments beyond 2021. It will not be set in legislation, which means that we will have to align with Treasury's allocation. There are no policy changes in the SR, and farmers should not see any changes as a result.

The second SR on the simplifications was considered by the Committee, again on 4 February. It makes simplifications, changes and improvements to direct agricultural payment

schemes for the incoming year in a number of ways. It removes greening requirements and maintains the ban on ploughing or conversion of environmentally sensitive permanent grassland. The basic payment scheme land eligibility inspection rate is now set at 1%. The development of future schemes, among other things, will be the responsibility of DAERA and not DEFRA.

As has been outlined, concerns were raised about the reduction in inspections to 1%. DAERA officials addressed those concerns and stated that the proposed reduction will apply only to land eligibility and not to cross-compliance measures. It was explained that, due to COVID, inspection rates had to be reduced to 1% for basic payment schemes and 3% for greening payments, and that, due to greening requirements being removed, only 1% of inspections for the basic payment scheme will be carried forward for the incoming year. Officials told us that that provides adequate control after conducting assessments.

Sinn Féin will support both SRs. However, we note that that cover is for the incoming year only. We will have an annual budget, not the seven-year multi-annual budget framework that we previously had under pillars 1 and 2 of the common agricultural policy. Whilst there is a commitment in the Tory Government manifesto to retain the direct agricultural payment until the end of the British Parliament, there are no guarantees after that date. As has been pointed out by others, given that the British Government have appealed the fixed-term Parliament, we do not know what the situation will be beyond 2022. Our farmers and rural communities will undoubtedly face major uncertainty.

Our neighbours in the South remain in the common agricultural policy. As has been said, that could lead to an uneven playing field on this island and pose problems for farmers in the North's ability to compete with farmers across the island. Although I support the SRs, our farmers have hanging over them major issues and concerns, which we will no doubt be raising in the Chamber in the future.

**Ms Bailey:** We have been repeatedly assured that the SRs are mainly technical amendments to how direct payments were previously administered. For that reason, we will be supporting them today. The Green Party broadly welcomes the simplifications, because we welcome the ability for payments to continue into 2021, thus providing that limited certainty for farmers.

It is important that minor simplifications do not become characteristic of the change that we make to our system of agriculture payments as we leave the EU's common agricultural policy. Instead, they must form part of a transition period of continuing towards delivering better outcomes for nature and land use and for the wider farming sector through nature-friendly farming models. As it stands, England is working on its new system of direct payments. It is using public money for a public-goods model that does not automatically extend to Northern Ireland. Scotland and Wales are working on their own bespoke primary legislation for 2024. At EU level, the CAP is being reformed. Is Northern Ireland therefore being left behind? As we know, despite clear support from the AERA Committee at the time for such a provision, no sunset clause for Northern Ireland was included in the UK Agriculture Act 2020. Without the legal obligation to introduce a bespoke agriculture Bill for Northern Ireland, change will be slow in coming. We are in a situation in which no such legislation seems to be forthcoming, and there has been no indication that it will ever come. For all we know, the simplification regime will simply continue indefinitely. What we need is for the simplification payments to be part of a time-limited transition period until we can get our own legislation in place for farmers. It is essential to provide that certainty for farmers and the agri-food sector at large.

I therefore call on the Minister to make the creation of Northern Ireland's own agriculture Act a priority. There can be no doubt that the future of agriculture policy is at a crossroads. Our system is at breaking point. On the one hand, we see an industry that has become increasingly hostile to those at its heart. Rural poverty is at an all-time high, and one in four farming families lives in poverty. On the other hand, we see our natural ecosystems in a state of collapse and government policies of agricultural intensification that have led to 98% of our special areas of conservation (SACs) exceeding their critical thresholds for ammonia pollution. We have no air pollution strategy either. Some 95% of our lakes fail water framework directive quality standards. At the same time, our agriculture sector is the sector that is the biggest contributor to our total greenhouse gas emissions. As was already mentioned, I do not think that our track record on environmental sustainability is really there.

As tricky as it is, the issue of climate change is one that must be addressed. We need to work out a transition plan for rural communities, as well as for the rest of us. The writing has been on the wall about climate change for all of this

time, and it cannot be ignored. Business as usual is not an option. We keep hearing about plans from the Minister and the Department for the new green growth strategy, which is a strategy that is based on more productivity. We have not had sight of it to date, however, so we have not seen the detail. We must move forward with a Northern Ireland agriculture Act, using the public-money-for-public-good model that puts nature and farmers at its heart.

Any future system must address farm poverty, support small farmers, and improve the status of farmers in the value chain, while mitigating the effects of climate change, improving water and air quality, and protecting and enhancing biodiversity. The Green Party does not believe that to be ridiculous or impossible. We will do all we can to make what some may believe to be impossible very possible.

We will support the SRs.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank all Members who contributed. Together, these are important statutory rules that will ensure the continued smooth delivery of direct agricultural support to farmers. I welcome the support of the Committee, and, it appears, of the Chamber, for the regulations. That, as was noted, is essential. I thank the Chairman of the Committee for acknowledging that, for rehearsing the view of the Committee and for putting it on the record.

We did, though, get to his own party-political contribution — a very party-political contribution. I want to speak to a few of the issues that he raised. He mentioned a number of strategies and frameworks that he is looking for clarification on. We had talk of climate change, ammonia, rural frameworks and TB. Those are all progressing. I hope to have more information with the Committee soon in relation to what the Department is doing.

He mentioned the lack of action so far on TB. That is something that I am pushing in my short time in office. It is my expectation that something will happen and that we will see interventions this year. I hope that that will be welcomed, although I remind the Member that, from 2007 to 2016, it was his party that held the post that I am currently in. Where was the progress during that time? Where was the progress during the three years when there was no Assembly, when it was his party that kept the Assembly down, preventing us from taking action —

**Mr McAleer:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** — in a second — not only on TB but on issues across many Departments? I do not want to test the patience of the Speaker too much on this, but I am happy to give way to the Member.

**Mr McAleer:** On the topic of TB, does the Member accept that it was the wide-ranging test and vaccinate or remove study implemented by the former DARD Minister Michelle O'Neill that will, in fact, underpin whatever interventions he, finally, puts in place to tackle this issue?

**Mr Lyons:** Of course, we will be looking at all those options, and I hope, as I said, that an intervention will take place this year. There has not been the movement that we would have liked on this over the past number of years, and I am glad that because of work that my predecessor did, and the work that I am doing, on this issue, that it can be moved on.

I thank Members for their comments. Mr Irwin outlined why we need to have the regulations in place and their importance. I thank him, and Mrs Barton, for welcoming the fact that we now have opportunities, as a result of leaving the EU, to tailor support and no longer have to find our way into the one-size-fits-all model from the EU. We can now tailor support to our own needs here in Northern Ireland.

Mr McGlone raised concerns about unsuccessful applications and the limit of three application attempts. It is the case that they will be able to make a number of applications. If circumstances change, they can apply again and still have three attempts. However, if difficulties are to be identified through the implementation of this revised approach, we can look at that again in the coming years.

The evidence that we have is that it will affect a relatively small number of people, if any. It is important that we have the ability to make changes if necessary, but it is good that the changes and rules are put in place.

**1.00 pm**

Mr McGlone also mentioned certainty for the future and the supposed certainty that, he felt, he had in the European Union. Of course, that certainty did not exist. There were limits to the support and the time frame. Nothing was guaranteed beyond 2023. Now, we have the power to support farmers in the way in which we want and desire. That should be welcomed.

Mr Blair raised questions about what future support might look like: again, that is now in our

hands. As Minister Poots outlined in his statement to the Assembly in November, we want to progress, taking into consideration a number of issues. We want to increase productivity, see improved resilience, see a more integrated supply chain and be environmentally sustainable. Those are the issues on which we will build our future support and policy as we move forward in the coming months and years.

Ms Sheerin raised concerns about areas of natural constraint. I confirm to the Member that I have no plans to reintroduce an ANC measure. It is an old CAP measure that has little to offer in moving the industry forward. We need to look to the future rather than try to recreate the past. That is my position and that of my predecessor.

**Ms Sheerin:** Will the Minister take an intervention?

**Mr Lyons:** I am happy to give way in a second. That is our position moving forward. I hope that it is understood that we need to change how we provide that support in the future to put it where it is needed and to make it available to all farmers. I will give way.

**Ms Sheerin:** The Minister said that it was not wanted by a majority, but a majority in the House supported a motion on the ANC payment just last year, during this mandate. It might be the DUP's view that the ANC payment does not work, but that view is at odds with the view of the rest of the Assembly.

**Mr Lyons:** I am not surprised that we are on different sides on the issue; I do not think that that will change today. I note the Member's comments, but, certainly, in my engagement with farmers and stakeholders, that is not what, I am told, is the way forward. It is not what people want to see being progressed. Instead, we should focus our efforts on devising schemes and support measures that are for the good of all farmers.

I think that those were all the comments that related directly to the regulations that are in front of us. Given the importance of the issue, as I have set out, I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

### **Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

**Mr Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).]*

**Mr Speaker:** Members may take their ease for a moment or two.

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

## Assembly Business

**Mr Butler:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will know that the right to vote is a democratic right that is cherished and protected across the world and here in Northern Ireland. That right to vote is protected in legislation, as are the mechanisms to facilitate it and the absolute need to ensure that the register of voters is as up to date and accurate as possible.

Last week, Sinn Féin, a party in the Assembly that is led by the deputy First Minister, produced what I can describe only as a package of misinformation and fake news on the updating of the register that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will soon embark on. Surely, it is incumbent on each of us, as elected representatives of the Assembly, and our parties to uphold the democratic process, accuracy, openness and transparency, and I ask the Speaker's Office to investigate and rule on the matter.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member should be aware that that is not a point of order, but he has put his points on the record.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, will the Speaker's Office look at how Members use points of order? Some Members use them to issue press releases and snapshots for the evening's news.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Your comments are on the record and are valid. They should be investigated, and I am sure that that will be drawn to the Speaker's attention.

## Private Members' Business

### Recovery and Investment Strategy

**Ms McLaughlin:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises the deep and lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and businesses across Northern Ireland; further recognises the severe impact that restrictions have had on our society and economy and the devastating impact that the conclusion of the furlough scheme will have on jobs; regrets that the Minister for the Economy and Minister of Finance have failed to produce a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery plan prioritising employment and efforts to build back better; expresses concern that the Minister for the Economy has failed to outline a strategy for maximising the potential for job creation and growth as a result of dual market access guaranteed under the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and calls on both Ministers to work with their Executive colleagues to establish a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

**Ms McLaughlin:** The Assembly has a choice: we can moan about the situation that we face, or we can get on with it and fix it. The SDLP has always focused on solutions. We are proud of that, and, my, does Northern Ireland need solutions today? This is not just about COVID. We have other major challenges. We have Brexit, and we have climate change. We can spend our time arguing about whose fault it is, or we can devise solutions. In doing so, we have the opportunity to begin to solve the deep-seated problems in our society.

Perhaps the biggest problem of all is inequality. That inequality has been manifest throughout the pandemic. COVID-19 has not hit people equally. Those who are poor, those who live in overcrowded accommodation, those who do not have access to private healthcare, those who work in the National Health Service and the caring professions, those who work in low-paid service jobs and those whose neighbourhoods have air quality that is blighted by traffic and



solid-fuel burning are, along with the old, the most likely to become seriously ill with COVID-19 and to die. The crisis of COVID-19 is also a crisis of inequality, and, of course, the SDLP was founded to address inequality in our society.

As we look to build back better, it is essential that we correct the deep-seated inequalities in Northern Ireland. If we just let market forces do the work, we will not achieve a better and fairer society. About one in five workers who have been on furlough for the past six months or more are expected to lose their jobs. Last year, 11,000 intended redundancies were notified by employers. The situation is likely to worsen this year and will affect, in particular, our young adults, the lowest paid, those on zero-hours contracts and others who have the weakest positions in the labour market. That is particularly true for those without the strong skills that are valued most by employers. For generations, our labour market has struggled with insufficient skills and has delivered productivity levels that are the worst in the UK. If we are to have an effective recovery from COVID, it is essential that we raise skill levels across our working-age population.

The solution must start in our schools, and we must address inefficiencies and inadequate provisions in our further and higher education colleges. The COVID recovery plan must involve all our Departments and break down the silo system of government that prevails in the Executive.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms McLaughlin:** Sorry. No time.

It would be wrong to try to just recreate the structure of the economy that we had before the pandemic. When we talk about building back better, we need to take that literally and not just metaphorically. Prior to the pandemic, we had a crisis in our high streets, towns and city centres. Our retail centres must be centres of leisure activity, and we need to invest more in our streetscapes and green spaces and make city and town centres easy places to walk around, with less crowded pavements, and allow cafes and restaurants to expand and spill outside. They need to be recaptured as places for people and not be dominated by cars.

Central to the Economy Minister's approach is the circulated paper, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', which includes a section on a more regionally balanced economy. It talks about how to bring rural areas up to the level of urban areas, yet the biggest challenge of all is how we

bring the weakest urban areas up to the level of the strongest urban areas. If you look at the map of deprivation and joblessness across the North, you will see clearly where the biggest problems of regional imbalance are. They are in Derry and Strabane and in west and north Belfast. The apparent failure of the Economy and Finance Ministers to recognise that reality shows a real lack of perspective behind the decision-making process when considering how to build back better.

Talking about a lack of perspective brings me to the protocol. No one dislikes or opposes Brexit more than me, but even I can see that the Brexit protocol provides the North with new opportunities that we must grasp *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I recognise that, sadly, some are so blinded by their narrow ideology that they would prefer to suffer than use the opportunities that they have. That is not the attitude of the SDLP. My colleague Matthew O'Toole and I have written to the Economy Minister to urge her to fully exploit the advantages that we have as a result of the protocol while, of course, working pragmatically to reduce *[Interruption]* —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order, Members.

**Ms McLaughlin:** — the difficulties caused by Brexit to east-west trade.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. Please take your seat.

**Ms McLaughlin:** OK.

**1.15 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Members, we are at the start of the debate. You will all have the opportunity to give your point of view. If you wish to intervene, you may ask to do so. If the Member agrees, your intervention will be permitted. Other than that, wait until it is your turn. There is too much noise from Members in a sedentary position. I call the Member who spoke last.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My colleague Matthew O'Toole and I have written to the Economy Minister to urge her to exploit fully the advantages that we now have as a result of the protocol, while, of course, working pragmatically to reduce the

difficulties in east-west trade that Brexit has caused. We also wrote to InterTradeIreland, the Industrial Development Authority (IDA), Invest NI and the Department for International Trade to urge them to exploit the opportunities presented by the protocol. I pay tribute to Invest NI — not something that I will say very often. I have criticised that organisation on many occasions because of its lack of regional balance, but I have no criticism of it with regard to the protocol. I would like to quote from Invest NI. I realise that this will be difficult for some to hear, but this is what it said:

*"This dual market access position means that Northern Ireland can become a gateway for the sale of goods to two of the world's largest markets and the only place where businesses can operate free from customs declarations, rules of origin certificates and non-tariff barriers on the sale of goods to both GB and the EU.*

*This is a unique proposition for manufacturers based in Northern Ireland as well as those seeking a pivotal location from which to service GB and EU markets, recalibrate supply chains, or design, develop and sell products across key industries such as life & health sciences, aerospace, electronics & machinery, chemicals, consumer and agri-food goods."*

I totally concur. However, I would have added renewable energies to help the producers who are reliant on it.

That brings us to the other problem that has been inflicted upon us: climate change and the necessity to decarbonise our economy. Imagine a place with lots of hills on which wind turbines can generate massive amounts of electricity. Imagine a place with lots of coastline that provides the opportunity for tidal strength to be converted into electricity. Imagine a place that is internationally recognised as having substantial levels of geothermal heat that can be used to heat buildings. That place, Members, is Northern Ireland. However, imagine a place where four of 10 homes are occupied by people in fuel poverty and where hundreds of thousands of homes are leaking heat because the properties are in serious need of major improvements to their energy efficiency. This represents a massive challenge to our ability to move to 100% net zero by 2050. These facts make the case for a green new deal, which is a core part of my party's policies.

Let us put the pieces together: improving our city and town centres, giving them new purpose with more urban living, leisure facilities and

green spaces; creating a substantial number of jobs in the construction industry; reskilling our workforce to equip those out of work and those not yet in work for the next generation of jobs; investing in infrastructure, including public transport, water supplies and sewerage; accelerating broadband roll-out; exploiting the Brexit protocol to attract inward investment and support local businesses to make good in the best of both worlds; helping local producers to supply to local retailers; tackling the regional imbalance, which requires Invest NI to promote jobs across the North, particularly in areas with the highest unemployment rates, such as Derry; delivering more and spreading more fairly; higher education places and skills training —

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

**Ms McLaughlin:** — decarbonising the economy; supporting the roll-out of heat pumps; promoting hydrogen; implementing a green new deal; and creating a more equal society. Once you put these elements together —

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

**Ms McLaughlin:** — you genuinely have a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy —

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

**Ms McLaughlin:** — unlike the weak proposals put forward by the Minister for the Economy [*Inaudible.*]

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order, the Member's time is up.

**Dr Archibald:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "will have on jobs;" and insert:*

*"agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis."*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** You will have 10 minutes to move the amendment and five

minutes to make a winding-up speech. I invite you to formally introduce your amendment.

**Dr Archibald:** I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to today's debate and to move our amendment, which was tabled in the spirit of recognising the need for a collective approach from the Executive to the recovery from COVID-19.

We face many challenges in the weeks and months ahead as — hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, if we continue on the right track — restrictions begin to ease and society begins to reopen. It has been a devastating year, and everyone here will recognise that, first and foremost, it has had a devastating human cost, with many people losing loved ones and others suffering serious and long-lasting health impacts. It has also had a huge negative impact on our way of life and on livelihoods. Businesses have had to close and some people's jobs have disappeared overnight, while tens of thousands of people remain on furlough and uncertain about their future.

Certainly, the interventions from the British Government and the Executive have been vital in mitigating the worst impacts and in helping businesses to survive and protect jobs. However, despite all the interventions, there remain those who have been excluded from support schemes to date, which needs to be addressed. There remains £250 million of funding, which can be allocated to support businesses and protect jobs, but there has been a frustrating lack of any new schemes coming forward. I ask the Economy Minister to look at that again, including for those self-employed people who fall between the self-employment income support scheme and the newly self-employed scheme, for travel agents who have been very badly impacted and need particular supports and for the events sector, which has not had any specific support either. While there is money available, it should be utilised to help as many businesses and workers as possible.

The Finance Minister —.

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Archibald:** Very quickly.

**Mr Stalford:** I will be very brief. In the previous debate on the economy, the lady from Foyle thought it very funny for me to point out the massive debt that the Government are running up. The Minister has revealed that every week of lockdown is costing the Northern Ireland

economy £100 million. Would the Member like to talk to that?

**Dr Archibald:** I am not sure if you are referring to me; I am not from Foyle.

**Mr Stalford:** No, I am not. *[Laughter.]* No, I am not.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order.

**Dr Archibald:** We have seen massive state intervention from Governments around the world, which shows the strength and importance of doing something like that. That is something that we need to look at. What we want to see is continued economic and fiscal stimulus to support businesses and to get our recovery, particularly our economy recovery, on track.

All of us recognise the importance of the furlough scheme and the need for it to be extended further to continue to support businesses, particularly those most impacted and those that will not return to anything like normal operations for some time. Another possible cliff edge and lastminute.com announcement will not be helpful to any business that is trying to plan and to support its workers. The ongoing cost to businesses that have not been able to open for the past year is something that the British Treasury needs to look at again in respect of the furlough scheme.

The pandemic has lasted longer than many of us originally thought that it would, which has resulted in longer restrictions, and there has been a need for mitigations rather than stimuli for recovery. It is clear that that will continue for some time, but there is a need to plan for the way forward to ensure that we are ready to boost our recovery once we are through the worst of this and do not simply return to what we were doing before, because, let us face it, it was not working too well anyway; we have a very poor economic scorecard, and that needs to change.

We also need to respond to the new trading reality that has resulted from Brexit. Our businesses and our communities need to be supported to deal with the challenges posed by Brexit and to build on the protections afforded by the protocol and the continuing access to the EU's single market. We need to see collective leadership to find solutions within the arrangements of the protocol and to support businesses that, because of Brexit, have greater challenges. That includes support to

reorientate supply chains and markets across the island of Ireland.

Recovery from COVID-19, even the economic recovery, will not fall to one Department to deliver. There will need to be an Executive strategy with buy-in from all Ministers. We need to work to tackle deprivation and break down barriers to education and employment. We need to ensure that our recovery from COVID-19 seriously addresses the threats from the climate and biodiversity crises. We need to have a holistic approach that cuts across all Departments in order to deliver a jobs-led recovery. We need skills and employability programmes and entrepreneur supports that build on the new ways of working that we have had to adopt and that we accept being accelerated throughout the pandemic. We need to create a more regionally balanced economy, in which our towns, villages and cities are more suited to contemporary working, living and socialising, with infrastructure to support modern living, which is increasingly digital and online. We need a transport network that meets the needs of our rural and urban communities and that delivers on our decarbonisation targets. None of those things will be done in isolation. That is why our amendment calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy.

The pandemic has shone a bright light on many inequalities and structural problems, and particularly on the importance of our public services, which have been decimated by a decade of Tory austerity. It has also highlighted the real essential workers, and we need to remember that as we plan the way forward. Sinn Féin published its economic recovery strategy back in June last year. It is based on four key principles: supporting workers and their families, including through ensuring that we deliver on the protections for workers committed to in New Decade, New Approach; supporting businesses to create and sustain jobs through skills programmes, start-up supports and the infrastructure to support local recovery across the North; delivering on a just transition to a net zero-carbon society, because, as we move away from a reliance on fossil fuels, we need to ensure that those who can afford it least are not left to foot the bill; and, finally, giving the Executive the financial tools to deliver on recovery, because being at the whim of a Tory Chancellor who delivers funding for COVID supports in dribs and drabs and who failed to live up to the commitment to have multi-annual Budgets is not the way in which to plan for economic recovery.

There needs to be a real conversation about the financial and borrowing tools that the Executive need to be able to deliver on economic recovery. Those four principles are the basis of a strategy that should be delivered across the Executive: a strategy that aligns our Programme for Government with all Ministers and all Departments working to deliver on their important roles within it. That is the approach that is envisaged through the outcomes-based Programme for Government, which is focused on indicators that do not fall neatly into departmental boxes. It is about adopting an approach that breaks down departmental silos and ensures better outcomes for all our citizens.

All the Executive parties need to pull their weight. They need to show that they are serious about collective leadership and responsibility by contributing to the development of the recovery strategy and then driving it forward. "Building back better" cannot be just an aspiration or a slogan. It needs to be delivered on, and that means having a strategy that is not just a document on a shelf but the active work of the Programme of Government for all Ministers and all Departments.

**Mr Stalford:** We will not be supporting the motion, but we will support the amendment. Everyone recognises the serious impact that lockdown measures have had, not only at an economic level but at a societal level. As I said earlier in my intervention to the Chair of the Economy Committee, the pandemic is costing the Northern Ireland economy £100 million a week. We have seen projections that show that up to 100,000 jobs are likely to be lost in Northern Ireland.

In that context, it is well and good to table motions demanding recovery plans and greater action from one or two Ministers, but you cannot at the same time, day in and day out, week in and week out, appear in the media to demand that lockdown continue. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot lambast the Education Minister every time that he is in the Chamber for daring to suggest the reopening of schools. You cannot appear in the media and in the press opposing even a hint of the slightest easing of lockdown and then bring such motions such to the Assembly.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** I am happy to, if I get an extra minute. Do I get an extra minute if I give way, Mr Deputy Speaker?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** If there is an intervention, yes.

**Mr Stalford:** Knock yourself out. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr O'Toole:** I will leave that to you. The Member's argument seems to be that there is this binary between locking down and magically opening up the economy. Every independent economic forecaster or serious analyst around the world does not accept that binary. We cannot simply open up the economy when the virus is still rampant. That would do more economic damage. The real thing that we should be doing is vaccinating as many people as possible in order to drive the infection down, because that is the way to economic recovery.

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

**1.30 pm**

**Mr Stalford:** I gave way, but I will not take the entire minute. I am not suggesting that for a second but I am pointing out that Northern Ireland is one of the most locked-down places in the world with regard to controlling access to education, closing off huge swathes of our economy and all the resultant trouble that will come from that.

It is important that we do everything in our power to get the economy opened up as quickly as possible within the public health constraints. I have noticed that, when that is hinted at or suggested, certain parties run to the TV studios to rubbish the suggestion. The same ones demanding almost eternal lockdown will be the ones tabling motions like this and singling out the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance. People see that as quite cynical behaviour; they see straight through it. The economy is everything because it pays for all of the public sector; it pays for all of the services that we want to provide for our constituents. It is only through having a strong and thriving economy that we can pay for roads, hospitals and schools. Therefore, we must be cognisant of that fact. Yes, of course, health is important, but the economy is equally important.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** Yes, go ahead.

**Mr Storey:** Does the Member accept that the parties opposite want a continual drip-feeding from the Chancellor without any recognition of where real money comes from?

**Mr Stalford:** That is the point. These debts will have to be paid back. It is not real money; it is borrowed money. We need to be cognisant of that.

As for the benefits of the protocol mentioned in the motion, they are as illusory as the concept of European Union flexibility. There are no benefits to the protocol. It adds costs to customers and businesses and makes it harder to operate a business in this part of the world. Among those who argued for it, I noticed that the tone has now changed. Gone is the "rigorous implementation of the protocol", as the consequence of what they campaigned for has become increasingly obvious to businesses and consumers. "Rigorous implementation" has been changed to "teething problems". They are not teething problems. It is what the protocol was designed to do. It was designed to punish the people of Northern Ireland as they tried to purchase goods or operate a business.

Indeed, I recall that, in a previous debate, my colleague Mr O'Toole thanked the EU for giving us the protocol. Thank you for making it harder for my constituents to purchase goods. Thank you for making it more expensive to run a business. Thank you for your benign attitude towards us. The vaccine debacle demonstrated to all of us just how benign and decent the view of the European Union is towards Northern Ireland. We are nothing more than a plaything for it to use to get back at the rest of the United Kingdom for voting to leave. The proposer of the motion said that the solution must begin in schools. I agree.

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

**Mr Stalford:** I will. That is why schools should not remain closed for ever. As quickly as we can get schools and institutions of learning open, the better for everyone.

**Mr Stewart:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not expecting to get in so soon. I want to thank the proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment. There was a similar motion in October. Unfortunately, things have not moved on much since. We are still in lockdown, businesses are still under pressure, and the economy is suffering as a result. I share the frustrations that, to date, there has been a lack of a clear economic pathway and I also share the need for an ambitious, innovative and cross-cutting economic strategy. I recognise the need for the entire Executive to play a role in that. We should all be concerned about the impact of furlough ending. No one

should be under any illusions about the impact of ending it too soon, even in a targeted way.

That said, it is important to recognise the huge levels of government intervention, from Her Majesty's Treasury and the Executive, that have helped to shore up businesses and provided a safety net for workers. We can only imagine the true and horrific impact without that. Thankfully, there is light at the end of the tunnel. An excellent vaccination programme is being rolled out, as we have been discussing, and, hopefully, we will come out of lockdown and start to see economic recovery very soon.

The Department for the Economy is working through the 'Rebuilding a Strong Economy' document, which was published in June 2020. The Minister will know that I was somewhat critical of that because, in the medium-term recovery strategy that it intends to address, there were the same three cornerstones that every economic strategy has ever had, which are: creating highly paid jobs; developing a highly skilled and agile workforce; and rebalancing the regional economy. I do not think that anybody could be against any of those things, and I think that was aspirational, but I could never understand how that could fit into a 12- to 18-month strategy. It was almost unachievable that we would ever have got to that stage.

We eagerly await the publication of the Northern Ireland economic recovery plan, and we understand from last week that there is a bid of £160 million for that, but I hope that it includes recognition of our microbusiness and small business sectors, which make up over 90% of our economy. I also hope that it recognises the need to grow our social economy through social enterprise acts, potentially looking at a Northern Ireland-first public procurement process, a focus on skills and jobs and an ambitious attempt to promote and grow our fintech and green energy sectors and to regenerate town centres, which have been under major pressure since well before the pandemic broke out.

We often say that Governments do not create jobs but businesses do when given the right conditions. The Job Start scheme was launched here briefly, which was a reincarnation of the Kickstart scheme that was launched by Westminster. I find it almost impossible to believe that, just three months after it was launched and tinkered with by the Department for Communities, it has now been binned. Young people who have returned from studying in GB or the Republic of Ireland and want to get into an apprenticeship or a paid internship are

now being told that that scheme is no longer available. How can we say that we want to invest in our most important asset — our people — and throw them a lifeline and then take it away just when the opportunity is about to begin.

Businesses and dozens of young people who were meant to start that scheme have been in touch with me to say that they are completely disgusted that it has been removed for the sake of £16 million. I am sending a message to the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance to refund that scheme and get it back up and running. We talk about our young people being our most important asset, and I cannot, for the life of me, understand why that scheme has been withdrawn for the sake of £16 million. The opportunities that it would create, specifically in the sectors in which it was meant to work, would be absolutely massive. We talk about the brain drain here and the impacts of that, and many young people are leaving, but that scheme was there to target exactly that. I would love to see that as a cross-cutting strategy in the Executive.

Finally, the motion refers to the benefits of the protocol. I want to see the Department focusing on the impacts right now of the protocol rather than aspirational job creation, if that is something that others think might happen. Right now, businesses in my constituency are massively under the cosh. They cannot get goods in, they are struggling with their logistics, and they are paying more than double in tariffs. So, I encourage the Minister to set up a designated point in her Department to catalogue the hundreds of issues that businesses here are raising to try to work towards solutions —

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

**Mr Stewart:** — because those are the businesses that are operating right now, and they need solutions as quickly as possible.

**Mr Dickson:** As Members will be very much aware, for nearly a year now, I have been pressing the Economy Minister to deal with many of the issues in today's debate. It is very clear that our world economy has been severely battered by COVID-19. Lives have changed immeasurably and businesses have been severely restricted and, indeed, closed as we try to tackle infections and save lives.

It is very clear that the impact of the pandemic will be with us for many years to come. The

past few months have been amongst the toughest of the pandemic, but with the mass roll-out of vaccines, which others have referred to, there is more reason for optimism and, hopefully, a glimmer of light on the horizon.

As we move, we hope, out of the pandemic, we clearly will need an Executive-wide recovery strategy. Some say, "Build back better", but I say, "We need to build forward better." Going back to the old ways is not the solution. We need to tackle structural weaknesses and to build on our strengths. Unfortunately, that does not always seem to be recognised by the Departments that are supposed to take a lead on economic development. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of our Government is the stubborn silo mentality of Departments and Ministers. They are reluctant to work together, and there is a lack of communication. If we cannot have cross-departmental plans to navigate our recovery, truthfully, we are wasting valuable time and money and squandering our opportunities and those of future people by simply drifting and reacting to events in real time.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** No, I want to get through. Thank you.

For example, the Minister for the Economy has rolled out numerous and very welcome programmes for skills and apprenticeship recovery and made additional funding available for higher and further education. We have had our differences, but I place on record that the Minister has done a job of work to tackle those issues. However, that work does not relate strategically to the work that is being carried out by the Department for Communities on supporting people in employment. In reality, the two are not on the same page; indeed, one wonders sometimes whether they are even reading the same book.

The Department for Communities also demonstrates a lack of urgency to cooperate with the Department for the Economy, particularly on the launch of the Job Start scheme, which reference has been made to. Its equivalent in GB launched on 2 September. Where is it? We have to have an answer to that. I understand that this is an emergency the like of which we have never seen before, but if we continue to simply react without a plan or planning, we will miss the opportunity to maximise the impact of spending and cross-departmental working.

The drift needs to stop. As noted in the motion, the job retention scheme will eventually end. We know that it will end, in theory, in April, but many of us hope that it will continue as the vaccine programme starts to build back resilience in the community. Thousands of people may not return to roles that they had in March 2020, so we need to have a comprehensive plan in place for job creation, upskilling and attracting the jobs of the future. We need to adjust to the new economic realities of the pandemic and face the situation post Brexit. That means selling Northern Ireland's strong and unique advantages.

The motion notes that one of those will come about as a result of the protocol. The protocol is not the outcome that I or the Alliance Party wanted. We wanted minimum friction in all directions; indeed, the backstop would have delivered that in a much better way. However, our national Government sought the hardest Brexit, leaving us, by necessity, with the protocol. Unless the UK Government sign agreements that make the protocol unnecessary, we must make the most of what we have by streamlining operations and pressing our Government to reach lasting solutions with the EU, as they promised to do.

Nonetheless, this should be a game changer for our economy not only in the UK market but in the EU single market for goods. Instead of being a peripheral region of Europe, Northern Ireland should be the pivot point and a centre for trade east-west, North/South and between Europe and the UK. In recent days, we have heard that Invest Northern Ireland has increased its interests from foreign investors, with the result that Northern Ireland's new trading —

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

**Mr Dickson:** I will. We are in uncharted territory, so we need a plan for the future — a plan that delivers. Unfortunately, up to now, we have been drifting.

**Mr Buckley:** I will speak against the motion and support the amendment.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has had a terrible impact on every element of our society, whether it be business, leisure, faith, community, sport or family life. There has not been a person who has not been impacted by the restrictions and by COVID's effect on their business or livelihood. We take it very seriously. While I support 100% what has been said about

a recovery plan, we must also look towards that as a collective effort. It is not the fault of an individual Minister or Department or of who got what Department before COVID came along. COVID has impacted upon them all, and we need a collective effort and strategy, as outlined in the amendment, which I will support.

COVID-19 has had an impact.

My colleague Mr Stalford mentioned £100 million a week in costs and thousands of jobs. We are at the tip of the iceberg with regard to the long-lasting impact that some of the restrictions will have. However, the SDLP motion is full of doublespeak. On the one hand, in relation to COVID, it says that —

**1.45 pm**

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to my friend for giving way, not least as it gives him an extra minute. The Member will agree, I am sure, that a recalibration of the economy is under way. Does he agree that, as we roll out the vaccine and more people get the protection that they need, a recalibration of the way in which the Government have functioned over the past 12 months, with one Department dominating all others, is also needed?

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

**Mr Buckley:** Absolutely. That will come.

I was talking about the doublespeak. On the one hand, in the motion, the SDLP talks about the damaging impact of the restrictions, and, on the other hand, in public commentary, it is so lustful as to desire the restrictions that are in place. You cannot have it both ways. It also talks about the benefits of the protocol, the rigorous implementation of which is, inevitably, damaging to businesses across this country. The motion is filled with doublespeak.

It is notable that the motion is a deliberate, styled attack on the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance. If the SDLP wants to talk about records throughout COVID-19 and the schemes, I am happy to do it, because, while the SDLP was dragged to the table to put support in place for our lorry drivers and taxi drivers —

**Mr Storey:** And bus drivers.

**Mr Buckley:** — yes, absolutely — we watched as the list of those who were willing and wanted to get their driving test lingered and could not

engage in the workplace because they had no transportation. Let us compare that with the record of the Economy Minister, who has put nearly half a billion pounds' worth of schemes towards supporting businesses and individuals throughout this difficult time. Could she do more? Absolutely. She would want to do more. Let us not forget that those in glasshouses should not throw stones. I can see how this may come from an opposition party, but a member of the Executive knows full well the financial responsibilities that are placed on every Department.

Nearly half a billion pounds — 30 schemes — have come from the Department for the Economy. There has been the £10,000 small business grant scheme; £25,000 for the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors; the microbusiness hardship fund; the newly self-employed support scheme (NSESS); the limited company directors support scheme (LCDSS); and the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS), parts A and B. Do I have to go on? I think I will. There has also been the wet pubs business support scheme (WPBSS) and the large tourism and hospitality business support scheme (LTHBSS). The list goes on. It is incredible. I have a document outlining over 30 schemes. What has the SDLP brought forward? What has it done in support of those struggling throughout COVID-19? Only advocate for the very restrictions that have put those people into isolation in their homes with no jobs and no ability to get back into the workplace. Reality must dawn, and the reality is that there must be a collective response. That is why I am so sad at the tone of the motion.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way.

**Mr Buckley:** I will before I end, but I want to get on to the second doublespeak in the motion: support for the protocol.

What doublespeak if ever I have heard it. Again, we see the useful pawns of the Europeans sitting on the Benches opposite, advocating a protocol that places limits and restrictions and denies opportunity to Northern Ireland business, be that unionist, nationalist or other. It is very much a case of chasing fool's gold at the end of the rainbow or riding the unicorn about which they talked throughout the Brexit process. They have been useful pawns in the game. Rather than putting the needs of Northern Ireland first, they have put on record their rhetoric on Brexit and hampered the opportunities in it for our business.

In the short term, prosperity in homes across Northern Ireland during the recovery will be



protected only by ensuring that businesses already doing trade with what is by far Northern Ireland's largest and most valuable market — Great Britain — are able to continue to do so in the new and costly way provided by the protocol, the rigorous implementation of which the Members opposite called for. It is useful to note how Members opposite have drawn back their language.

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

**Mr Buckley:** The reality has dawned that the protocol damages Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland businesses. It is high time that Members realised that.

**Mr McGuigan:** Brexit has been imposed on us by the DUP and the Tories. I just had to mention that.

**Mr Storey:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you clarify the accuracy of the comments made? Leaving the European Union was the result of a democratic vote held in the United Kingdom, and the Member opposite has a UK National Insurance number.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member has put his point on the record.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank my constituency colleague for allowing me the opportunity to clarify: a hard Brexit has been imposed on us by the Tories and the DUP.

Nobody could have predicted the current worldwide COVID pandemic or its impact. Whilst the first priority of the Executive and the Assembly has to be protecting public health and the lives of our citizens, there is no doubt that COVID has brought harsh economic conditions. This is a worrying time for many businesses and workers concerned about their current financial conditions and their financial conditions on the other side of the pandemic. Add a disastrous Tory/DUP-imposed hard Brexit and the threat of climate change into the mix, and it is clear that we need a comprehensive economic recovery strategy. Whilst the Economy Minister is clearly responsible for economic policy, any recovery strategy must have buy-in, input and contributions from all Executive Ministers. As our amendment states, any recovery strategy must:

*"transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the current crisis."*

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Member for giving way. I totally agree that any strategy must be aimed at providing new jobs and retraining people. Does he agree that the cancellation of the Job Start scheme after it was evolved to try to make it Northern Ireland-specific is deeply lamentable, given the impact that this will have on people who now want to get into paid apprenticeships and on sectors that want to encourage young people to join them?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member will have an extra minute.

**Mr McGuigan:** We need to encourage, through as many avenues as possible, people into businesses and people into employment. I certainly am optimistic that any Executive recovery strategy will do precisely that. That is what is needed. It must be based on supporting workers and their families, and it must support businesses here, including SMEs. As other Members have said, it must, of course, tackle regional imbalances.

As Sinn Féin's environment and climate spokesperson, I think that it should go without saying that we need to build back better and greener. Our recovery must be built on working towards a zero-carbon future. If any positive can be taken from COVID, it is that it has shone a light on how work practices, transport and infrastructure can be redesigned to deal with a pandemic, as has been done. When we are rebuilding and building for the future, some of the lessons that have been learned must be implemented and used to tackle climate change and build an economic future that creates better cities with less traffic, cleaner air and better air quality for all citizens who live in them. When I look at the infrastructure developments and active travel policies that have been introduced in other European cities throughout the past year, I cannot help thinking that, moving forward, we need to be much more ambitious in the North.

An Executive recovery strategy must not only deliver a green new deal but do so by delivering a just transition. The strategy must allow businesses and workers to buy into that and participate in a better way of doing things. A green economy will create additional, well-paid employment, harness our abundant renewable energy resources, lower costs for families and businesses, create warm homes for those in fuel poverty and provide public transport for all, including those living in isolated areas.

Five minutes is nowhere near enough to outline all that needs to be outlined in such an

important debate on the economic future for citizens. Tory austerity over 10 years has had a severe negative impact on public services in the North and on our economic prospects. We need further devolution of fiscal powers to the Executive and to see those powers used wisely in the interests of those who live here.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Members, Question Time is due to begin at 2.00 pm. I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member scheduled to speak is Mervyn Storey.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

**2.00 pm**

## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **The Executive Office**

#### **Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland**

1. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their engagement with the European Commission on the impact of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1597/17-22)

2. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps they are taking to maximise the benefits from Northern Ireland's unique dual-market access under the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1598/17-22)

3. **Dr Archibald** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the recent joint statement by the European Commission and the British Government on the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1599/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister):** With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will take questions 1, 2 and 3 together.

Following the EU's triggering of article 16 on 29 January, the First Minister and I requested a meeting with the European Commission vice president Maroš Šefčovič. The meeting took place on 3 February, and we apprised him of the current situation regarding the implementation of the protocol and its impact here. The meeting was constructive and led to an agreement to work together to address the remaining protocol issues. Following the meeting, the European Commission and the British Government released a joint statement confirming their commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and their agreement to use the Joint Committee structures to work intensively to find solutions to outstanding issues. That commitment to finding solutions is very welcome. I am pleased that it was reiterated in the joint statement from the European Commission and the British Government following a further meeting on 11 February. The First Minister and I continue to attend meetings of the Joint Committee. We will use its structures to ensure that our position is understood and to seek the best outcome for our citizens and businesses. Concurrent with

those ongoing discussions, we continue to work to identify, assess and seek to resolve immediate operational issues associated with the end of the transition period.

The Department for the Economy, alongside Invest NI (INI) and InterTradelreland (ITI), is continuing to engage with many sectors to clarify the terms of access to the different markets and to encourage and enable export growth that could help drive our economic recovery.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the deputy First Minister for her comments so far. Did Maroš Šefčovič give any indication that he was listening to the very legitimate concerns of the people of Northern Ireland, particularly those of the unionist community, about the very invidious and divisive nature of the Irish Sea border and the fact that the protocol is part of the problem, not part of the solution?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I can confirm to the Member that the vice president of the Commission listened intently to what was said in the meeting. Further to that, as you will know, he held a series of meetings towards the end of last week with business leaders and civic society leaders here to listen to people's concerns. I welcome the fact that the EU side and the British Government have recognised the need to implement the protocol, iron out all the issues that have been identified and find solutions. Everybody's efforts right now should be on trying to find solutions to give businesses the clarity, stability and certainty that they crave for the months ahead about what future trading patterns will look like for them. What we are dealing with now is the outworking of Brexit. There were always going to be major ramifications from Brexit. Thankfully, we have a protocol that offers a solution to what is a huge problem.

**Mr O'Toole:** First Ministers, just a few days ago, Invest NI said:

*"Northern Ireland can become a gateway for the sale of goods to two of the world's largest markets".*

Our unique position means that we are at the hinge point of the British market and the EU single market of half a billion people. First Ministers, what are we doing to maximise the benefits from the dual market access to create jobs and prosperity for people here? We are in a unique position that is envied not just by other parts of the United Kingdom but across this continent.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I agree with the Member about the opportunity that we have. We have access to both markets, which is a strength in our ability to trade that is the envy of many others. We need to work on our access to 450 million people in the EU market. I said in my original answer that work is under way with the Department for the Economy, Invest NI and InterTradelreland. It is important that they work together, and with all sectors, to identify the markets and work on the opportunities. We need to see more of that. We need to use our unique position to attract jobs and investment. There is a huge opportunity for us. We need to see the dedicated economic strategy from the Department for the Economy. I know that the House will discuss economic strategy today and tomorrow, and I look forward to that. It is important that we maximise the benefits that we have and that we work with the business community, traders, retailers and everybody else. We must try to get certainty on the issues that require certainty and then look for the opportunities.

**Dr Archibald:** Does the First Minister agree with me that the Executive should develop an overarching economic strategy to maximise the benefits from our continued access to the European single market and its 450 million consumers?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for her question. It is an opportunity for us to work to develop an overarching economic strategy. That will take all of the Executive working together across every Department. It will come as no surprise to the Member to hear me say that the disruption and difficulties that we are experiencing are a direct consequence of Brexit — a Brexit that was rejected by the majority of people across this community and the majority of Members of the House. That is my view. Our collective focus, as an Executive and across the Assembly, must now be to protect jobs and livelihoods. We need to have the Joint Committee providing solutions on issues. Let us all work together to provide solutions. Those are the opportunities before us.

**Mr Allister:** Does the deputy First Minister accept that commerce between Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been impeded by the protocol, the rigorous implementation of which she demands? Why does she want to punish the economy of Northern Ireland? Is the simple truth that dislocation between Northern Ireland and GB is a political gain that she prioritises above the damage to our economy?

**Mrs O'Neill:** What we are experiencing is a direct consequence of the Brexit that the Member championed and helped to bring about. What we need to do now is find solutions to the outstanding issues. I want to see free trade right across: North/South and east-west. I do not want to see any disruption to trade. It is to our economic benefit that trade flows freely. Instead of playing silly games, our focus needs to be on what provides certainty to businesses, traders and retailers and what gives stability and simplification. Let us use the avenues open to us in the withdrawal agreement, namely through the Joint Committee. I welcome the fact that it will meet, I believe, before Wednesday. I hope that the joint First Minister and I will be in that meeting so that we have an opportunity to put across the need for stability, certainty and simplification.

**Mr Buckley:** These issues are caused not by Brexit but, rather, a denial of Brexit by the protocol parties opposite. Some nine weeks into the Northern Ireland protocol, can the deputy First Minister point to any evidence, either anecdotal or substantial, that the protocol has any advantages for Northern Ireland businesses, or is it the case that they simply do not exist? If so, would she join me and others in calling out the protocol for what it is, and ensuring that it is destined for the dustbin where it belongs?

**Mrs O'Neill:** My personal view is this: thank goodness for the protocol. What we are experiencing right now is a result of the fact that the British Government did not prepare. They did not work with businesses to ensure that they were ready for a post-Brexit world. They ran the clock down to 31 December, so there was no opportunity to transition into a new trading arrangement. We are dealing with a new trading reality as a direct result of Brexit. What the Executive and the Assembly need to focus on is ironing out the difficulties that have arisen as a direct result of Brexit and working with the British Government and the EU side to make sure that we get solutions to those things. Let us look towards the opportunities for the future, and let us ensure that we grab all those opportunities and that we help to create jobs and employment here and help our local industry. There are new trading realities and patterns, so there are opportunities now for smaller businesses here that traditionally could not supply, for example, some of the big supermarkets. How can we support them to make sure that they can do that? That is where our efforts need to be focused. It is around stability and certainty. It is not around playing games with the protocol that was agreed over the course of four years.

**Ms Armstrong:** What confidence can our business community have in an Executive that are failing to work together? How will the negotiations go if that relationship falls apart, given the self-harm that Brexit has created in this place?

**Mrs O'Neill:** We are dealing with a post-Brexit world. The Executive have no option other than to work together. Everybody needs to be focused in the same direction, and that is to iron out the issues that need to be resolved. There are issues that are a direct result of the new trading reality. There are issues that are a direct result of the fact that, as I said, the deal was not struck until it came right down to the wire, so people have not had time to adjust. Of course, there will be issues, and they are genuine issues, particularly from a business point of view, so let us get a resolution to those. I look forward to the Joint Committee on Wednesday. That will give us an opportunity to try to, hopefully, get some outcomes. A number of issues have been resolved. Some clarity was given on the issue of steel, for example. We continually raise a whole list of issues to try to get clarity on them. I welcome the fact that there has been progress, but there is definitely more to be done. Our job should be to continue to find the solutions.

**Mr Stalford:** The triggering of article 16 by the European side was, I am sure that the deputy First Minister would agree, a hateful, spiteful act by an incompetent, bungling European bureaucracy to disguise the fact that it had singularly failed to deliver a proper vaccine roll-out for the people of continental Europe. Given that article 16 has now been triggered, does she agree with me that, in future, UK Governments should not be reticent about using it to defend our interests in the way that the European side did theirs?

**Mrs O'Neill:** First, I disassociate myself completely from your language. Secondly, what happened on the EU side, when they indicated that they were going to trigger article 16, was wrong. I have said that publicly. It was wrong, but you do not fight fire with fire. You do not fight back and say, "Well, you know, they threw their dummy out of the pram, so let's do it too". Let us find solutions. Let us find solutions to the Brexit that has been foisted upon us by the Tories and that your party supported.

## Hate Crime

4. **Ms Brogan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on how the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 is addressing

racism and eradicating hate crime. (AQO 1600/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, junior Minister Kearney will respond to that question.

**Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** We want this to be a truly shared, equal and safe society for all our people, regardless of race or ethnicity. Unfortunately, racism and hatred remain an unwelcome presence in our society. Earlier this month, the First Minister and I attended a meeting with the racial equality subgroup, which reinforced the huge impact that racism has on people's lives and how important it is that we continue in our efforts to tackle hatred and prejudice. We are doing that through the implementation of our racial equality strategy.

Tackling racism and hate crime is the central aim of that strategy, and we remain fully committed to the delivery of all its key actions. Progress has been made on a number of those. We have completed a review of the minority ethnic diversity fund to ensure that it best supports local groups to promote good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds. We have reviewed the Race Relations Order and are now preparing options for enhancing the legislation. We will shortly consult on a draft refugee integration strategy.

We are also considering the recommendations from Judge Marrinan's report on hate crime legislation, and we very much look forward to seeing them implemented.

## 2.15 pm

Tackling hatred is the responsibility of all of us in government and wider society. We will continue to drive forward this critical work. Let me say this once again: there is no place for hate or discrimination in our communities, and we will not tolerate racism in any form. We are committed to tackling the challenges, and it will take us all working together to deliver the positive change that is needed.

**Ms Brogan:** We recently witnessed appalling racist remarks from a DUP MP who then refused to withdraw or apologise for the offensive comments. Will the Minister agree that comments like that not only run contrary to the objectives set out in the racial equality strategy but go against the Executive and Assembly's opposition to any form of racism?

**Mr Kearney:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht an cheist a chur. Just last week, the First Minister, junior Minister Middleton and I met the racial equality subgroup. That group, as I indicated, has a specific responsibility to advise on the implementation of the racial equality strategy for 2015-2025. Speakers at that meeting recalled their experiences of everyday racism. They also reflected on their experiences of institutional racism and, critically, intergenerational poverty, as it interconnects with the reality of racism. They also discussed the effects of precarious employment and zero-hours contracts, which have a disproportionate effect on our ethnic minority population. It was a sobering meeting. In some respects, we might want to describe it as something of a "reset" moment, if you like, because contributors set out the task ahead if we are to build a future that values racial equality and racial justice.

As for the 'Songs of Praise' remarks by a senior DUP politician that you referenced, it is clear to me that, when senior politicians feel that that type of public commentary is acceptable, we still have a way to go. The remarks were insulting and offensive, and I acknowledged that during our meeting with the racial equality subgroup. Those remarks contrast starkly with the future that we should all seek to build together. Just as they run contrary to the vision of the racial equality strategy, which is owned by the Executive, they speak to the need for robust political leadership across the Chamber to confront all forms of racism and to give leadership to build a community that is defined by inclusivity, celebrates our diversity and is known, crucially, for its zero tolerance of racism so that this place becomes renowned as a welcoming place for everyone who has chosen to make it their home. Mar sin, a Cheann Comhairle, ní mór do gach aon cheannaire sa saol, sa tsochaí agus sa pholaitíocht an fód a sheasamh in éadan an chiníochais, an tseicteachais agus gach saghas idirdhealaithe.

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister's time is up.

**Mr McGrath:** A key component of the racial equality strategy that has yet to be delivered is a refugee integration strategy. Given that I was today sent a social media ad for a vacant house in Northern Ireland that included the line, "Foreign nationals need not apply", where are we with that much-needed integration strategy?

**Mr Kearney:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht an cheist a chur. The Member raises an important issue about the progress of the refugee integration strategy.

Allow me to set it into this context: work has progressed on the matter. Just bear with me, colleagues, so that I can get you the specifics.

We have, in fact, advanced it. It is one of our 11 themes in the racial equality strategy. It falls within the context of how we deal with refugees and asylum seekers. We are engaged directly with the British Home Office on bringing forward its recommendations and views on the matter. We have made it clear that we are acutely concerned about the potential implications that that would have for how we ensure that our racial and ethnic minorities and those who have come to this place as asylum seekers and refugees are properly regarded, included and not in any way economically disadvantaged as a result of coming here to make this place their home.

**Mr Beattie:** It is incumbent on us all to make the racial equality strategy work to help with diversity in this part of the United Kingdom. Many from the BME community, especially the newcomer communities, cannot avail themselves of the rules around the common travel area. What are we doing to rectify that?

**Mr Kearney:** I thank the Member for his question. Again, that relates to how we advance the work that we have taken forward on our minority ethnic development fund. We have the racial equality strategy overview, but we also need to deal specifically with asylum seekers and refugees. In that respect, we are engaged, as I said, with the British Home Office to ensure that travel does not become an impediment to ensuring that people who need to come to live in this place for fear of famine, war and other forms of injustice are brought here, are included in this society, are fully integrated and enjoy the same benefits of living in this place as any other member of society in the context of our racial equality strategy and all the programmes, elements and priorities that that reflects.

**Mr Durkan:** There is a lasting concern that organisations run by people from our traditional communities who work with BME people are favoured over organisations led by BME people, whose groups are often told that they lack the capacity to administer government funding or to run programmes. However, one of the stated aims of the racial equality strategy is to build capacity for ethnic minority people. How is the distribution of resources between race relations and community relations decided?

**Mr Kearney:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht an cheist a chur. We have in place a racial equality subgroup. As I explained,

the First Minister and I met them just last week. We think that they are very representative of the constituencies and communities that they represent. We can always do better. We had a good engagement about the importance of the work that they are carrying forward. We need to listen to what they say. It would be a huge anomaly and completely counter-intuitive if we had a situation in which those of us who are from here would purport to know best the needs of those who are members of our racial and ethnic minority population. The fix for that is to stay closely engaged with our racial equality subgroup, which is an integral part of our racial equality strategy, listening to what it has to say, and then, when we have access to resources, to build capacity and inclusion to ensure that the rights of those minorities are protected and that that is done in a way that is absolutely in consultation with those citizens on the ground articulating their needs and ensuring that they are properly represented and reflected through the racial equality subgroup.

## Victims' Payment Schemes: Funding

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions with the Secretary of State on funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1601/17-22)

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1602/17-22)

10. **Ms Dolan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1606/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission again, a Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 5, 6 and 10 together.

On 9 February 2021, the Court of Appeal ruled that the Executive Office is under a legal duty to fund victims' payments and lump sums under the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020. The ruling gave the Executive and the NIO four weeks to find an agreed solution. The First Minister and I remain entirely committed to delivering the scheme, and the Executive Office acknowledges that it needs to be funded to operate properly. Along with the Justice and Finance Ministers, the First Minister and I are engaged in correspondence with the Secretary of State in relation to funding. Following our request for an urgent meeting with him to address the matter, the Secretary of State has

now agreed to that meeting, which will take place tomorrow, 23 February. It remains our firm view that the scheme should be funded by the Westminster Government as an addition to the block grant. Without that additional funding, the Executive will face significant funding pressures. We will continue to make that case directly.

Such discussions will not prevent TEO, in the meantime, from making the necessary requests for funding from the Department of Finance as it falls due. The £2.5 million advance from the Executive has enabled the establishment of a dedicated project team in the Department of Justice to progress the development of delivery structures for the scheme. A substantial programme of work is under way. Progress to date includes the ongoing development of an online system to receive applications, the appointment of an interim Victims' Payments Board, the appointment by the DOJ of an assessment service provider and the securing of accommodation for staff who will deliver the scheme. Mr Justice McAlinden has been appointed as interim president of the Victims' Payments Board. The proposed allocation of funding in the draft Budget would provide £6.7 million in 2021-22 for the administrative costs of the scheme, which demonstrates the Executive's commitment to delivery. Part of that funding will enable the victims and survivors sector to recruit additional staff to support applicants.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. The clock is, clearly, running down on this. There are two weeks left. Is the deputy First Minister telling me that there is a plan B, so to speak, to get everything in place? Will the Executive have any money to pay victims at the end of March or May? The campaign was led by those who were severely physically injured, and, subsequently, those who suffered psychological damage were added. If funding were to become available, would the Executive be in a position to get money out quickly to those who have suffered the most hurt physically?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for her question. It is our intention to get the scheme up and running and the payments out the door as quickly as possible. Those people have waited far too long to get to this point. As the Member will know, the court ruling made it clear that we had to fund the scheme, but we believe that the scheme is so different from what was agreed in the Stormont House Agreement. Under the British Government's own funding policy, they must fund what they have legislated for. We hope that we will make some progress

in the meeting with the Secretary of State tomorrow.

**Mr Beggs:** Earlier this year, the Finance Minister reported a significant underspend and said that money returned to him might be returned unspent to Treasury. Has the Executive Office been in touch with the Treasury to ask whether, at the very least, that funding could be used to pay the first year of the disability scheme for Troubles' victims to ensure that those victims are not disappointed once again?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I assure the Member that our focus and attention are on getting the scheme up and running, the applications in and the payments made. That is why we need to have the engagement with the Secretary of State tomorrow. It will involve a group of Ministers including us from the Executive Office and the Finance and Justice Ministers. It is important that we have that meeting, because we have been waiting for it for five months. It is really important that we have that discussion. Alongside that, the Finance Minister will, of course, on behalf of the Executive, continue to engage with the Treasury on the funding of the scheme.

**Ms Dolan:** Can she clarify whether it is the case that the British Government developed the scheme and, according to their own Treasury rules, must fund it?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am always conscious, when I speak about this matter, that victims who need the pension are listening to the debate. Let me speak directly to them: the Executive are absolutely committed to delivering on the scheme. However, how the scheme is resourced is a political question, and it is one that needs urgent focus from the British Government and, in particular, Brandon Lewis. It requires an immediate political solution because, as I said, victims have had to wait for far too long. I appreciate that the needs of victims who are waiting for the pension are immediate and need to be addressed without further delay.

As I said in a previous answer, we have been asking for this meeting with Brandon Lewis since, I think, last October, and we will have that meeting tomorrow, but it is really important that there is an outcome and that we have a chance to have a real conversation about the funding of the scheme.

**2.30 pm**

The victims' payment scheme was designed in Westminster, and policy decisions on the scheme were taken there. The British Government have significantly increased the costs, so, consistent with their statement of funding policy, they also ought to have made provision for the finances that are required. The cost of the scheme when it was initially pitched and the costs today are vastly different. We have now received a report from the Government Actuary's Department, which has used assumptions about numbers provided by TEO for a range of cost estimates, ranging from £600 million at one end of the spectrum to £1.2 billion at the other end, with a central estimate of about £848 million. That shows the level of challenge that the Executive will face in trying to fund the scheme, which is why we need the British Government to fund a scheme that they brought forward policy for and took policy decisions on.

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

### **Electoral Register: False Information**

T1. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that the deputy First Minister will be aware that a census is due to be carried out in the coming months to provide us with an up-to-date, accurate record of all who will be eligible to vote at the next elections, whether the deputy First Minister will take this opportunity to correct the false and factually incorrect information that she and her party put out across the media that this was solely an exercise to purge eligible voters from the register in Northern Ireland. (AQT 1011/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** First, the Member will know that I am speaking here as joint head of Government and joint First Minister, so if you want to address the matter politically with the party, that is fair enough. However, let me say that the Electoral Office's role should be to facilitate people to register to vote and to make it easy for people to exercise their franchise and to take part in the democratic process. Given that, right now, normal procedures cannot be followed because of the pandemic, if you wipe the register now, how will people be able to go door to door, for example? There are pragmatic issues that need to be addressed, and I hope that the Electoral Office takes that on board.

**Mr T Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for her response, but she did not take the opportunity to withdraw the remarks that the party made

and to apologise to the people for the misinformation that the party put out, which seems to be a constant drip from that party.

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is not a question, a Cheann Comhairle, but let me say that, given the history of this place and the fact that so many people were denied access to voting, we here in the North know how important our vote is, so it is incumbent on all of us in political office to ensure that it is made as easy as possible for people to participate in the democratic process.

### **Abortion Services**

T2. **Ms Sheerin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the legal and human rights imperative to provide modern, accessible and compassionate abortion services here, whether the deputy First Minister agrees that it is the sole responsibility of the Health Minister to implement those services. (AQT 1012/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** In simple terms, the answer is yes. That is my view. Since the framework came into effect, there has been a legal responsibility on the Health Minister to ensure that he provides modern, compassionate healthcare and abortion services and that they are provided via the health trusts here. I believe that his failure to do so is failing not only women, who have a legal and human right to compassionate healthcare services, but his health trusts, which have a right to expect leadership from the Minister. Women should, under no circumstances, be compelled to travel to access vital healthcare services at any time, let alone during a global pandemic, so the Minister should end the delays and fulfil his legal responsibilities to make those services available to women. His failure to do so to date is totally unacceptable.

**Ms Sheerin:** Go raibh maith agat, Minister. As you have outlined, the new legal framework for abortion services came into effect in March last year. Do you agree that it is now long overdue that the Health Minister acted on this legal imperative and that he should stop delaying and provide the services to which women are entitled immediately and without further delay?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The framework and the legislation are crystal clear. It is the legal responsibility of the Minister of Health to ensure that the services are provided, and the longer the delays go on, the longer he is denying women access to compassionate, modern and vital healthcare services. That needs to end, and the Minister must act.



## COVID-19: Vaccination Roll-out

T4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the positive news today from Scotland in relation to data, which demonstrates that the roll-out of the vaccination programme has led to a significant reduction in the number of people who are being hospitalised, whether the deputy First Minister can confirm that that type of data will be included in future modelling here to inform decisions to move Northern Ireland out of the current restrictions more quickly. (AQT 1014/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** My thanks to the Member. I have not seen the data, so I cannot comment on that per se. What I can say, however, is that we have always held the view that the Health Department should put all that information into the public domain. A fair amount of information is shared on the Department of Health website, but when it comes to us making those decisions and bringing the public along with us, the more information that we can put into the public domain, the better. That will help people understand the pathway of the virus, the trends and the patterns, and how those inform our decision-making. My general answer is therefore that we should put everything that we can into the public domain.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. We are all aware that work is ongoing to produce a pathway out of lockdown. The deputy First Minister should know that people are mindful of the need to protect lives and the health service, but they are also weary. Will she give a commitment that that pathway will be meaningful, detailed and unambiguous and will have clear targets?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, it is really important that we set out the pathway. As the Member is hopefully aware, the First Minister and I intend to present it to the House next week, hopefully on Monday. We very much want to give the public a route map and show how we will reverse out of the current restrictive measures that we have in place. Everybody is looking for some hope and towards the future, and we want to spell that out for people. It will need to be a step-by-step process, however. There is no doubt in my mind that it will need to be gradual and that the lifting of restrictions will be slow and steady. The roll-out of the vaccine and the fact that it is working so well — we commend all those who are involved in delivering the vaccine — combined with keeping the virus suppressed for as long as possible mean that we need to chart what the

future will look like for people. As I said, we hope to do that next week.

## Victims' Payment Scheme: Delays

T5. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister would like to take this opportunity to apologise to innocent victims for the added hurt and trauma that all the delays, at her insistence, to the victims' payment scheme have caused them, given that the High Court has had to call out the Executive Office, not once but twice, on failures in respect of the victims' payment scheme and, very pointedly in the first case, made criticisms that were personal to the deputy First Minister. (AQT 1015/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** This is a very sensitive issue, and we should be very mindful of the fact that, in normal political discourse, we can goad each other. Obviously, you and I will never see eye to eye on many, if not all, given issues, but, when it comes to the victims' pension, Members need to be very sensitive. Those people have waited for far too long to get their pension.

I am committed to doing all that I can to make sure that they get that payment as quickly as possible, but the political reality is that Westminster took policy decisions that were far advanced from what, politically, we had agreed previously. It is therefore incumbent on Westminster also to resource it. I have talked about the challenge with the costs and about the fact that we could be looking at a central estimate of £848 million. That is a lot of financial resource that the Executive would have to bear the brunt of providing if the British Government are not forthcoming with finance. It would put the Executive and the Assembly in a very difficult position, and we would have to take the money from health, education and all the other public services. I am very focused on getting a solution, trying to find the money and making sure that those people do not have to wait a moment longer.

**Mr Allister:** For all those words, the Minister is unable to say sorry to them, and not for the first time. Are we now in a position in which who gets the pension has been abandoned as a stalling tactic? Has the deputy First Minister come to the realisation that that point is settled and will not be used as a stalling tactic any further?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The victims' pension should be paid to all those people — every single last person — who have been directly impacted on by the conflict. Anybody who has received an

injury should be eligible for the scheme. There is a cohort of people who have been left out of the scheme, and I know that they will fight this case in the courts. I support them in doing so because they are equally entitled to a pension. I previously said that my focus and priority are to make sure that we get the pension paid, that the payment is no longer delayed, and that the British Government must step up and resource something that they took policy decisions on.

## **COVID-19: Republic of Ireland Vaccination Roll-out**

**T6. Mr Givan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after asking the deputy First Minister to join him in commending the roll-out of the vaccination programme in Northern Ireland, with the number of people who have now received the vaccine heading towards a third of the population, which is replicated across the United Kingdom, how concerned the deputy First Minister is that only around 5% to 6% of the population of the Republic of Ireland has been vaccinated and to state how much of a threat that is to the people of Northern Ireland. (AQT 1016/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I look forward to the day when all the people who live on this island, across these islands and globally receive the vaccine. There is no room for any nonsense about "vaccine nationalism", as I have heard it described. We are in a global pandemic; if there was ever a time for us to work in a global effort, this is it. I look forward to the day when we are all vaccinated, when we can get back to some sense of normality, and that people are allowed to be with their family and friends and go about their daily business without the fear that comes with living in a pandemic.

**Mr Givan:** On the reopening of our economy, and as you said this morning, you want to have a pathway to recovery to protect families, workers and businesses. I wholeheartedly agree with that. Let us have these restrictions removed as soon as possible and as is practicably safe to do so in line with the health guidance. However, the Republic of Ireland has put in place enforcement against the people of Northern Ireland travelling in the Republic of Ireland, and yet we are a much safer country now due to our vaccine progress. Is any reciprocal enforcement planned by the Executive to protect our return to normality because of the Republic of Ireland's failure to vaccinate its people?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The message across the board, across both these islands, is to stay at home.

That remains the case, even as measures are announced on what a pathway to recovery and what opening things up again could look like. We are still dealing with the pandemic, and the message, for now, is to stay at home. People should not be travelling anywhere, whether from Clonoe — where I live — to Belfast or from Dublin to Cork. People should stay at home. That remains the message.

We are still in the middle of the pandemic, dealing with a challenging situation. Whilst things are going in the right direction and are looking good, if we do not keep the virus suppressed, we will keep yo-yoing in and out of lockdown. That is not where we want to be. We need to see steady progress. We want to publish the pathway next week, as that is really important to giving the public an understanding of what the future looks like.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Maolíosá McHugh. I advise the Member that he will only have time for his main question.

## **Casement Park**

**T7. Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the importance of resolving the delay to the Casement Park development, which is an Executive flagship project. (AQT 1017/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right: Casement is a crucial project, not just for Gaels but for the Executive, because it has been a flagship project for some time. Therefore, there needs to be an end to the delay as soon as possible. I am glad to say that the Finance Minister has included £20 million in the Budget for that development.

It is disappointing that the planning application still has not been completed. I expect that the Infrastructure Minister will now work to ensure that there are no further delays. It has been more than 10 years since the Casement project was announced. It is time to return Casement Park to its place as a shining beacon for Gaels in Antrim, and for the wider economic benefits that it will bring to Belfast and Ulster.

**Mr Speaker:** Our time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

**2.45 pm**

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

## Finance

### Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his Department's engagement with the Executive Office on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1611/17-22)

9. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance what provisions are being put in place to ensure payments from the Troubles-related-victim victims' payment scheme can be made without further delay. (AQO 1619/17-22)

14. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has requested a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss funding for the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1624/17-22)

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** A LeasCheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will group questions 1, 9 and 14.

I, along with my Executive colleagues, am committed to ensuring the delivery of the victims' payment scheme. With that in mind, as part of the draft Budget, the Executive have allocated some £6.7 million towards the preparation costs for the introduction of a scheme. The wider payments issue requires urgent attention.

While TEO identified estimated costs in respect of scheme payments, the Executive were agreed on the need to further the matter of funding with the Secretary of State, whose predecessor's actions led to a significant increase in the potential cost of the scheme. I, along with the First and deputy First Ministers and the Minister of Justice, have been trying to meet with the Secretary of State for some time. He has now agreed to a meeting, which is due to take place tomorrow.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the likely funding levels and any estimates that he has made for the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme and what bids, if any, TEO or the Justice Ministry have made to his Department?

**Mr Murphy:** The most recent report that we got from the Government Actuary's Department estimated that the cost could be anything between £600 million and £1.2 billion, which is

an increase on the high-level estimate that the Department of Justice had placed on it.

As the Member will know, the additional bits of the scheme that were added by a previous Secretary of State, such as psychological injury, including to people based outside the jurisdiction, and injuries, including psychological injuries, for armed forces personnel, have substantially increased the potential cost. While it is a demand-led scheme, it is very hard to give an accurate estimation, but those costs make it hugely challenging, if not unaffordable, for the Executive to carry the burden alone, not to mention the fact that it is contrary to the British Government's own policy, having set the policy and legislated for it.

The Department of Justice received money for the administration of the scheme, and the Executive were very clear that, on the payments for the victims, which we are committed to and want to see happening, we need that discussion urgently. That is why we have been pressing since last year for a discussion with the Secretary of State to try to apportion the costs of the scheme.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Given the wider cost of the scheme, which the Minister talked about running from £600 million upwards, what action is he taking in order to ensure that, whenever applications are made by the innocent victims, the money will be there to make the payment to them and that there will be no further delays in the scheme?

**Mr Murphy:** Of course, that is a matter for the Executive to decide. If the Executive decide that they are going to carry the burden of the entirety of the cost, the upward figure, as I said, is estimated by the Government Actuary's Department to be £1.2 billion. That will have serious knock-on implications for other public services that we provide over the lifetime of the scheme. Many more upfront costs may well be attached to that than were previously estimated, given that people may opt for a lump sum rather than a pension over many years.

All those issues create huge levels of uncertainty, and that is why we need that discussion with the British Government. The Secretary of State has decided to take the lead on the matter, and we have been pressing for a discussion with him. We wanted to include the payment levels in the draft Budget paper that we have produced, and we certainly want to include the levels for payment in the final Budget paper, which we will come to in the next couple of weeks.

**Ms Dillon:** It is disgraceful that the British Secretary of State has taken five months to respond to a request for a meeting with Ministers from the Executive on the issue, which is on a policy and legislation that he brought forward. Having said that, I am glad that he is now prepared to meet you, Minister. What will the potential impact be on other Departments? I absolutely support the payments to victims, who should not have to wait any longer, but what is the likely impact if the British Government do not step up to the plate on funding the scheme?

**Mr Murphy:** As I said, the cost will be anything between £600 million and £1.2 billion, depending on whether people seek payments up front, which could change the profile of payments year-on-year. However, if we take it at the upper level and do a rough allocation across Departments, we are talking about a cost of about £615 million to the Department of Health and £227 million to the Department of Education and so on, right down the level of spending for all Departments. You can see that it will have a very significant impact on our public services.

That is not to play off what victims deserve and need against public services, because that would be a very cruel thing for the Government to try to do to us, as we want not only to provide the best possible public services but to meet the very real requirements of victims. We need that urgent discussion with the Secretary of State in order to get the issue resolved.

**Mr Allister:** Is that not exactly what the Minister is doing: trying to play off victims against public services in order to up the ante with the Secretary of State? Is there an acceptance that, when one listens to the Court of Appeal, at the end of the day there is no choice other than to find the money wherever it is found? Does it help to exaggerate the demands by saying, for example, that £600 million will come off the Department of Health as if that was in one year, when it is over the entire lifetime of the scheme, which might be 30 years?

**Mr Murphy:** The Member says that the money should be found "wherever it is found", but he clearly does not indicate where it should be found, so he has not come off the fence. Perhaps he could say whether he thinks that the Executive should pay for the scheme in its entirety and that the British Government should not make any contribution. If he feels that the British Government should make a contribution, we in the Executive are right to pursue them for that. He is sitting on the fence because he will

not declare his hand. He is just saying, "Somebody should sort this. It should not go on much longer". Of course, from his position in opposition, he does not have to come up with the answers for any of it.

We are trying to sort it. We recognise that the costs over the 30 years — those are the costs that the Government Actuary's Department came up with, not us — have to be paid, and if we have to pay them, that will have a huge impact. I have no desire to play off public services against the needs of victims. We want to see the issue resolved, but the British Government added the substantial costs to the policy; therefore, they have a duty to meet those costs.

## Fiscal Council

2. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the establishment of the fiscal council. (AQO 1612/17-22)

12. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment on the establishment of an independent fiscal council. (AQO 1622/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to group questions 2 and 12 together.

I have put forward proposals to the Executive for establishing a fiscal council and a fiscal commission. Those include terms of reference for and membership of both bodies. Once the Executive have considered those proposals, I hope that we will be able to put the council and the commission in place very quickly so that they can begin their important work.

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Minister for his response. I understand that the fiscal council will focus on the Executive's spending plans but not on their revenue plans. Does he agree that the work of the fiscal council will be more meaningful if the Executive assume greater control over local taxation and revenue-raising opportunities as a result of the important work that the fiscal commission will take forward?

**Mr Murphy:** I thank the Member for her question. The intention is that the fiscal commission will look at the broad range of economic, policy and revenue-raising levers available to the Executive and make recommendations, as has been done in Scotland and Wales on a number of occasions. It is envisaged that the fiscal commission will engage over the rest of this calendar year and

produce a report for the Executive. Given the time frame in this mandate, it is more than likely that it will become a point of action for an incoming Executive. When its work has been done, any decisions taken by the Executive will then become a matter of immediate interest to a fiscal council. I see the work of both bodies being interlinked.

**Mr O'Toole:** I welcome the fact and am glad that these bodies are being instituted, which I have called for repeatedly. Will the fiscal council or the fiscal commission be set up in statute to give the grounding that the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) in London and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council have? Also, will they have independent economic forecasting powers to give real bite and insight to their recommendations and underline their independence?

**Mr Murphy:** For the fiscal council, I have brought initial propositions in order to set it up. The experience in other jurisdictions, as the Member said, is that, once a body was set up, it moved onto a legislative footing. We and the Finance Committee, on which the Member sits, will have an interest in that. We have asked the personnel involved in the fiscal council and the fiscal commission to engage early with stakeholders, including the Finance Committee. Clearly, we want to see that. We want independence to be firmly established. As it begins its work, whatever resource and support is needed will be provided by the Department. Senior officials in the Department will support the council, the commission and the secretariat. Should they require any other resources or support, we are very happy to look at that. The initial proposition is to get these bodies established and to allow them to develop from there.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** My apologies, I should have called Chris Lyttle first. Mr Lyttle, you have the Floor now.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you, Deputy Speaker. The fiscal council was a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement in January 2020. Minister, when will the fiscal council be operational, how will it be funded and what will its relationship be with the Department of Finance?

**Mr Murphy:** The fiscal council will be operational as soon as the Executive approve it, which, I hope, will be in a matter of days. The council's relationship with the Department of Finance is that the costs will be met by the Department, and we have already budgeted for

that. We will provide a secretariat and support from a senior departmental official. Clearly, the intent is that the commission, like similar commissions, will move onto a more solid footing with legislative underpinning. If they have specific requirements, we will be happy to work with them. We have encouraged them to engage with all stakeholders as soon as they are up and running.

**Dr Aiken:** We want the fiscal council to be put in a legislative framework as quickly as possible so that it is in statute in order to guarantee its independence. Will the Minister outline how he sees the relationship developing, particularly around the Procurement Board that he chairs, the independent board on infrastructure and other independent oversight boards that are being looked at?

**Mr Murphy:** I agree with the Member about moving quickly to that position; we have spoken about the issue in recent days. I see a role for the Committee, of course, in that. The fiscal council will have responsibility to look over the Executive's finances to make sure that we are on a sustainable footing. Interaction with the Procurement Board, which provides policy for spending £3 billion, will be an important function. Any agencies or bodies that have an impact or give advice on spending will be of interest to the council. We fully expect the council, when it is up and working, to have wide engagement not only with bodies outside government that have an interest but with this institution, Departments and arm's-length bodies.

3.00 pm

## COVID-19: Aviation Industry

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will work with Executive colleagues to prepare a comprehensive package of measures to assist businesses that service the aviation industry and that have been badly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. (AQO 1613/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The responsibility for airports rests with the Infrastructure Minister. Although the responsibility for air connectivity and, indeed, wider economic support, including the COVID restrictions business support scheme to support businesses in the supply chains of affected businesses, rests with the Economy Minister, my Department is in the process of implementing a £10 million package of support for the Belfast airports under emergency powers granted by the First and deputy First

Ministers. The Infrastructure Minister is providing £1.2 million of similar Executive support to the City of Derry Airport. Keeping the airports open is the first step in supporting the businesses that work with them.

This support follows on from a series of Executive-agreed announcements last year specifically to help to sustain the aviation sector during the pandemic, including over £3.1 million in direct business rate support to our airports and other businesses within the airport sites. My Department is also holding £150 million aside for consideration of additional business rate relief in the next financial year, and regional airports will be considered as part of that. That, in turn, is in addition to a broader range of schemes that have been put in place by the Executive and Treasury to provide significant support to businesses more generally.

If respective Ministers believe that there are gaps in the provision of support for the industries that they have responsibility for, I will fully consider any proposals that they develop.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for his answer. The huge drop in revenue as a result of fewer flights has caused devastating losses to other people and industries, such as engineers, travel agents, airport car parks and taxi operators. What are the Minister and his Department doing to assist other Ministers to prepare a package of measures to support those businesses specifically?

**Mr Murphy:** We have been sounding like a broken record for the last number of weeks in encouraging Ministers to bring forward bids for any area of responsibility or any sector that falls under the broad ambit of their Department, in recognition that some of the sectors that she mentioned have, thus far, received little or no support. The support that we provided to airports covered businesses in the airport and gave rate relief and other support to them. As I said, in the first instance, keeping the airports open and enabling them to pick up again when we emerge from this pandemic will be crucial.

In some cases, bids have been brought forward for other sectors, including the taxi industry. I have been told that support may well be sought for travel agents, which I very much welcome, but it is for the Departments that have responsibility for those sectors to bring bids forward.

## **Premiere People: NICS Contract**

4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown of the £425 million contract with Premiere People for the provision of temporary agency workers for the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), agencies and non-departmental public bodies. (AQO 1614/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Construction and procurement delivery, in conjunction with Civil Service human resources, has completed procurement to provide agency workers for a wide variety of posts in the Civil Service, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. Within that procurement, a total of eight contracts were awarded, the estimated total value of all contracts being £425 million. As the use of the contract is demand-driven, the figures provided are estimates, rather than a guaranteed level of business.

Like many organisations, the Civil Service uses agency workers to carry out work that, for a variety of reasons, cannot be completed by substantive Civil Service staff. Those reasons include covering periods of staff absence, supporting time-limited projects or contractual work or, where necessary, to cover permanent vacancies pending substantive appointments.

Approximately 50% of agency workers in the Civil Service are assigned to the Department for Communities to discharge benefit processing services on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) under the terms of service-level agreements. The salary costs of all those staff are funded by DWP via the Department for Communities. Of the eight contracts, six were awarded to Premiere Employment Group Limited. The total estimated value of the Premiere contracts is £394 million.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that there has been a big overspend on previous contracts with agency firms. I appreciate that he mentioned estimates, but I hope that he can outline measures that have been put in place to avoid future overspends. The Comptroller and Auditor General has expressed concern that there is an over-reliance on agency staff and:

*"Strong evidence therefore exists that temporary solutions are being used to plug permanent gaps".*

It appears that the Minister's decision is at odds with that position. How can he commit to addressing the over-reliance on agency workers by announcing another lucrative contract for the further use of agency workers?

**Mr Murphy:** There will be oversight and monitoring of the contracts to make sure that they are properly operated and that the payments reflect the service provided.

Recruitment, as you know, is not an overnight process. It is ongoing to fill vacant posts permanently. The majority of agency workers are at administrative officer (AO) level, and, as of 15 February, there were 1,749 agency workers at that grade in the Civil Service. A recent AO external competition, which allowed current agency workers within the Civil Service to apply, has resulted in over 560 letters of offer being issued to date. There is an attempt to reduce reliance on agency workers and to increase the numbers of permanent staff. As I said, 50% of the agency workers are employed directly through the DWP contract, which is a service level agreement that it has with the Department for Communities. However, I agree with the Member, and, this year, we have enhanced the terms and conditions of agency workers. The best solution, where it can be found, is to have permanent workers with proper terms, conditions and career prospects.

**Ms Dolan:** Minister, I welcome the fact that you have required parity of treatment between agency and permanent workers in pay, annual leave and paid time off for medical appointments. In addition to those improvements in conditions, has your Department included any social clauses in the contract?

**Mr Murphy:** As the Member said, we have changed the terms and conditions to allow parity with those that apply to Civil Service workers. In consultation with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), the Department has used the Buy Social initiative to include a number of social clauses in the new contracts. The contractor will deliver paid work placements for Buy Social agency workers and business and education initiatives to a school or organisation in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector to support people's career development and employability. That support may include vocational talks, curriculum support, career guidance, workplace visits or mentoring. The contractor is also required to develop and maintain a human rights policy in relation to work carried out on that contract.

**Mr Durkan:** A few months ago, the Minister assured me, in the Chamber, that the necessary resources were in place to support the recruitment of the announced 900 Northern Ireland Civil Service posts in universal credit over the next few years, given the 126%

increase in the number of claims; a number that, sadly and inevitably, will increase even further. It is my understanding that 350 of those posts were advertised, yet, to date, not one of them has been filled. The DFC draft budget indicates no additional money for recruitment next year. Does the Minister agree that that investment is vital, not only to minimise the hardship faced by claimants but to reduce the massive stress on current staff?

**Mr Murphy:** I agree with the latter points that the Member made, but I disagree that I gave a guarantee. Any Finance Minister who guarantees what money will be in next year's Budget is someone to whom you should listen very carefully. I could not give any such guarantee last year, because we did not know what was going to be in next year's Budget. We have been delivered from the Treasury, very late and at short notice, what is, essentially, a flat Budget for next year. For Departments, such as Communities, to have the same cash available as they had last year is, effectively, a cut. I have had a number of meetings with the Minister for Communities, and she has correctly identified the pressures that the Member refers to. She is clearly exercised to ensure that she can employ the requisite number of staff to deal with, unfortunately, a very high level of increase in the number of people presenting to claim universal credit. We will work closely with her, and we hope to have an improved position by the time that we get to the final Budget stage.

**Mr Muir:** Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all been greatly indebted to our civil servants and officials for their work in challenging circumstances, particularly staff in the Department for the Economy for the assistance that they have given. It was recently reported that there is a 25% vacancy rate in the Department for the Economy. Will the Minister give us an assurance that everything is being done to fill those vacancies, so that we can relieve the pressure on staff in that Department?

**Mr Murphy:** We will do all that we can to support Departments when they identify pressures. Pressures of £1.7 billion were identified ahead of the Budget. The Budget did not deliver any additional cash, so that is a very significant level of pressure to try to meet from within existing resources, but we will continue to work with all Departments to try to assist them in managing the pressures that they face, including recruitment pressures.

## COVID-19: Budget Implications

5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the medium- to long-term Budget implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1615/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The Member will know that we are in the middle of a pandemic. Any future economic assessments will depend on the course and nature of the pandemic, the vaccination response and the potential for virus mutation. At this stage, it is not possible to predict accurately the medium- to long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. How the pandemic will impact on the Executive's Budget will depend on a number of factors, the primary one being the approach that the British Government take to public spending in the medium to long term. We will know more once work commences on a further spending review, which will set out the medium-term Budget envelope.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he foresee there being an impact on the Executive's capital spend as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that could have a detrimental impact on Departments such as Economy and Health?

**Mr Murphy:** It very much depends. This year's Budget, including the capital and resource allocations, is very disappointing, because, in effect, we have got the same amount as last year, given that costs rise and salary costs rise. The budgets of most of the larger Departments have, in effect, been cut. As I said, that is very disappointing. It will therefore depend on what policy approach the British Government take. If they revert to the approach that they took to the 2008 crash, for instance, when they decided to cut public spending to introduce austerity policies, we are into a real difficulty, because I do not think that we ever fully recovered from the austerity policies and cuts that were imposed on Budgets over a number of years. Last year's Budget was the first Budget to give all Departments an uplift, but, with this year's Budget, we are back to flat cash. It will therefore depend on what happens going forward. As the Member correctly identifies, if there is a reduction in capital, that will have an ongoing impact on how some of the bigger Departments can spend their money.

**Mr McGuigan:** The disappointing stand-still Budget provided to the Executive for next year seems to indicate that the British Government intend to use COVID to justify a return to austerity, just as they did with the financial crisis of 2008. Does the Minister agree that austerity is a self-defeating, right-wing ideology that will

hamper economic recovery from the health pandemic?

**Mr Murphy:** Austerity is the wrong approach. If ever we saw a lesson for the short-sightedness of cutting public services, it was the advent of the pandemic, when a range of public services, particularly the health service, which had been underfunded for years, became crucial. The direct knock-on effect of that is that the restrictions that we found ourselves with and that have had an impact on the economic activity are a consequence of trying to protect public services and making sure that the health service is not overwhelmed. There is therefore a linkage between the two. Austerity is a short-sighted policy, because it impacts on longer-term economic planning and spend. I hope that it is not a direction that the British Government revert to. I hope that they will have learnt the lesson that their previous dalliance with austerity policies did not serve the public well generally, and I hope that it is not a course that they follow in future.

**Mr Chambers:** Can the Minister make a commitment to ensuring that the sacrifices of our health service are recognised and that health transformation remains the priority in future funding?

**Mr Murphy:** I know that that is a key ask of the Health Department. The Member will know from my previous answers that we recognise that the health service was left under enormous pressure. When the Executive returned last January, they collectively set themselves the priority of trying to support the health service and the transformation programme. That remains Executive policy. The Member will know that, even though we have limited resources, Health gets the lion's share and tends to get the first call on any additional resources that we receive. That is as needed, because we have seen over the course of the pandemic, if we needed an example, how crucial and vital the health service is to protecting our population. I wish that we had a much better budget to offer it for next year, but we will certainly try to protect the transformation programme as best we can in the time ahead.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** We will be able to get in a quick question and answer.

## **January Monitoring Round: Departmental Bids**

6. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on departmental bids for unspent



COVID-19 funds made since the start of 2021. (AQO 1616/17-22)

8. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has received any bids in the January monitoring round from the Department for Infrastructure to maintain and improve roads in rural areas. (AQO 1618/17-22)

11. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Finance whether there have been any bids from the Minister of Education in the January monitoring round to provide laptops to enhance the provision of online learning. (AQO 1621/17-22)

3.15 pm

**Mr Murphy:** I would like to group questions 6, 8 and 11, but I doubt that we will get to supplementary questions for questions 8 and 11.

During the January monitoring round, Minister Weir submitted a bid of £3 million for children's portable devices for the Education Authority. The bid was agreed by the Executive on 21 January 2021. The Department for Infrastructure did not submit a bid in the January monitoring round to maintain and improve rural roads. In answer to the Member's question, having provided further additional resources on 2 February and 10 February subsequent to the January monitoring round, I have now asked Executive Ministers to provide final bids for funding in 2020-21. Those are under consideration. I will update the Assembly in due course.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I will take a brief supplementary question.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, I am mindful of the concerns of those waiting in limbo for cancer surgeries across the North, and I am sure that you share my concern. Therefore, has your Department made any further funding available for private healthcare providers to enable more cancer surgeries to take place?

**Mr Murphy:** This is a conversation that was had a number of weeks ago at the Executive, and we were advised by the Health Department that it could not purchase surgery in this year to be spent out in the next financial year. So, the allocation of some unspent COVID money would not have worked in that regard. I understand and appreciate the points that the Member makes, although purchasing surgery abroad might be problematic in a pandemic with the restrictions on travel. It was discussed that

surgery purchased now could not be spent out in the next financial year, so it was not possible to allocate money to that. No bid came in for that in that regard either.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Members, that ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

## Unspent Funding

T1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Finance to inform the House of the quantum of funds at risk of being unspent and therefore lost to the Treasury. (AQT 1021/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** We are still receiving information from Departments, so I cannot. Suffice it to say that we intend to bring an updated paper to the Executive this Thursday, which I hope will capture all that we have received to date. We have left a little bit of leeway should anyone have something in the pipeline that they want to bring to our attention. My priority is to make sure that all the sectors that have missed out get an opportunity to have a case made for them. We also put in place contingency plans, which we will bring to the Executive, to spend out any remaining money to ensure that its full value goes back into the local economy or into local services.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister. Has he received a bid from the Minister of Justice on behalf of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the Chief Constable's warning that he may have to lose several hundred officers, which would amount to a net loss of 800 officers compared with the commitment in New Decade, New Approach?

**Mr Murphy:** I think that there is a difference between what the Member is talking about in making a bid. The bids that I have been speaking about are bids for unspent COVID money, which was the framework for his original question. The first question dealt with unspent money or underspend of money. That, of course, is to be spent in this financial year. If he is moving onto the Budget for next year, of course, as I said in response to previous questions, we did not receive any increase for any Department, so any bids or pressures identified by the Department of Justice or, indeed, by any other Department, have to be set against the reality that we had no additional money for any Department and we had no time to do a re-prioritisation exercise, which may have taken money off one Department to put it into a priority in another. That left us in a very difficult position in trying to match for the year

ahead. Of course, pressures in relation to policing personnel come in under that as well.

## Fiscal Management

T2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance, given that he will be aware of the code of practice and established rules of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which are embedded in the Treasury's 'Improving Spending Control' guidance, whether he agrees that where it states in that guidance that "devolved administrations, and their Arms Length Bodies will be expected to monitor and manage information about spending effectively, including improving the skills needed, in order to help them deliver their spending plans" that is a good foundation for fiscal management. (AQT 1022/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Yes, I think that it is, and that is why we included reference to best practice in the OECD in setting up the terms of reference of the fiscal council, the proposition on which I have put to the Executive.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Minister for his answer, short though it is. Minister, the DCAL subregional stadia programme for soccer was agreed as a priority by the Executive and allocated £36 million back in 2011. Consultation started in November 2015 and closed in February 2016, and, for some reason, the Minister went out to a second consultation. We are now in February 2021, and no money has been allocated to the football clubs. Will the Minister agree with me that that does not meet the OECD established rules of good practice?

**Mr Murphy:** The Member has neglected to mention that we had a three-year hiatus, when the Assembly was down, in the middle of all of that. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has been replaced by the Department for Communities, which has responsibility for that programme. The Communities Minister can answer on — perhaps, not what happened under her predecessors — what is intended to happen to that programme in the near future. I agree with the Member that we want to see things work as efficiently as they can. I also share his view that investment in sports is a very good long-term investment for society as a whole.

## IT Provision

T3. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will allocate extra resources to

schools by extending for another year the Engage programme and the provision of expanded IT support for schools and IT equipment for children who do not have adequate IT at home for schooling. (AQT 1023/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I entirely agree with the Member that the Department of Education has run two very important programmes, and my Department recently increased the money for the Engage programme. As I said in a previous answer, the Department has given £3 million to support additional IT requirements for kids who are homeschooling.

COVID money will be available next year. It will not be on the same level as this year, where we have had over £3.3 billion. We have been promised about £0.5 billion for next year. Some of that is earmarked for Education. I know that the Education Minister is very complimentary about the value of the Engage scheme in particular, and I imagine that he will bid for support on those grounds. I will be very happy to support those bids.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that East Derry is a very rural constituency, I often hear about the difficulties with broadband and digital poverty. What further steps is your Department taking to remedy that?

**Mr Murphy:** I recognise the problems; I represent South Armagh, which has very similar issues with broadband connectivity, rural poverty and deprivation. My Department has been involved in a pilot scheme on IT support for vulnerable people in areas that struggle with broadband connectivity. The pilot scheme has been substantially oversubscribed, and we intend to look again at what resources can be applied to that pilot scheme. Of course, I encourage the Department of Education to look at rural areas where there are difficulties. Homeschooling is difficult enough for parents who have full access to broadband, but where it is patchy or non-existent, it is virtually impossible for people.

## Winter Fuel Allowance

T4. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of what should have been the automatic payment of winter fuel allowance in November and December having been quite problematic in a number of areas, what steps is his Department taking to resolve the issues to avoid a repeat of the problems next year. (AQT 1024/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I seem to be answering topical questions on the business of a lot of other Departments today, and that is clearly a Department for Communities issue. We provide the resources if we can, and if the Executive approve that, the Department has to carry it forward. I am not certain what the hold-ups or difficulties have been. The Minister for Communities might be able to provide you with an answer on that issue.

**Mrs Barton:** Minister, I was going to follow up by asking whether you had any idea of how many people were affected and how much finance was involved.

**Mr Murphy:** Unfortunately, I do not have that information with me at the moment. I can undertake to ask the Department for Communities to provide the Member with a written answer.

## Gender Identity

T5. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Finance whether he agrees with the transgender community here in its call for a change in the law to allow people to declare their own gender identity rather than enduring a medical process to receive a medical declaration, which is the current process. (AQT 1025/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Yes, I do. I met TransgenderNI last year to talk through the issue and how best to bring about change here. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient time left in this mandate to bring through such legislation. However, I have commissioned research to inform legislation in the next mandate. The research went out to tender in November last year. Unfortunately, no proposals were submitted. Therefore, it has been retendered, with a closing date of 26 February this year. I very much encourage bids for that important work.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thanks, Minister, for that answer. Will the research that your Department is conducting refer to the 2015 Bill and the current law in the Twenty-six Counties?

**Mr Murphy:** Yes. I am conscious that there is a shift internationally towards self-declaration models of gender identity. The research will examine the legislation south of the border as well. The fact that other jurisdictions have moved first means that we can learn lessons from them. It is also important that transgender people here are not left behind, so we need to make progress on the matter in the next mandate.

## Job Start

T6. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Finance how much money came here by way of Barnett consequentials for the youth labour market intervention that is known as Kickstart in Britain, was proposed as Job Start here but is now known as "false start", given that it, too, has been shelved by the Minister for Communities after months of preparation by businesses and promises to young people. (AQT 1026/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** It is up to the Executive as a whole to decide what to do with any money that comes as a Barnett consequential. It is not for an individual Department. The money comes unhypothecated, as he will know from his time as a Minister. He will also know that the programme has not been shelved but has run into the same difficulties as those that he identified with employing people to deal with universal credit and that the Department is very concerned about that and desires to press ahead with those employment support programmes. That is a discussion that we are having with the Minister for Communities, and it is an issue that we hope to address between now and the final Budget paper.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he will agree — I think that he already has — about the importance of upskilling our young people for employment and reskilling people of all ages, particularly given the employment abyss into which we are staring. Does he share my concerns about the impact that any failure to proceed with Job Start might have, combined with the impact on many employment and skills programmes, which has been caused by the loss of European structural funds?

**Mr Murphy:** Yes, I absolutely agree with him. He mentioned in a previous question the figures for universal credit, the need to get people upskilled and reskilled and the need to give some hope of employment to young people. Those programmes are hugely important. That is why I am exercised about trying to find support for the Minister for Communities and why we have pursued lost European funding, which has a real impact on similar skills programmes in the Department for the Economy. Those will all be vital because we are going to face a significant economic downturn. We are already facing a significant increase in unemployment. If we want to provide support for people to try to get them back into full employment, we need to assist them with skills and re-education opportunities.

## Hospices: Financial Support

T7. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the fact that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the fundraising activities of hospices, and given the crucial role that those organisations play in caring for people with terminal illnesses, with the fact that there remains money to allocate in this financial year, whether he will consider an injection of financial support, further to the more than £15 million that he provided previously, to help hospices through this difficult period. (AQT 1027/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I thank the Member for his question. Yes. As he said, we have, with the agreement of the Department of Health, provided support for the hospices over this year.

We are looking at a further package for hospices from the unspent COVID money to assist them. As he and, I am sure, all Members of the House do, I value the services that hospices provide. I am glad that we were able to offer them some much-needed support. We are working with hospices to secure a further package for them.

**3.30 pm**

**Mr Gildernew:** You touched on the issue in a previous answer, Minister, but will you expand on it? As a representative of a rural community, I am aware that this is a time of year financially when spare cash is often directed towards improving roads. I am sure that we all continue to see roads in poor condition, as I have today. Would you be open to a further bid for road maintenance, Minister?

**Mr Murphy:** I would. I know from my experience of having responsibility for roads that time is moving on. Generally speaking, Roads Service, as it was then, would have been ready to go in January, February and March. We are now approaching the end of February. We had no bids in January monitoring for road maintenance or road improvements generally. However, if such a bid should come in, I would be happy to consider it. I suspect that time is against that now, but I would be happy to consider such a bid if one comes in.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That ends today's topical questions. Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Thank you, Minister.

I ask Members to take their ease before we move back to continue the Private Members' Business.

## Private Members' Business

### Recovery and Investment Strategy

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That this Assembly recognises the deep and lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and businesses across Northern Ireland; further recognises the severe impact that restrictions have had on our society and economy and the devastating impact that the conclusion of the furlough scheme will have on jobs; agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis. — [Ms McLaughlin.]*

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after "will have on jobs;" and insert:*

*"agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis." — [Dr Archibald.]*

**Mr Storey:** I am sure that not all the nation is waiting with bated breath after Question Time to hear my contribution. It is more likely that they will want to hear what the Prime Minister has to say about moving out of lockdown.

Forgive me for being the cynic in the House, but, when you read the motion and listen to the proposer and some other contributions, you would nearly think that we are in the first shot of the 2022 Assembly elections. The motion reads and sounds like a party manifesto. Maybe it is time for the SDLP and others to consider seriously whether they are part of the forced mandatory coalition that we have in these arrangements. Instead of trying to have the best of both worlds, maybe it is time for the SDLP to tell its electorate where it stands on working together in an Executive.

The SDLP is not alone in acting in that manner. The Member for East Antrim was right to raise the issue of the Job Start scheme earlier. The Minister responsible for that scheme has not really told us why it has been set aside. Did the

Minister want it to be rebranded? Did the Minister want it to be redesigned? Was the Minister nervous about being part of a UK-wide scheme? Those are all legitimate questions that need to be answered, because they all have an impact on the economic recovery and well-being of Northern Ireland.

We also need to ask a question of the Alliance Party, which likes to present itself as benign, being neither unionist nor nationalist and living in this world of, "We really don't know what we are, but we are up for whatever is out there". Be assured that the Alliance Party will raise its hand for whatever is populist. What did its representative say about the Executive? He said that, when it comes to Ministers, they are still in their silos. Maybe the reason that they are in their silos is that the construct of this place has resulted in silos. They are not a Government the same as the Governments in any other part of these islands. This is a forced mandatory coalition, and it is therefore no wonder that we have the outcomes that we sometimes have.

Of course, Sinn Féin never ceases to amaze me in how it comes up with the schemes and plans that it gets involved in. Philip McGuigan, my North Antrim colleague, wants us to have more fiscal powers. Let us ignore the £13 billion from the Treasury and the £4 billion that has come to Northern Ireland as a result of being part of the United Kingdom despite the protocol. Now, he wants us to have more power and more fiscal responsibility. Will the Members opposite tell us whether they want to bring in water charges? Will the parties come clean and tell us what economic stimuli they will introduce that will tax the people of Northern Ireland?

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. He speaks passionately on the subject. Does he agree that, to date, solutions, recommendations or, indeed, ideas have not been brought forward by the parties opposite, because, in reality, what is provided to us by the block grant and other means is what keeps our place in the United Kingdom secure, as it is today?

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. He makes a valid point about the fiscal package. It is vital, but it is not the only reason that we want to remain part of the United Kingdom.

When we come to the motion, let us pull away all the rhetoric and let the party that proposed it be honest with its electorate. Huge problems have been created as a result of lockdown. Yet, when the Economy Minister brought forward

proposals to help local businesses — click and collect is one example — what did the other parties in the Executive decide to do? They said, "You cannot do that. That is a bridge too far". The ink on the press release was not even dry when they went out saying, "It's terrible. We need to support local businesses. The traders are crying out for help" — and they are.

We need to have a dose of reality in the House. Let us remember that Google — not that I always take it to be the source of my information, but it is the source of most of our information today — says that 87% of retail and recreation establishments had a loss in footfall in the five weeks prior to January.

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

**Mr Storey:** It is time for the party that proposed the motion to come up with real ideas and not try to be part of an Executive when, in reality, it would prefer to be outside the door.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I advise the Member that she has four minutes before we have to pass over to the Minister.

**Ms Dolan:** The COVID-19 pandemic has given the world a different perspective on the way that we live our lives. It has exposed flaws in the traditional models and approaches to public services, but, likewise, it has progressed thinking and practice around new and different ways of working. An example of that is the regional hubs announced by the Finance Minister last week. It was probably not a direct result of the pandemic, but the pandemic was possibly a catalyst in making us realise that remote working is feasible and productive. Enabling people to work closer to home promotes regional economic balance, reduces carbon emissions and, perhaps most importantly, promotes the work-life balance and health and well-being of employees. Investment in rural broadband through Project Stratum must mean that those in rural areas are not impeded from working remotely.

A strong, regionally balanced and inclusive economy is essential if we are to tackle the social and economic challenges facing us. Any economic recovery cannot repeat the mistakes of the past and must provide decent and secure work. Sinn Féin is committed to strengthening collective bargaining rules to empower workers, such as the need to remove the 20-employee threshold for statutory trade union recognition. There has been significant spin from the Executive on business survival; however, trying

to keep the pre-pandemic economy alive will not bring about an economic recovery. We have already seen an adverse impact on our high street with a number of retail outlets moving exclusively online.

To achieve the kind of economy that we want and need to see, key structural weaknesses in our economy need to be addressed, such as too few higher-paying jobs, the skills gap and our regional imbalance. We know that higher pay and greater stability brings benefits to people's well-being. Working to increase the number of people in higher-paying jobs and to decrease the number of lower-paying jobs will bring a range of economic and social benefits. While the Economy Minister recognises the need to end low-paid jobs, her strategy looks only at improving productivity in order to do that. She has given no commitments or recognition to the need to end the scourge that is precarious work that results in low pay.

Developing the skills base of our young people and workforce should remain central to our economic success going forward. There are too many sections of our society where low skill levels and low educational achievement are prevalent. I have real concerns that, in a post-COVID-19 world with significant competition for jobs, that section of society could face even greater challenges in securing employment. At the end of December 2020, 94,800 employees in the North were still on the furlough scheme. Therefore, the potential for unemployment to increase significantly over the next few months means that there will need to be a particular focus on adult education and the opportunities to reskill and upskill.

While the economic recovery must be led by the Department for the Economy, there is a responsibility on the Executive as a whole to contribute. Transport and physical infrastructure are the responsibility of the Infrastructure Minister, and, as infrastructure development is central to closing regional imbalances in the economic recovery, it is important that the SDLP recognises that responsibility. I am from Fermanagh, a county without a single mile of dual carriageway, never mind a motorway. I could give you all a lesson on regional imbalances, but I will leave that for another day.

**Mr Carroll:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are obviously having an important discussion, but we are reaching the point at which we will have had debate for about an hour and a half and not had a contribution from a Member who is from a party that is not in the Executive. I ask that your office considers that

for future debates to ensure that the parties that are not in the Executive are not excluded.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Yes, I will reflect that back to the Business Committee. I understand the point that you make, but, within the time constraints of an hour and a half, the Minister must be called half an hour before the conclusion of the debate. I will reflect that back. Thank you.

I call the Minister to respond to the points made during the debate.

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** First of all, I thank Members for their contributions.

COVID-19 has not just been about the economy. As a public health crisis, it has created havoc with our children and young people's ways of life, especially through the unprecedented disruption to our education systems. It has split family units in a way that none of us could have imagined. It has put pressure on our heroic health service, and, most tragically of all, it has taken the lives of more than 2,000 people in Northern Ireland. The decisions to impose such restrictions have been aligned with the respective health protection regulations brought forward by the Minister of Health and supported by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA).

### 3.45 pm

There is no one in the Chamber more acutely aware than I am of the economic damage done by these restrictions. As Mr Stalford pointed out, although others have called for longer and more extreme lockdowns, I have repeatedly highlighted the devastating effect that restrictions have on employment, our town and city centres, our high streets and the wider economy. No level of grants can compensate for the loss of trade incurred over the past year. The best way in which to support local businesses beyond this restrictions period is to have a safe and sustainable reopening of the economy.

Ms McLaughlin began the debate by outlining the choice that we face between constantly complaining and moaning or finding solutions. She set the bar of expectation high. I will leave it for others to judge for which of the two options she opted. She then spent some considerable time espousing the virtues of the protocol. Her party is a cheerleader for the protocol, so we should perhaps not be surprised by that. Ms

McLaughlin cannot, however, hide her head in the sand and ignore the damage being done to businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland as a direct result of the protocol. Indeed, her own party —

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** Give me one second. Indeed, her party leader wrote to me asking for assistance to be given to businesses suffering as a direct result of the protocol. I will give way now.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister very much for giving way. Does the Minister agree that the protocol is the problem, not in any way the solution?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, the protocol is indeed the problem. We did not have to be here. There are those in the House who just today told us that we should be thankful for the protocol. I do not know many businesses that are thanking anyone for the bureaucracy, the hindrances to trade and the disruption of the UK's internal market.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for giving way. She mentioned an interesting document that she received from the leader of the SDLP, Colum Eastwood MP. Does she find that in some way to be in conflict with the actions of his party in this House, where it calls for the rigorous implementation of the protocol?

**Mrs Dodds:** Yes. Sometimes we have to ask the real SDLP to stand up, but in this case I will defend Mr Eastwood, because I think that he is genuinely reflecting the concerns of his constituents and writing to me asking for some help with the problems that the protocol is bringing for businesses.

**A Member:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** I do have to keep going. Mr Stewart raised some of the problems being faced by businesses because of the protocol. I can assure him that my Department has been cataloguing the issues and engaging directly with our Government on them. Mr Buckley called those supporting the protocol the pawns of the EU. If this were a game of chess, those people would already have knocked over their king and accepted defeat.

Northern Ireland is a great place in which to live, work and invest. I want to see us reach our full potential and grow our economy, but, to do

so, we must recognise the frictions and damage created by the protocol. Unless we have full and unfettered access to our most important market in GB, we simply cannot maximise our opportunity for economic success.

I listened with some interest to the contribution from the Chair of the Economy Committee. Although I may not be a cheerleader for everything that the Conservative Party has done of late, we absolutely must recognise the unprecedented level of financial support given to Northern Ireland by our national Government, as well as the immense success of the national vaccine roll-out across the United Kingdom, which has meant that over 30% of our citizens in Northern Ireland have had at least one dose of the vaccine. As my colleague Mr Storey noted, being part of the United Kingdom matters.

Since last April, my Department has stepped up to the challenge of providing financial support for businesses, employers and individuals impacted on by COVID. It has provided in the region of half a billion pounds to tens of thousands of businesses and individuals. I will not outline the details of every scheme delivered by my Department, not least because my colleague Mr Buckley started to do that for me, but I will write to all Members to provide an overview. I am sure that Members, including the Chair of the Committee for the Economy, will agree that it compares very favourably to that of other Departments. My officials have sought to meet the challenge head-on, working tirelessly to turn around schemes that would ordinarily have taken weeks. We owe them our thanks for the work that they have done. Along with the UK Government initiatives, such as the self-employment income support scheme and the furlough scheme, collectively, we have provided financial assistance to all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland.

I note and concur with the concerns raised in the motion with regard to the furlough scheme and the potential impact of its ending on 30 April. I have requested that the Chancellor reconsider that date, given that significant job losses would inevitably occur were it not to be extended. The economy needs more time for sustained recovery before that financial support for employers and individuals is removed. I will continue to work to that end. In parallel, I will work with Executive colleagues to consider how best to support those who most require ongoing financial assistance within the designated budget available, as well as working on the pathway to recovery and resilience beyond the COVID nightmare.

In June 2020, I published our framework document, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. Guided by that document, my Department is preparing to publish its economic recovery action plan. The plan will set out the interventions required to assist people and businesses to adjust to and recover from the changing economic fundamentals caused by COVID-19 and EU exit.

Four themes for recovery have been identified in the action plan: stimulating research and development and innovation; supporting a highly skilled and agile workforce; promoting investment, trade and exports; and building a greener economy. Within each of the four themes, a suite of actions has been developed to promote sustainable economic recovery. Needless to say, Members will understand that, as with the virus itself, the global economic consequences of COVID-19 are still unfolding. Therefore, it will be important that the action plan is agile and can evolve and adapt to meet the needs of the economy as we move through the crisis to recovery and back to economic prosperity.

Looking ahead to that more stable and prosperous future, my Department has also been working on the development of an economic vision for Northern Ireland. That separate and more strategic piece aims to communicate a plan for the next decade, which will guide our longer-term economic ambitions and direction. That economic vision will also identify the core sectors and technologies where Northern Ireland can demonstrate global leadership and the opportunities that exist for us to take advantage of our strengths in those areas. The next decade for the Northern Ireland economy must be one of innovation. I am confident that, through an innovation-driven recovery, we will deliver long-term, positive outcomes for all people.

I also want to see funding that will allow me to deliver a comprehensive skills package. I need support from the Committee for the Economy, the Chamber and, indeed, wider society in helping me to gain the budget that I require to invest in skills. Without that investment in skills, economic growth and recovery potential will be stunted. Whilst my Department has led, and will continue to lead, on all aspects of that work, economic development is a shared responsibility for those across the entirety of government at both devolved and national level. I note that the Member from Fermanagh talked about the importance of infrastructure. Of course, my Department is delivering the largest infrastructure project ever delivered in Northern Ireland, Project Stratum, which is being



delivered through DUP confidence-and-supply funding for Northern Ireland.

In relation to the motion, of course, I will work with my fellow Ministers on our immediate recovery plan and implementation and will continue to instigate the conversation and thinking to influence our longer-term aims of a globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral economy, as per our joint commitments in the Programme for Government.

I, again, thank Members for their contributions to today's debate. While I do not underestimate the challenge ahead of us as we continue to respond to COVID-19 and its economic and societal impacts, now is not the time for petty point-scoring. Now is the time for real and genuine collaboration that puts our people and their economy first. I am confident that if we work together, not just in the Executive and Assembly but right across all spectrums of society, we will thrive as a nation.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will speak in support of the amendment. The proposer of the original motion, Sinead McLaughlin, spoke about solutions and tackling inequality. I would not dream of arguing against either of those things, but if we are to find solutions to the economic devastation that is possibly facing us as a result of a number of elements, it is crucial that the Executive work as one and that all Executive Ministers play their part in producing an economic recovery plan that creates well-paid jobs, leads to an end to inequality and gives our society and our people hope for the future.

The consequences that we face are the result of, almost, the perfect storm. Facing Brexit on its own would have been bad enough for any devolved Assembly with limited fiscal powers, but to face COVID-19 and Brexit and, possibly, an accompanying world recession will be a huge challenge for all the political parties involved in the Executive, and those that are not involved in the Executive as well. We need a united front, and that is why I think the amendment is important.

Members on the opposite Benches have said — to a degree, they are right — that the economy has been ruined as a result of the lockdown. Yes, that is true to a certain degree, but it is COVID-19 that has ruined the economy. Nobody set out to close down the economy. Nobody's ambition was to close down the economy. I heard Members say that it has cost x amount of pounds to keep the economy closed, so I checked the latest figures for deaths across these islands. Across these

islands, in the last year, 125,000 people have died as a result of COVID-19. Imagine if we had not closed the economy down. Imagine if we had not, in response to the third wave, which has been devastating, closed the economy down.

**Mr Buckley:** I appreciate the Member giving way, and I understand the point that he has made. Inevitably, yes, the actions by the Executive have helped save lives. Equally, in that spirit, will the Member acknowledge that some of the restrictions put in place by the Department of Health on wider health services and, indeed, on the economy have had a knock-on impact on mental well-being, jobs, family life etc? Does he recognise that?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I remind the Member that he has five minutes.

**Mr O'Dowd:** They have, but I remind you again that 125,000 people have died. They cannot be replaced. Jobs can be replaced. Businesses can be replaced. Mental health can be treated. I accept that it is a huge challenge for our society and has to be part of our recovery. However, when you look at the scale of what we faced, it was the right decision to close down. We now have to decide what we have to do to create a new economy. Our economy was in trouble before COVID-19. It was in trouble as a result of the pending Brexit and in trouble even before Brexit was mentioned.

As a society, we have the lowest-paid jobs on these islands. We have the lowest economic output on these islands. We have the lowest standard of living on these islands. That was before Brexit, before COVID-19 and before anybody had heard of the protocol, so we have a long, long way to go to try to create a fair economic recovery for all.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Very, very quickly.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member also accept that we can sometimes create a situation of doom and gloom in here?

There was a 5.7% increase in new businesses registered in Northern Ireland in 2020. We also need to give confidence to the community.

**4.00 pm**

**Mr O'Dowd:** We do. You need to reflect on that yourself, Mr Storey. Is your campaign against

the protocol giving confidence to the business community or is it causing difficulties in that community? At the early stages of the campaign on the protocol, your leader quite rightly pointed out that there are huge economic opportunities for businesses as a result of the protocol. Invest NI now has enquiries coming in from across the globe about how businesses could set up here in order to create jobs and prosperity for our people. When those businesses are looking at scenes such as those that we saw at Larne or Belfast, or they hear —

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** — our political leaders say that we are facing a crisis, it does not give confidence.

Let us use the opportunities that are in front of us. I accept that there are problems for some businesses with the protocol, but there are also huge opportunities as a result of it.

**Mr O'Toole:** Mr Deputy Speaker, can I just check? Do I have 10 minutes to make my winding-up speech?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** You have 10 minutes.

**Mr O'Toole:** I will try not to use all my 10 minutes; I will try to be uncharacteristically concise. First, let me start by thanking everyone who contributed to the debate. It is clearly vital that we discuss the issues. They are critical and fundamental to why we are all here, whether we agree on individual economic issues.

As we debate the motion, we all hope that we are nearing the end of this most acute phase of a pandemic that has changed the life of virtually everyone on the planet. We heard from John O'Dowd, the previous Member to speak, that 125,000 people in these islands have died. I am glad that he drew our attention to that, because it is the most fundamental and critical thing that we should all bear in mind when we are responding to the consequences of the pandemic, including its economic consequences.

In this part of the world, we are sometimes liable to dwell on how unique and distinct we are — and we are — but in the face of a once in a lifetime public health crisis, the Assembly and jurisdiction faces many of the same dilemmas that are being faced around the world. How do we keep as many people as possible healthy? How do we minimise deaths? How do we avoid our health services collapsing? How do we

vaccinate our people quickly? How also do we ensure that we have a fairer and greener economy when we finally emerge from what we all agree is a hateful hibernation? That is what the motion is all about. According to my party, it is about emerging from our hateful hibernation in a fairer and greener way while not only addressing the very many long-standing structural issues that have affected our economy but taking advantage of the unique and distinct place that we find ourselves in as a result of the protocol but not exclusively because of it.

Before I come on to some of the main arguments in my summing-up, I want to touch briefly on some of the arguments that were made by colleagues from across the House throughout the debate. Caoimhe Archibald moved the amendment, which we do not agree with, although, in a sense, I understand its point. We think that it is important that we are specific in holding Ministers to account for the delivery of an economic strategy, and I am glad that the Minister is here to respond to the debate. Among the things that Caoimhe Archibald said was that we need to deliver on a just transition. We absolutely agree with that. That is why we talked about it today.

My constituency colleague Christopher Stalford, who is no longer in the Chamber, talked about the importance of opening up the economy as quickly as possible. As I said when I intervened on him earlier, unfortunately, that opens up the false dichotomy that far too many people in the debate and, frankly, on the opposite side of the House have been prone to when talking about the economic challenges of COVID. That is the idea that somehow there is a public health response and then there is the economy, and if you would just open everything up — that means the shops, the restaurants and the pubs — we could all get back to normal. I am afraid that that is just a fantasy. Sadly, that is not the case, and I am afraid that, even in her response, the Minister slightly indulged the notion that somehow the two are in opposition to one another. There is no economic response without a comprehensive and effective public health response. There is no way of recovering our economy unless, when we lift the restrictions, we do so in a durable and sustainable way.

I am afraid that the lesson that all of us had to learn before Christmas was that, if you precipitously ease restrictions in an unplanned way in order to narrowly prioritise short-term economic interests, there are negative public health consequences. I do not want to dwell on that point, but it is important.

There are noises off from the Member for North Antrim from a sedentary position. He talked about the effects of lockdown, working together in the Executive and how he thought that fiscal powers were a bad idea. What are his bright ideas for overhauling economic policy in this place? I will happily give way to him. I see him moving towards the mic.

**Mr Storey:** I remind the Member that I was not that person; it was the party opposite that raised the issue of fiscal powers. John O'Dowd has raised it again. Let us hear from the party opposite and from the SDLP about your plans. If they are anything like previous plans, City of Derry Airport will probably be back up for sale again.

**Mr O'Toole:** I will say two things. I could keep the honourable Member here all day telling him about my plans and my party's plans for greater fiscal powers, which would be matched to a proper long-term economic strategy. I will tell you what they would not be. They would not be the kind of use of fiscal powers that Sammy Wilson demonstrated 10 years ago when he actively sought a new fiscal power from the Treasury in London, only to use it to subsidise non-existent transatlantic flights, which cost us £2.5 million every year. I want more fiscal powers for this place, but I want to use them better than Sammy Wilson did in giving away 2.5 million quid out of the block grant every year. Every time a Member opposite lectures me about fiscal responsibility, I will lecture you back about the Sammy tax.

**Mr Buckley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Toole:** I am happy to give way to Jonny Buckley.

**Mr Buckley:** Getting back to the motion, I agree with the initial sentiment about recovery and an investment strategy. However, does the amendment not remove the politics from the motion in calling for a collective strategy? If that is the case, why can the Member's party not support it?

**Mr O'Toole:** Our motion is about an Executive approach, but it is also about holding people accountable. In the nicest possible way, I am glad that the Minister is here today and that we are holding her accountable.

I will address points made by Members before I move to my own points. John Stewart was exactly right when he talked about the many issues that face our economy because of COVID. He talked about Job Start and

apprenticeships, and we agree with him on those. He moved on to talk about issues that have arisen as a result of the protocol, which in itself is a consequence of Brexit. The Member who has just intervened dismissed the idea that the east-west disruption on goods moving from Britain to Northern Ireland was a consequence of Brexit. My God, what cognitive dissonance. There would not be a protocol if not for Brexit. There would certainly not be a protocol if we had not had a series of opportunities for a softer all-UK Brexit, one that would have avoided disruption in the Irish Sea.

**Mr Buckley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Toole:** I will not give way. I have been generous so far.

That was spurned by the party opposite.

Let me come on to the protocol and a key issue that we are discussing. We face one of the biggest economic crises that any of us have lived through. It may even dwarf the financial crisis of 2008. We do not know when we will fully emerge from this. We hope that we will see sustainable global economic growth, but we do not know what the path of that recovery will be or how well the rest of the globe will do on vaccination efforts. There is huge uncertainty. I recognise that, and it does not make the Minister's job any easier. However, at the beginning of my remarks, I talked about this place being unique and distinctive, which we focus on too much sometimes. However, the truth is that our unique and distinctive nature means that, because of the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves post Brexit, we have a unique selling point. I did not want Brexit. I did not want Brexit so much that I left a career over it. The only reason that I am here is because of Brexit. I found the consequences for Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland too unacceptable, and that is why I got involved in politics. However, the protocol means that we, not only unlike any other part of these islands but unlike any other part of this continent, have unique, untrammelled and unfettered access from Northern Ireland not only into the British market, which — I agree with the Members opposite who keep saying it — is critical to our economy but into the European single market of 450 million people. That is unique on this continent.

We know that food producers are facing issues. For example, in Britain, the people who catch Scottish langoustines, those who produce Somerset cheddar and Welsh lamb farmers cannot get their produce to supermarket

shelves or, when they reopen, restaurants on the continent quickly enough. We have replacements for all those products: for every Scottish langoustine, there is a Portavogie prawn; for Somerset cheddar, there is Coleraine cheddar; for Welsh lamb, there is lamb from the Mourne and the Sperrins. The Members opposite may shake their heads, but it is true. That is why Invest NI, which works for the Minister, is looking at those opportunities.

In the area of life sciences and highly regulated manufacturing, we have some great pharmaceutical companies in Northern Ireland. We have Almac, which is in Mr Buckley's constituency, and Norbrook, which is beside the border in Newry. We have an established life sciences sector. I am sure that the Minister knows this because Invest NI will have told her: that is exactly the kind of sector that can benefit from the protocol and having access to trade in both markets. Why not?

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

**Mr O'Toole:** Why, when we are talking about a just transition, do we not focus on our access to the European green deal and the green industrial revolution that Boris Johnson keeps talking about? Let us maximise the opportunities that we have and our unique place on this continent. Let us stop talking down the Northern Ireland economy. People on this side of the Chamber are often accused of that; now, however, people on the other side of the Chamber are the ones who are talking us down.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Member's time is up.

**Mr O'Toole:** Let us maximise the opportunities. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises the deep and lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and businesses across Northern Ireland; further recognises the severe impact that restrictions have had on our society and economy and the devastating impact that the conclusion of the furlough scheme will have on jobs; agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy;*

*and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis.*

*Adjourned at 4.12 pm.*

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