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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 23 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a few opening remarks. Members will be aware that I have issued a number of communications since the last sitting. Today, I want to recognise the very significant cooperation that there has been in my discussions with party Whips and Assembly Commission members. There has been an absolute unity of purpose to ensure that the Assembly is focused on the public health crisis at this time, and I want to thank all those Members who have so cooperated.

I met junior Ministers last week, and I have received a positive response from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that Ministers will come to the Chamber frequently, as shown by the fact that there are two statements to the Assembly today. Members will also be aware that the Assembly has significant business tomorrow when it will consider giving consent to the Coronavirus Bill.

I have had further meetings with officials this morning, and continued work is being done to revise the practical arrangements for Assembly working procedures during this period, some of which you can see here this afternoon. I will have further conversations with the Whips and the Assembly Commission as required over the next number of days. I plan to attend a meeting of the Committee Chairpersons tomorrow to discuss the business of Committees.

As I conclude this morning, I thank all the Assembly staff, Members and their party staff who are working to support us in Parliament Buildings during these very concerning times.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to express my thanks and the thanks of the whole Assembly to all those in our community and our public services who are working to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. It is, indeed, a fast-moving situation. They are making extraordinary efforts, and it is only right that the business of the Assembly adjusts to support them.

Mr Ivan Davis

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a number of remarks in relation to the passing of Ivan Davis, a former Member. The former Ulster Unionist Member for Lagan Valley, Ivan Davis OBE, sadly passed away on Friday 13 March. As his funeral service was taking place at the same time as the plenary sitting last Monday, I agreed with the Ulster Unionist Party that it was appropriate to delay tributes to Ivan until today. I want to thank personally Robbie Butler, the Ulster Unionist Party Whip, for his full cooperation in this matter.

Before joining the Assembly, Ivan had been a Mayor of Lisburn. In the first term of the Assembly, we were the Chief Whip of our respective parties for a period of time.

While we came from different political perspectives, I always found Ivan to be courteous in all our dealings, and he was someone with whom you could certainly do business. His passing follows other losses of late of Members who served in that first Assembly and who, many would say, were courageous in doing so. In what are already very sobering times, that gives additional cause for reflection.

We extend our sympathies at this difficult time to Ivan's wife Betty and his children Allyson, Hayden and Gareth.

Before I invite Members to pay their tributes to Ivan, I put on record and extend the House's condolences to Mike Nesbitt, whose mother Brenda passed away on Saturday 14 March.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words. It is an honour for me today, even briefly, to pay respect on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Assembly to the late Ivan Davis OBE. Along with the OBE, Ivan was a freeman of the city of Lisburn, something of which he was very proud. He sadly left us on 13 March 2020 — peacefully in hospital, and for that we are grateful. As you said, Mr Speaker, Ivan was the much-loved husband to Betty and father of Allyson, Hayden, Gareth and the late Alvin. He was also a devoted grandfather and great-grandfather, and our thoughts are very much with those people at this time.

Ivan was first elected to political office in 1973, one year after I was born. Some of us newbie politicians may think that the decisions that we make today and have had to make in recent months have been difficult: they have, but, when I cast my mind back and think about people like Ivan, who, when this country was

imploding violently, stepped up to the podium and, at great risk to them and their families, sought to serve their community. For that, Ivan, we say, "Thank you".

Ivan was a proud unionist, a proud working-class guy and a devoted family man. Thankfully, I did not need to google any of that; I know that because I lived where Ivan lived. Ivan lived in the community that he served. He raised his family in the Roseville estate in the Low Road, Lisburn. In 1987 and to my delight, he moved from the Democratic Unionist Party to the Ulster Unionist Party and quickly became a community champion who seemed to know everyone. He was able to fix any problem that was brought to him, and he gained great respect and admiration across the political field that will be shared by many, including you, Mr Speaker, today. For that, Ivan, we say, "Thank you".

At Ivan's funeral, a tribute was made by Lord Trimble. He and John Hume are known as the architects of the Good Friday Agreement, and it was with a sense of local, Low Road, Lisburn pride that I learnt of his role and the support that Ivan gave from the Benches of the Ulster Unionist Party in the design and delivery of what, we now know, brought an end to our Troubles and helped to pave the way for peace in Northern Ireland. For that, Ivan, we say, "Thank you".

Finally, though — I did learn this from Google — when I was made Chief Whip a number of months ago, I felt a great sense of achievement and pride that that wee working-class guy from the Low Road was Chief Whip of the Ulster Unionist Party, but that self-satisfaction was short-lived. I merely follow in your footsteps, my friend, and pick up the baton as you did before me when you held that role. If I can carry even half the reputation that Ivan Davis had, I will be doing fine. For all that you did and all whom you served, Ivan, I say, "Thank you".

Mr Poots: I have known Ivan Davis since 1973 when my father and Ivan were first elected to Lisburn Borough Council, which later became Lisburn City Council. Ivan was a true gentleman through all the time that I knew him. As Mr Butler pointed out, Ivan left the DUP in 1987. That was largely due to one particularly difficult individual, and we deeply regretted the loss of Ivan. Ivan was a fantastic community constituency worker. That was reflected in the old area D of Lisburn council, when he received some 3,700 votes in the 1981 election. That was more than three times the quota. It demonstrated the guy's individual popularity. He was elected to the council for 38 years in total.

Over the past number of years, I would have called with Ivan. One thing that he rebuked me for was that, in 2017, I did not call round to get my nomination paper signed by him. He had signed it for a number of years previously, despite the fact that he was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party. That was a demonstration of the friendship that existed between Ivan and me. One thing on which he reflected regularly was his imprisonment with my father for their protest against the Public Order Act 1986, when they walked from Smyth Patterson's in Lisburn to the police station on the road in defiance of that Act. They would not pay the fine and ended up being imprisoned for several days together. Ivan often reflected on that experience and had many a chuckle about it.

Ivan was a really decent guy, a really decent individual. He will be truly missed. One thing that I will say about Ivan is that, although he stood down from the council in 2011, he still provided huge support to many communities in Lisburn thereafter. He turned up to many of their events. He still engaged in a way in which many public representatives do not engage with their communities. Every year, the Lisburn Assessment and Resource Centre holds a fantastic event where the learning-disabled community has a night together: Ivan was always there. We will miss his friendship and community spirit. He has delivered much not just for the community in Lisburn and Lagan Valley but for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Dowd: I did not know Mr Davis, but, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I add our condolences to his family, friends and, indeed, former colleagues. I have said in the Chamber often that, regardless of our political differences, I have huge respect for anybody who serves the public in elected office. We pass on our sympathies.

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP and, in particular, my party colleague Pat Catney, who worked across a range of community projects with Ivan Davis, I extend our sincere condolences to his wife, extended family and, indeed, his party colleagues. These are difficult times for us all, but, after so many years together, the loss of a father and husband who was, there is no doubt, a guiding hand and presence in the family home, must be acute for them at this time. I extend our condolences on behalf of the SDLP.

Mr Muir: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I add to the condolences that have been expressed. I did not know Ivan Davis, but I knew that he had a long record not just here but particularly in

local government. As has been outlined, he was a freeman of the city. In better times, I had the opportunity to visit Wallace Park to do the park run, and I noticed that the pavilion is named after him. That reflects the esteem in which he is held in the community and the contribution that he made to sports groups in the city of Lisburn. Today, we remember his passing and the contribution that he made to communities and society generally.

Mr Givan: I did not know Ivan to the same extent as my colleague Edwin Poots did, nor did I have the history that his family did with the Davis family. I first met Ivan on a school tour in Parliament Buildings shortly after the Belfast Agreement was signed. Ivan had been elected for Lagan Valley with his colleague Billy Bell of the Ulster Unionist Party. My school principal was an avid Ulster Unionist. Of course, it was that party who provided the tour. He was interrogated by a group of students who were not really that way inclined, and I was one of them. After that meeting, Ivan said, "Paul, you will be here with me some day". I said, "Well, I hope so, but I might take your seat", because I was after representation at that time. Ivan always engaged with me in very good humour.

12.15 pm

I served with Ivan when I was a councillor on Lisburn City Council. Ivan was always a very steady, consistent individual. He was gracious and mannerly, and he worked across all the parties with that type of approach. Ivan was unique in that you would never have seen him in Lisburn without him wearing his suit. Until very recently, in any public appearances that he made, he was always in a shirt, tie and a jacket. I am not sure whether he would appreciate that his replacement in the Assembly does not adhere to the same dress code when he is out in Lisburn, but Mr Davis was always very well turned out.

Ivan's working-class roots have been mentioned. Many's the public group AGM that I attended, even within the last 12 months, Ivan was there providing advice to those community organisations that he continued to support long after he was an elected Member.

Ivan also had a museum of newspaper articles from the 'Ulster Star'; he obviously kept every edition. He was able to produce what had been said 20-plus years ago. He had a fantastic ability to recall previous statements that people had made and what they were now saying.

I offer my condolences to his wife, Betty, and to the wider family on the loss of Ivan.

Mr Allister: The late Ivan Davis was a man whom I had the honour of knowing for over 40 years. I found him, at all times, whether in agreement or disagreement with him, to be as he is being described today: a true gentleman.

Ivan personified what it was to be a community politician. He was "Mr Lisburn" for many years, and the torch that he carried for that city always came first. Within the community, he was undoubtedly the go-to man, from the mundane to right above that when people had problems. It earned him, quite properly, a remarkable reputation as a community and political representative. He served in all the various fora that we have heard about.

I last saw Ivan at a disabled police officers' event. That was typical of Ivan: even though he had retired, he sustained an interest on behalf of such a variety of community interests. There he was, and we had a good chat and look back over some old times.

When I was first in this House, from 1982-86, I was the Chief Whip of the DUP group, and Ivan Davis was the assistant Whip. I will not say that I taught him all that he knew, but he did follow my example of leaving the DUP [*Laughter*] so maybe I did. He was a very personable and honourable man, and he will be much missed, but primarily within his family. To his wife, Betty, and family, I add to the condolences.

While I am on my feet, I convey to Mike Nesbitt our sympathy on the loss of his mother. No matter how long we have our mother, and Mike had his for many decades, the parting is not easy. I am sure that we will all join in conveying that to Mike.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. If there are no further Members indicating that they wish to speak, that concludes the tributes to Mr Davis.

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Colin McGrath replace Ms Sinead Bradley as a member of the Committee for Health. — [Mrs D Kelly.]

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are going to invite us to consider another motion.

The House is being invited to consider that motion without debate. Yet, that motion will remove the opportunity for Members during coming weeks to ask oral questions of Ministers in the House. That seems to be a wholly retrograde step compounded by the fact that we are not even to debate it.

I recognise entirely that these are utterly unprecedented times and that our focus should be single-minded in respect of the medical crisis but we are sent to the House as MLAs, and part of that function is to scrutinise the work of the Executive. Once the Coronavirus Bill is passed, tomorrow or in the following days, the Executive will acquire immense, draconian powers, because that Act is effectively an amazing special powers Act. Yet, that will coincide with removing the regular facility of the House to question Ministers at Question Time. That is not happening, generally, elsewhere. It is not happening in Westminster. The First Minister in Scotland is still taking questions, and, I believe, it is so in Wales. Yet, in this House, we will, on the nod, remove that facility from Members. That is incongruous, it is wrong and it is particularly wrong that we will do that without debate. If that is the will of the House, then let it be manifested in debate. The House is a place apart. It is a place without an opposition, and yet now we will have an Executive with the facility of Members to even question them removed. That seems wrong.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for giving me advance notice of the point of order that he wished to raise and has just raised. I would like to think that Members would acknowledge that, since I took on this role, I have contacted Ministers as an Executive and a number of Ministers directly in relation to matters around the delay in responding to questions or coming to the House. I have reported on that routinely

through Speaker's announcements in the morning. I have made it clear to all concerned that the role of the Assembly has to be exemplary in holding to account and scrutinising the work of the Executive. But that is for more normal times, I have to say.

As I explained in my letter to all Members last week, the Whips and I agree that the Assembly should not unnecessarily divert or distract from the delivery of public services to deal with the impact of COVID-19. That is why the Business Committee subsequently agreed a motion to suspend the normal routine of questions for oral answer to Ministers. In return, I encourage Ministers to come to the Assembly regularly to update Members with oral statements, after which Members will be able to conduct more focused scrutiny through their questions. That motion reflects the seriousness of the current public health situation, and I commend the Whips for their support. Of course, as the motion indicates, the decision will be reviewed by the Business Committee at the end of April, and Members' feedback, through party Whips and representatives on the Business Committee, will be welcome at that time.

I just want to say again that we all know that the Assembly has to give leadership. I have made it clear, as I have pointed out, that it is our job to scrutinise and hold the Executive and the Ministers to account for the work that they are involved in. It is very clear, increasingly so over the weekend with the concern around people not heeding the advice to socially distance and so on, that the Assembly has to lead by example. Hopefully, through leadership — including from the House — the sooner that people take heed of the medical advice around public safety, the sooner we can get back to business as usual. In the meantime, we will be inconvenienced and have less opportunity, but not necessarily so, because I am encouraged by the response that I have been receiving from the Executive Office and the Ministers that they wish to be regularly in contact with Members through the Chamber.

I thank Mr Allister for raising the point of order, but, as I have said, the Whips and the parties have agreed the course of action that we have tabled on the Order Paper this morning. I think that we all believe that it is reasonable that we take the burden from the Executive and Ministers at this point in our history — an unprecedented time of public health crisis. Again, I thank the Member for raising the issue: it will be kept under constant review.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A: Suspension

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 13 May 2020.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 13 May 2020.

Mr Speaker: I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Standing Order 15(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: As with other similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That Standing Order 15(1) be suspended on Tuesday 24 March, for the purposes of the legislative consent motion on the Coronavirus Bill introduced at Westminster; and that amendments to the motion shall be given in writing to the Speaker not later than 9.30 am on Tuesday 24 March 2020.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 15(1) be suspended on Tuesday 24 March, for the purposes of the legislative consent motion on the Coronavirus

Bill introduced at Westminster; and that amendments to the motion shall be given in writing to the Speaker not later than 9.30 am on Tuesday 24 March 2020.

Mr Speaker: I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Executive Committee Business

Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

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

Ms Hargey: The regulations will increase the value of lump sum awards that are paid under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (NI) Order 1979, known as the "1979 scheme". The uprating of the scheme stands apart from the main social security benefits uprating, and there is no statutory requirement to increase the rates. However, it has been agreed to increase the rates payable from 1 April of this year in line with inflation. Therefore, payments will increase by September's consumer price index of 1.7%. That is consistent with the uprating of industrial injuries benefits.

The purpose of the 1979 scheme is to pay compensation to people who suffer from certain dust-related disease and their dependants. The five respiratory diseases that it covers are mainly related directly to asbestos exposure: mesothelioma, diffuse pleural thickening, primary carcinoma of the lung, byssinosis and pneumoconiosis. The lump sum payment scheme is intended to compensate people who, in the course of their work, have been exposed to asbestos or other listed agents but have been unable to seek compensation from their employer, even though the disease was contracted as a result of working for that employer. Symptoms tend not to appear until many years after exposure. By that stage, the

employer might have ceased to be in business. To be eligible for payment under the scheme, there has to be no current or previous claim for damages in respect of the disease for which the person is claiming; there must be no relevant employer who can be pursued through the courts; and the person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit.

The lump sum compensation is paid in addition to the weekly disablement benefit for the same disease. Dependants of the sufferer can make a claim if the person has passed away before they were able to make the claim.

12.30 pm

Payments of the lump sum are based on the age of the person with the disease and their level of disablement at the time of diagnosis. Higher amounts are paid to people with higher levels of disability and whose condition is diagnosed at an earlier age. Lower amounts are payable to dependants who make a claim after the sufferer has died. The maximum amount that can be paid under the 1979 scheme is being increased this year to £93,827 for a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis. That helps to ensure that the compensation that is provided under the Order maintains its value.

No amount of money can compensate a person who is affected by these terrible diseases. However, I am sure that Members will want people who are making a claim on or after 1 April 2020 to receive the higher amounts and will, therefore, support the regulations.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee for Communities considered the regulations at its meeting on 12 March 2020 and acknowledged that the regulations would simply increase the amounts that are payable under the relevant Order and make provision for payments to dependants where the sufferer did not receive a payment under the Order before their death. We can all see the justice and fairness in making such a provision for dependants.

The Committee noted that the uprating is in line with that for other disability benefits; that is, according to the consumer price index rate as of September 2019, which was 1.7%. The Committee was, therefore, content to recommend that the Assembly affirm the regulations.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Chair and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Preparations

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that she wishes to make a statement.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I made a statement on 16 March 2020 and I would like to provide a further update to Members on the arrangements that are being made in the Department of Justice to continue to deliver essential public services in the face of the challenges that are presented by COVID-19.

Officials briefed the Justice Committee last Thursday and did so again this morning. We are committed to providing reassurance that, across the Justice family, we are working together to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Our priority is to ensure public safety, the safety of our staff and those in our care and to maintain access to essential justice services. In that context, I will take the opportunity to place on record my appreciation, and that of my departmental staff, for the recent decision to keep non-urgent Assembly business under review and to manage the use of written questions in particular. That will enable staff to focus on the maintenance of essential services while, through regular statements like this, I can provide frequent and timely information to Members on how we are handling the situation.

Key to our contingency planning is strong communication and collaboration right across the wider justice system and with other Executive colleagues. Significant work continues across the Department's business areas, agencies and non-departmental public bodies to develop and refine the contingency plans and emergency response plans that we need in order to have the resilience to continue operating in the event of increased staff absence. The Department's operations centre has recently been opened and I believe that the Department is doing everything that it can to prepare.

As I said before, we have identified the highest priority public services that need to be maintained and we will, if necessary, make further resources available to do so. This is a dynamic situation, and significant resource is being devoted to ensure that we keep our plans under review in light of emerging information and as the scale of what we are all facing becomes clearer.

We know that it is estimated that 50% of our workforce will take time off as a result of COVID-19 during the total period of the outbreak and that during the peak weeks of the outbreak — a period that is estimated to be three to four weeks — we can expect up to 20% of staff to be absent at any one time and that is before we account for absence for other routine reasons.

Safeguarding our staff is paramount and we continue to take proportionate steps, in line with Public Health Agency guidance, to ensure staff well-being. We have asked individuals who are displaying symptoms to stay at home. We are reducing non-essential contact, particularly for those who are in vulnerable groups. People have been asked to work from home where possible, limit their use of public transport and avoid unnecessary social gatherings.

Staff have also received the central Northern Ireland Civil Service advice clarifying working arrangements and physical distancing measures to help reduce the transmission of COVID-19. I understand that more will be forthcoming, including in light of the recent decision to close schools. For those who must work in the office, we are taking action to enable physical distancing. It has been recommended that meetings should not take place unless absolutely essential and that other tools are used to avoid face-to-face meetings. We have asked that everyone continues to maintain the highest possible personal hygiene standards, including through frequent and thorough handwashing. In certain areas, such as prisons, protective clothing is available for staff.

The emergency Coronavirus Bill, which is being debated in the House of Commons at Westminster today, gives us the powers that we need to take the right action at the right time to respond effectively to the progress of the outbreak. The Justice Committee was briefed on the detail of the Bill earlier today. At a high level, the measures in the Bill fall into five broad categories: measures to contain and slow the virus; measures to increase the available health and social care workforce; measures to ease

the legislative and regulatory requirements for front-line staff; measures to allow us to manage the deceased with respect and dignity; and measures intended to provide support to people.

The powers relating to policing and justice functions will help to alleviate the administrative burdens in that regard, in the event that widespread absences related to the spread of COVID-19 reduce our capacity to deliver those functions. Provision is also made for additional powers for the police to support actions taken by the relevant health authorities to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. These will enable the police force to enforce sensible public health restrictions, including returning people to isolation and, where necessary, directing individuals to seek relevant treatment or attend suitable locations for further help. The Bill includes certain powers of direction to enable local government to direct private providers in the death management industry — for example funeral directors, mortuaries and crematoriums — individuals and services to implement a central plan.

Under a reasonable worst-case scenario, the justice system would continue to deal with the highest priority issue of maintaining public safety, but it is likely to need to stop work of a lower priority. We all appreciate the sensitivities involved in planning for what we could be dealing with if the coronavirus really takes hold here in the way that it has done in other countries across Europe. I do not want to create unnecessary anxiety — of course I do not — but what my officials and I do want to do is to ensure that we are as prepared as we can be for that worst-case scenario.

All too sadly, we have already heard from the Health Minister that the worst-case scenario involves up to 15,000 people losing their lives to this virus. As a society, we do not like talking about death but it is a sad reality that, unfortunately, we will have to do so increasingly as the virus spreads. As figures rise — and all the evidence points to the fact that they inevitably will — my Department will be working to ensure that respect and dignity for the deceased and bereaved is preserved. We are taking precautions to prepare for the risk that the normal burial arrangements are not sufficient. We will do all that we can to ensure dignity for the deceased and their family.

We must also safeguard public health. In the event that the virus hits Northern Ireland very hard, as we have seen elsewhere in the world, this gives rise to challenges that we are working to meet. We are working with all of those

involved to enable as many people as possible to be buried or cremated in the usual way. Nonetheless, pressures on the system as a result of coronavirus are likely to mean that some families may need to wait longer for the burial or cremation of their loved ones. We have already seen restrictions on attendance at the crematorium, with services being conducted at gravesides. The wider health crisis may well mean that there need to be restrictions on attendance at funerals, but that is a matter for the health experts to advise on. As I have mentioned already, the Westminster Bill contains powers in this regard that are intended to help with potential pressure on the system at every stage up to burial or cremation. These are sensible, precautionary powers that we need to provide for in the event of the worst-case scenario, but that is not to say that it will happen.

Another of our most significant issues continues to be the impact on the Prison Service. Our priority during these unprecedented times will be to support our staff and keep safe those in our care.

The challenges that the Prison Service is facing should not be underestimated. We have just under 1,600 people in custody, and we know that 32% of our prison population suffer from mental health issues, 50% from addictions and 55% have a history of self-harm. Many of those in our prisons fall into the high-risk category, both in age and through underlying medical conditions.

The Prison Service, working closely with the South Eastern Trust, has identified isolation units, which it has been using on a precautionary basis over the past few weeks. All prisoners who have been placed in isolation have tested negative. So far, we, thankfully, have no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in our prisons.

It has been the objective of the Prison Service to maintain as normal a regime as possible for as long as possible. However, on Friday past, I agreed with the director general that all prisons visits should be suspended from today. The Prison Service is working on a range of measures that will allow contact to be maintained between prisoners and their families during the period of suspension.

In my last statement, I focused on the issues that the Courts and Tribunals Service is facing. Significant steps have been taken since then, including guidance that was issued by the Lord Chief Justice, to minimise the number of people

who need to attend court and to prioritise the most urgent business.

We remain committed to playing our part in tackling this crisis and keeping people safe. However, people need to get real, and I echo the call for social responsibility that began via social media over the weekend. I applaud those who are doing the right thing and those well-known local people who are using their influence to call on more people to do it. Now, it is time that we all do the right thing. I have talked about emergency legislation, but the best and easiest way to protect the public is for us all to wash our hands and to follow the guidance: stay at home where we can, social distance where we cannot. None of us has ever faced a challenge like this. What may have seemed inconceivable a few short weeks ago is increasingly becoming our reality, and it may remain so for a reasonable length of time. We are planning and preparing with that in mind. We will continue to follow PHA guidance. If that guidance changes, we will move quickly to adapt our approach and planning accordingly.

There are difficult times ahead for all of us, and we need to be there for each other, as a caring and compassionate society, as never before.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for her statement. Late on Saturday night, we spoke for over an hour and discussed a wide range of areas across the justice system. I also want to thank her officials for the way that they have engaged with the Committee. An emergency session of the Committee was held this morning, and members were able to dig deeper into these issues.

There are some points that I need to put on record. The first is about the police powers that are being taken on. When they will be triggered remains with the Department of Health. The risk to the public is serious and imminent. We need clarity as to when the Department of Health will trigger the laws that are going to be given to the police.

There are issues around the retention and recruitment of police officers, those most recently retired and the capacity to bring them back. The PSNI should be supplemented if necessary. If it becomes a requirement, I hope that the Minister will support assistance from the Ministry of Defence.

The PSNI needs personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as testing for officers and their families, so that officers have the confidence to re-engage and to ensure that the capacity

exists. We cannot afford to have 50% of the justice system off at any one time during this crisis.

We need to address mass gatherings. At the weekend, we saw an invasion of tourist areas across the country and into Donegal. That is unacceptable. I want to know that the measures that are taken on board will be enforced and that the capacity exists so that, should pressure come on the police to have to enforce those measures, that can happen. What punitive measures will there be to fine individuals who continue to act in defiance and those businesses that do not act responsibly?

In respect of possible deaths, which is a very sensitive issue, officials told the Committee that we have the capacity to store 280 bodies. Further capacity is being sought.

Is engagement now taking place across the public sector where there are provisions in place so that they can also be utilised in the event that that becomes necessary?

12.45 pm

I appeal to the public. They need to act and act now. They need to listen to the advice that is being given. These measures are now being taken on board. I will give my full support to the Minister of Justice as she seeks to expedite these matters with the urgency that they require. As the House comes together, as it is doing, and rallies round our Executive and those Ministers who have this responsibility, I will not be found wanting in giving my support for the extraordinary measures required in these extraordinary times.

Mr Speaker: I call John O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the statement and offer our support to the Minister in the action that she has to take to protect public safety and the safety of those who work in the Prison Service and the justice system and also those who are inmates in the justice system. I am aware, from reports over the weekend, that prison visits have now been stopped, but one visitor to Maghaberry prison over the weekend described it to me as being like a Petri dish for passing infection. We have to ensure that all precautions are in place. Clearly, we have some of the most dangerous people in our society in prison, but we also have some of the most vulnerable people in our society in prison. If our health service and our mental health services were fully equipped, those people would be in different settings other than in

prison. Will the Minister reassure everyone that all services and protection are put in place for those people?

I agree with the Member who spoke previously. Those who are not respecting the advice that they are being given are quite literally killing people, and they need to understand that. They are spreading this disease. While they may be feeling healthy, they are literally killing people, and they need to take that on board.

Mr Speaker: I call Patsy McGlone.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much to the Minister for all her efforts and those of her staff; we heard some of them at the Justice Committee this morning. Very briefly, I will raise two major issues. The Member who spoke previously touched on the first of them. There is mention of the potential for a release scheme, and many of the individuals who are in prison suffer from addiction and mental health problems. Some of them have a lot of vulnerabilities and even tendencies to self-harm. Can the Minister advise what measures are being taken to ensure that, upon release, those people will have the necessary support? That involves collaboration with the health services.

Secondly, we heard that there may be an announcement on testing for front-line staff in the PSNI and the Prison Service to ensure that they too, as key workers, are kept safe. Can the Minister advise when that testing will be available to those front-line key staff?

Mr Speaker: Minister, in my eagerness to invite Members to speak, I neglected to invite you to respond to Mr Givan and Mr O'Dowd. You may wish to respond now accordingly.

Mrs Long: I thought that we were being especially efficient in leaving all the answers to the end. I hope that you will indulge me with some time to do that. I thank the Members who have spoken already for their questions and also for the robustness with which they have asserted the need for the public to take this seriously.

I was appalled, frankly, at the laxness with which people were treating the advice. People have not been sent home from school and from work because this is a holiday; people are being sent home in order to try to protect lives. For them to do that, they need to stay in their homes and maintain social isolation. Failure to do that creates massive challenges for those who must go to work: our nurses, our doctors, our police officers, our prison services and so

on. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that, if people do not need to leave their homes, they stay at home and follow the advice that is given.

Paul Givan raised a number of issues that I want to give a brief response to. Under the legislation that is going through today, the commencement of police powers will reside in the Executive Office, so it will be for the Executive Office to declare an emergency, based on the health advice that is provided. The Executive Office will also have the power to ban public gatherings, to close facilities and so on, and it will then be for the police to enforce those decisions. You also asked about the potential consequences of not doing so. We have already said that people will lose their lives. That is the reality. However, if that is not sufficient to bring people to their senses, I draw their attention to the fact that in the Bill there is a fine of up to £100,000 for disobeying instructions in those circumstances. If people do not care that they may be endangering their own elderly relatives, and indeed those of other people, perhaps that will bring to their attention how serious this is.

With respect to retention and recruitment in the police, you will be aware that that is an operational matter for the police. However, they have continued, where possible, with the recruitment that was already under way and they have continued to maintain police training, albeit in a different format, so that they have a flow of new officers in to the service, as they have a flow out on retirement at the other end. Some will perhaps wish to delay retirement until after this crisis.

Similar measures are in place for the Prison Service. It is a matter for the Chief Constable to request MOD support at the point where it is necessary. He will liaise with me, and with Executive colleagues, in doing so, and particularly with members of the Policing Board. At this stage, he has not sought that advice and support.

In terms of PPE and testing, there is a worldwide shortage of PPE. However, my most recent understanding is that a source has been identified for PPE and for tests. The Department of Finance is taking that forward collectively on behalf of the Executive. We want to do that quickly, particularly for those in enclosed environments and in front-line services, so that we can protect the integrity of the workforce. We do not want people having to self-isolate for two weeks, when after three days we may be clear that they are not affected by the virus.

Finally, Paul Givan mentioned liaising with those in the sector on deaths and burials. You will appreciate, as I have said, that this is a very sensitive and difficult area. We have already reached out, for example, to those in faith communities, those who work in that sector in terms of burials and disposals, and with the council in respect of Roselawn crematorium and managing gravesides.

We need to manage this in as sensitive a way as possible. We want to ensure that families are able to grieve and that the dead are dealt with in a dignified manner, but we do have to recognise that, for those infected by the disease, that also is a public health risk that needs to be very carefully managed. We will need to work very carefully and sensitively with bereaved families to ensure that we maintain dignity but also protect public health.

I agree with John O'Dowd; that is one of the reasons why we took the extraordinary measure of suspending prison visits. Most of us will recognise that prison visits are crucial for mental health, family connections and maintaining a calm and cooperative regime in the Prison Service. We suspend prison visiting as a last option. We also recognise that many of the people in our care are very vulnerable and rely heavily on prison visits for their morale and mental health.

I want to reassure Members that whilst face-to-face visits have had to be suspended in order to protect life, there was extensive discussion with those in our care before that action was taken. Many voluntarily asked their families not to come to the prison, because they believed that to do so was to place them and their families at risk. We have also taken measures to reassure them that we will, insofar as it is in our gift, seek to support them to maintain contact with their families outside the prison system. Those measures include, for example, additional phone credits and additional opportunities to make contact with families, and the use of videoconferencing and the internet, in limited fashion, to enable face-to-face contact with families. Those are all now being implemented, as are some additional measures to offer support to vulnerable people in the system.

We recognise that for families this is also a very difficult time, because they will, on the one hand, want to see their loved one, and on the other hand they will not want to expose them to any risk. It is imperative, not just for those in our care, but also that their wider families get the support that they need to cope in this estranged situation and that contact is not lost.

I will move on to the questions from Patsy McGlone. There has been some toing and froing with the Ministry of Justice on the release scheme. As things stand, as of an hour ago, it is not now including the amendments to implement a different release scheme. However, we already have the powers here under prison rules to release people where that becomes necessary to maintain health and order in the prison system. Those powers will be used judiciously and not recklessly. You are absolutely right to identify that there are people with significant mental health issues and significant vulnerabilities. There are also people who would pose a danger to society were they to be released early.

If we reach that point — we have not reached that point — we will look at those who are low risk to the public and also those who are low risk to themselves, and we will prioritise release on that basis rather than on length of time served or on how much of their sentence remains. Rehabilitation is crucial in the prison system, and so it is important that those who have made most progress through the rehabilitation process in the prisons, those who pose the least risk of reoffending, and those who pose the least risk to their personal, physical and mental well-being are prioritised in such emergency and extreme conditions.

Finally, you asked about testing for key staff in the prison system. We are actively pursuing being able not only to test staff, but, should an emergency arise where someone in the prison system is infected with COVID-19, that we are able to take suitable precautionary measures to protect those who may have been in contact with them. It is an evolving situation, but we are taking whatever measures we can at this time to create the confidence that their health and well-being will be looked after.

Mr Beattie: Thank you Minister for giving us the briefing and answering questions. We are in extraordinary times, and we have some extraordinary measures coming down the road at us. They are things that we never thought would happen and many of us will be rightly fearful about those extraordinary measures, but they are necessary. I must echo the Chair of the Justice Committee's comments. He is absolutely spot on about this. He and the Justice Minister have my support and that of my party in doing whatever we need to do to fight against this terrible virus that is afflicting our society.

Nobody should be standing today as unionist or nationalist, socialist or republican. It does not matter if you are Irish, British or European; we

are all part of the human race. We do not stand in splendid isolation. We just need to look to Italy to see how bad it is there, with 800 deaths in one day alone. We should not think that we are immune from that, and people who do not understand social distancing need to look in that direction to understand just how bad it can get.

We talked about how we deal with death and about our death-management plan. My question is: have we engaged with the National Association of Funeral Directors? It buries about 6,000 people a year in Northern Ireland within three to four days and it believes that it has the capacity to bury up to 30,000 people a year within three to four days. Part of this is about taking away fear and panic from people who feel that they will not be treated correctly whenever their loved one dies or they fall sick and maybe become deceased themselves. It is about making sure that we do not spread fear and panic.

I am really happy to hear that, on prisoner release, the Justice Minister has been absolutely clear. She is absolutely right: the first thing is safeguarding. We must safeguard our society. If we have to release prisoners — we may well have to — she is right not to release those who could cause safeguarding issues for our society or, indeed, release people who will put pressure on our health service, which will already be overstretched.

1.00 pm

I am pleased, and I want to relay this to the Minister, that, having raised at the Committee for Justice this morning my concern about a course that is starting today for 20 prison officers, particularly my concern about social distancing, the Director General rang me, no more than 20 minutes ago, and explained the measures that they are putting in place to make sure that social distancing can take place. People are taking it seriously and I am glad that they are.

When we talk about Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA), everyone looks to the Justice Minister, but people need to understand that it is not just about the Department of Justice. If the military are called on by the Northern Ireland Office, it will not just be to support the Department of Justice. The military can provide a role 1 medical facility to help the Department of Health. They can provide a tented testing facility so that we can test people for the virus. They can provide logistical drivers, and they can provide support for our water

industry to ensure that our water supply is secured.

Let us not throw this away or let us not just throw this in the direction of the Justice Minister. This is something that some of us might have to suck our teeth on, and I get that, but this is something that we might have to do to safeguard our society, which is going to be incredibly changed at the end of this process. Therefore, if we put our bickering aside and reach out to one another for the next number of months, possibly longer, maybe a year, we can get ourselves through this.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his very robust comments around the need for social distancing.

The issue of prisoner release has been raised. There are issues as well about releasing people who may be higher-risk, in that, as you rightly identify, it places a burden on probation and health. Far from releasing people into a system to relieve pressure, it could actually create pressure in other places and so we need to approach that with caution. At the same time, we have to have plans in place that, if we reach that point, and I hope that we do not, we are prepared to deal with that in a way that does not endanger public safety or the vulnerable prisoners who are in our care.

I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to my staff in the Department. They have been doing a fantastic job in responding to a rapidly developing situation. Your comments about the Director General of the Prison Service are something that I will convey back to him because he has had a huge amount of work to do over the last number of weeks to prepare for the situation. He is one of a number of officials in the Department who have been investing huge amounts of personal time to ensure that we are adequately prepared.

I also agreed with the Member when he said that this is not a green or orange issue. He is absolutely correct: this virus will see only host and victim. Those are the only categories that the virus will recognise, and, so, we have to make sure that we are neither.

On death management, we have been in contact with funeral directors. The Bill that is coming through Westminster will give us the powers, as I explained in the statement, for local government to compel those in the private sector, and in other parts of government, to work with us to ensure that we can maintain the dignity in death that we wish people to have.

There are cultural sensitivities around that of which we are hugely aware. There are religious sensitivities around the expectations of how quickly people should be buried, or, indeed, whether they should be buried or cremated. We will endeavour to maintain that sensitivity throughout this difficult time. There are also cultural sensitivities. Many of you will be aware that, here in Northern Ireland, we expect to bury our dead in two to three days and that that is the normal and expected period. In parts of England and Wales, however, two to three weeks is a more normal expectation and, so, we will have to manage expectations should we get into the position where we have excess deaths to manage. However, I agree with those who have spoken to date. The easiest way to avoid having to manage excess deaths is for people to take control of their personal behaviour, here and now, by ensuring that they stay at home and ensuring that they maintain a social distance when that is not possible.

Finally, on MOD support, which I referenced earlier, that will be, as you say, a whole Executive decision. It will not solely be a decision for the Department of Justice. At this stage, there has been no request for that through civil contingency, but when it comes, it will be taken through the Executive and given the appropriate response.

Mr Allister: I want to raise with the Minister a very sensitive issue, touching upon the management of funerals and cremations. Schedule 27 to the Bill that is going through Westminster contains a provision that would disapply the current protection that means that a deceased person can leave instructions that they do not wish to be cremated. There is a power within the Bill to disapply that protection. Does the Minister anticipate utilising such a power? Is she fully aware of the devastating impact that would have for many grieving families if such a course of action was taken?

The Minister has not mentioned our courts, but schedule 26 to the Bill contains provisions for live links for our courts. Have we got a sufficiency of infrastructure to enable that to be availed of?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. I have indicated that there are huge sensitivities around dealing with a situation where there are excess deaths. There is a clause that allows us to disapply the rules with respect to people's individual wills around cremation in those circumstances. I do not necessarily expect that to be the biggest pressure in our system. We have only one public crematorium facility, so it is more likely to be the reverse that becomes

problematic if we have a large number of excess deaths. Access to crematorium facilities may be more restrictive than access to burial.

The Member may not be aware of this, because the Bill is being amended by the Government as we speak, but there are also new duties, on which I signed off this morning, on us to consider the wishes of the deceased as we make these decisions. It is not a duty to comply with them, because we should not falsely raise expectation that that may always be possible throughout this crisis, but there is a duty to consider the wishes of the deceased in making decisions for burial, disposal by other means and, if necessary, storage.

In my statement, I mentioned courts in respect of the actions that have been taken with regard to the Lord Chief Justice and the various announcements that he has rolled out in conjunction with my Department and the Courts and Tribunals Service. Work has also been done by the Department for Communities on restricting face-to-face tribunals. All of that work is proceeding. We are already at the stage where routine business, such as applications for adjournments, for example, are being handled by email. Where there is consent to do so, we will continue to roll that out, as we will for hearings at which the presence of parties, in addition to their legal representatives, is not required.

I move now to the use of video links and conferences. As the Member will appreciate, there are limitations in the system to the number of video links available. However, we have done some work around trying to accommodate more vulnerable witnesses being able to give remote evidence. There are, therefore, possibilities to use that and other facilities more frequently in order to cut down on the need for face-to-face contact. We need to work very closely with the Lord Chief Justice.

As someone who is legally qualified and has practised as a barrister, the Member will appreciate that as well as my duty to protect public health, public safety and life, I have a duty to protect essential access to justice so that it is not compromised during what may be a protracted period of unusual circumstances.

Mr Nesbitt: In response to Mr Givan's remarks about inappropriate public gatherings, the Minister made reference to a £100,000 fine, which, I think, is included in the Coronavirus Bill that we will debate tomorrow. Will she confirm that that fine can apply only to the owner or occupier of premises staging an event that has been prohibited by the Executive Office, or to

the organiser of such an event? Clause 37(7) of Part 5 of schedule 21 specifically excludes people who are simply attending an event, so attendees face no sanction in this proposed legislation.

Mrs Long: That is correct. The Executive, as I explained, will have the power through the Executive Office to ban events from taking place and to close facilities. Those who do not comply with those bans and closing orders will be subjected to the fine. I believe that, in such cases, if an event is closed by the Executive Office and the organiser faces a £100,000 fine, it is unlikely that there will be any event for people to attend.

This brings us back to the key point that all of us have been trying to make over recent days. It is not good enough for people to sit down and wait until they are forced to behave appropriately. We all have it in our gift to implement social distancing now. We all have it in our gift to cancel events that are taking place now. We all have it in our gift to maintain our social isolation, if we are in vulnerable groups, now, or to work from home, now. We do not need an emergency Bill for common sense. We have to appeal to people: while £100,000 is a lot of money, it will not compensate for the loss of a grandparent, the loss of a brother or sister, or the loss of a child. People need to take responsibility for their actions, because their decisions today will dictate what happens in two and three and four weeks' time, and I do not believe that anyone wants to be standing lonely around a graveside because they went to an event that was completely unnecessary today.

Mr Blair: I also thank the Minister for her statement. Whilst, like many others, I support the emergency Coronavirus Bill and understand the rationale and urgency behind it, can the Minister assure Members that measures will also be put in place to ensure that any long-term impacts on basic civil liberties will be minimised, if possible?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that we reassert this. First of all, the legislation will only apply in respect of the prevention of spread of coronavirus; it does not have wider powers than in relation to coronavirus. Secondly, the legislation will automatically expire after two years, so, at that point, it would have to be renewed. I believe that the Government have also indicated in Parliament that they are willing to agree to a six-month review of the legislation so that, should this pass more quickly than expected, the law will be able to be repealed.

As someone who believes fundamentally in personal freedom and personal liberty, I think it is hugely important that we have those protections. However, I would also say, as someone who believes in personal liberty and freedom, that I also believe in personal responsibility. Ultimately, if people will not take responsibility for their actions, there is nothing that we can do other than to bring in measures that will force them to act in a responsible manner.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her detailed statement. We are in unprecedented times, and people are genuinely fearful. My mother has been in isolation for 10 days, simply because, if she were to become infected, her life would be at risk, and we are all conscious of that. It is a very difficult time for many families, and we recognise that.

Many people in my constituency have been speaking to me about large groups of young people who are congregating in public spaces, not necessarily within premises or anywhere else, but, for want of a better description, roaming the streets throughout the weekend and since the schools have closed. No doubt this will continue to be an issue. What can we do, Minister, to ensure the safety of those children and to educate them that this is a very serious issue? They are not immune to it. We heard about a 14-year-old child in the UK, with no underlying conditions, who died from the virus this week. The reality of this virus is that it can affect everybody very differently, depending on their own system, and there are many people who have unidentified underlying issues as well. What can we as an Assembly, and your Department, do to ensure that parents keep children, where possible, within closed doors and educate them as to the importance and the dangers of this thing?

1.15 pm

Mrs Long: I thank the Member particularly for what he said about conditions that are unknown. We know that people with underlying conditions are vulnerable: we do not know everyone who has underlying conditions. For example, from the news, we know that a very young sportsperson — only in their 20s — who was otherwise fit and healthy and would not have considered themselves to be vulnerable to the disease passed away as a result of contracting the virus and that exposing an otherwise unknown health condition. No one should be glib about the risk. No one should take it for granted. We know that age increases risk, but that does not mean that those who are

younger are at no risk. They are also vectors in transmitting the disease through the community. It is hugely important that parents take responsibility and ensure that their children are indoors, supervised and safe. It is not acceptable, frankly, for people to treat this like a holiday, to go for a jaunt to the coast, to go to stay in their caravan or to take their kids to a play park where they will associate with other children. It is not acceptable to take them to the supermarket, along with their elderly grandparents, to do the week's shopping, because it is a danger to people's lives.

We need to communicate to young people that, while they may feel invincible — we all felt invincible as young people — they need to look around their family at those who are more frail and are worried about their health and consider whether they can live with their conscience if, through reckless behaviour today, they cost family members their lives tomorrow and in the future. Most of our young people have more sense than that: for those who do not, parents have to step into that gap and ensure that good social distancing is enforced.

This is not an easy issue for any of us, and the Member is absolutely right: it is distressing not to be able to spend time with family, particularly at a time when people are distressed, lonely and fearful. Our natural reaction as human beings is to reach out and comfort each other: in this crisis, that is the worst thing that we can do, but we can find other ways. We have talked in the Chamber many times about the health risks of young people refusing to go outside and of spending all their time on social media and in front of computer screens. Now is the time to encourage them in the very behaviour that we have tried to dissuade them from for many years: "Get on social media and talk to your friends there. Skype each other. Have conversations online. Do not go out in the community. Do not put other people at risk, and do not put yourself at risk or believe that you are invincible — you are not".

Mr Carroll: As Members have said, we are in unprecedented and worrying and dangerous times. Will the Minister give some detail of the rationale to suspend non-jury inquests into deaths? Obviously, it is a very sensitive issue, but does it relate to complications and issues with the bodies or to social distancing in courts? If it is the latter, has any work been done to find alternative arrangements for juries?

Mrs Long: A number of changes will be made to the operation of the Coroners' Courts and the inquest system. The reasons are multiple. The first is about bringing people unnecessarily out

to do jury service. You run the risk of not being able to complete the inquest, if members of the jury have to self-isolate. There has already been the ending of a case that will now probably require to be retried because of illness and the need for a juror to self-isolate. It is unwise to start down a course of action that cannot be sustained.

The other issue is about volume. Again, these are difficult issues to talk about, but, if we are talking about significant numbers of deaths, including those who might otherwise have been seen to be fit and healthy, the system will not have the capacity for all the inquests that would take place normally. We have to take proportionate measures to ensure that deaths that are genuinely suspicious can still be processed in the normal way and that we get a degree of clarity from the coroner and the inquest system on the reasons for death but that we do not overburden a system that may well be stretched in those extreme circumstances. The rationale is complex, and it is sobering.

What we are trying to do at this time in the justice system is to make sure that people's access to justice is not compromised but to do that in a context in which we know that resource will have to be redirected to other parts of the justice system and in which we cannot place people at risk in terms of their health and the health of those who work in the court system.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement.

Before we move on to the next item, I remind Members that, first, they need to be in the Chamber to hear Ministers making statements if they wish to ask a question and, secondly, those who are in the Chamber who wish to ask a question should put their name on the normal speaking lists, which are available.

Response to COVID-19

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Executive Office that the First Minister and deputy First Minister wish to make a statement on their response to COVID-19.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just checked: there are no copies of the statement available to Members. Have we also suspended that expectation?

Mr Speaker: I am not aware of the statement being made available as of yet. We have not

suspended that issue or discussed it. I will seek clarification.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): A Cheann Comhairle, I apologise for the lateness of the statement. It should be being placed in Members' pigeonholes as we speak. I apologise for the statement not getting to you sooner. It is a rapidly changing situation, and things are evolving. We are trying to be up to date and to give people as much information as possible.

I make the joint statement today on behalf of the First Minister and me. The entire Executive are behind the enormous efforts being made to keep us all safe. I thank you for accommodating our statement today. We recognise that our people need information, and we have given a commitment that we will update the Assembly and our people as often and as speedily as we can. Undoubtedly, things will change and develop on a daily basis — even on an hour-to-hour basis. We will need to keep people up to date to keep people safe.

Very sadly, we had our second COVID-19 fatality yesterday. The thoughts and prayers of all of us across the Assembly will be with the families of the loved ones who are deceased.

The situation as of 2.00 pm on Sunday 22 March is that testing has resulted in 20 new positive cases, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 128. The total number of tests completed is 2,484.

Our messages today are simple and cannot be repeated often enough, and I commend all elected representatives for trying to get that message out to their communities: "Stay at home if you can. Wash your hands. If you have to go out, practise social distancing. Stay apart. Protect our health service so our health service can protect us".

These are not normal times. This is a time for cool, calm heads and for big, warm hearts. The First Minister and I were so grateful to everyone who did the right thing yesterday on Mother's Day, despite the difficulties. They did the right thing to keep mothers and other vulnerable people safe. We definitely understand the difficulty for many people, but it was really heart-warming when you saw images of people and how they got in touch with their mums. We are grateful to all those mothers who worked for us yesterday on the front line in critical services. That is a demonstration of us at our best.

We know that there are more difficult developments to come, and, in our families and communities, there is confusion and hurt. There

are financial worries and worries about our loved ones, our neighbours and our communities. We ask everyone to please do the right thing and to carry on doing the right things in the weeks ahead.

Extraordinary times need extraordinary steps. Ministers and officials are meeting every morning and will offer very regular updates to the Assembly and to the media. We have made the health and well-being of our citizens our number-one priority. Our economic well-being and the well-being of society are also at the heart of our discussions. We need to maintain, as far as we can, other critical services, and we need to look after our people who are working on the front line.

We are taking part in COBRA discussions, and the announcements from London are being supplemented by local solutions that we need for the problems that we face here. We are looking far beyond the normal ways of working and policy development and how decisions are made. We are doing things now in days and hours that would normally have taken months and weeks. We are being responsible with our finances, making sure that decisions are quick and that the front line has what it needs to keep people well. That requires new real-time thinking, and it is absolutely the right thing to do in these circumstances. We are working across departmental boundaries in new and important ways.

To be absolutely clear, the top priority is to protect our health service because it protects us. We need to slow down the spread of COVID-19 by keeping the pressures on our health service to an absolute minimum. We must make space for our health service to look after those who will need care now and in coming weeks. That is vitally important. This is about keeping people alive — this is about keeping people alive. It is about making space for our nurses, our doctors, our hospital cleaners and our social care staff to do their job and follow their vocation. We are asking an awful lot of them now, so we need to do everything that we can to support them.

Other key decisions such as closing schools and limiting pupil attendance to key workers are focused on protecting our health service so that they can protect us. We totally appreciate that this is a difficult situation for parents. Please think about and understand the motivation. Closing pubs and restaurants is about keeping people well and protecting our health service. We made clear requests to pubs and restaurants on Friday to close. We are grateful to all those who closed their doors, those who

distributed their supplies to people in need and those who are looking after their staff.

We say to parents and to young people, "Please do the right things, now that the schools are closed. Young people are not immune to COVID-19. COVID-19 does not care about your age, so you need to care about yourself and the potential for you to catch it and to pass it on. Young people need to follow exactly the same advice. The schools are shut, but education, learning and planning for your future should be at the heart of what you do in the coming weeks". We ask parents to help get our advice across to young people: "Stay home, wash your hands, and stay apart".

The economic support that is becoming available will help to cushion our businesses and family incomes. It will help to keep our economy able to function again when normality finally returns. We are conscious that we cannot entirely insulate ourselves and our economy from the pain and the hurt that COVID-19 brings. It is a dreadful disease with dreadful consequences.

There are many things that we can do now. The Minister of Health has already taken steps to free up resources in our health service to provide hospital care for the most serious COVID-19 cases. All non-urgent services have been reduced, and steps are being taken to make greater use of the telephone and other digital technology for patients who need follow-up care as outpatients. Trusts will work to ensure the prompt discharge of medically well patients from hospitals to ensure that beds are available for any increase in admissions.

Initial support measures have been announced for businesses through grants, the support around workers' salary costs and the measures to provide rate relief. They will provide much-needed breathing space for our business community. We continue to work with the British Government to further enhance the assistance available and are lobbying hard to ensure that our businesses and workers receive the support that they need.

The Minister of Education has taken steps to close schools to pupils, with the exemption of children of key workers who have no alternative childcare provision. We appreciate that that causes disruption, but it is a necessary step. The Minister of Education is working with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA) and other awarding bodies to put in place robust processes for awarding grades.

We also recognise that there are vulnerable children and young people in our education system. The Minister of Education and the Minister for Communities are working together to put in place alternative arrangements for free school meals, and we expect to hear more about that throughout the course of today. The Minister of Education is also working with the Minister of Health to ensure that vulnerable children and young people in the education system continue to have access to the services that are necessary for their well-being.

The Minister for Communities is working to develop a COVID-19 community contingency fund to help groups that support those who are socially isolated, those who struggle financially or those who cannot access food supplies. She has also made arrangements to suspend the face-to-face assessment for benefits over the next three months and has temporarily removed the waiting period for statutory sick pay and new employment and support allowance (ESA) claims.

The Minister for Infrastructure has temporarily relaxed the legislation on drivers' hours. That will be an important measure to ensure that the supply chains can continue to operate effectively and to maintain flows of food and vital supplies. That change now applies to the items being delivered directly to consumers' homes and will help to support those who are self-isolating.

The Minister of Finance, the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Infrastructure are also working hard to support our airports and are pressing the British Government to provide specific support for the aviation sector. That sector faces significant challenges at present, but it is vital to ensure that air connectivity is maintained in the short and longer term. Our aviation industry will be essential in the times ahead.

1.30 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has put in place measures to protect citizens and staff accessing DAERA Direct services. We also recognise that, to ensure the best response, we must not work in isolation. Through the North/South Ministerial Council, we have agreed that everything possible will be done in coordination and cooperation with the Irish Government and our Executive and with the active involvement of the health administrations across both jurisdictions.

A total societal approach is the only way forward. Every person in our society has something to do. Every person in our society has a very important thing to do now to help us to beat COVID-19. We need all people to follow the advice: stay at home, wash your hands, and practise social distancing.

We need responsible shopping. Please, please do not be involved in irresponsible shopping. There is enough food to go round for everyone. Be generous to others by buying only what you need. Leave supplies on the shelves for the elderly, the vulnerable, and our front-line workers. We do not need our nurses and doctors, after working long shifts, and all the people who work in the health service — hospital cleaners and those who look after the most vulnerable for our families and for our communities — at the end of a day to go to the shops and not be able to buy food for themselves or for their families. Please be kind. Look out for your neighbours and the most vulnerable in your communities. If you can, leave one or two items in the food bank box in your community.

I suspect that most, if not all, families have had to think about how they will cope as this situation unfolds. I am confident that most, if not all, people have already thought about how they can help someone who is less fortunate. We can do these good things because we are part of the giant spirit that makes this a very special place. This situation will bring out some wonderful acts of kindness; of that I have no doubt. We can see it already. At the end of this, we all want to look back and say that we all did the right things.

Tougher times are coming. We can look at other countries to know that we are only at the start of what is going to be the most difficult of times. We cannot make this situation go away unless we all do the right things now. Every day that we do not follow the advice, the risk increases. Please help us to protect our health service and our health workers so that they can help us and our families.

We realise that we are sending out very difficult and very worrying messages, but we will get through this when we work together. We will come out of this, because we have looked to every part of society to play a role. That is because this is a great place and we have such a wonderful spirit in our people.

The First Minister and I, along with the entire Executive, recognise that we do not have all the answers today. We are working tirelessly to do the right things. We are asking all our people to

work with us and to do the right things. Our commitment to the Assembly is that we will keep you up to date as things develop. We thank you again for the opportunity to update you today.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the deputy First Minister and the First Minister for the update from the Department today. I also echo the condolences that have been sent to the families of those who have passed away as a result of the virus.

This is a worrying time for people, and, as the deputy First Minister said, information is key. I welcome all the announcements so far, but I ask whether some consideration can be given to funnelling the information through to MLAs because we are literally being contacted by hundreds of people and are having to go on to news websites and twitter feeds to try to find information. If there were a way of getting information funnelled out, it would be greatly appreciated.

I am concerned for our health sector staff, as they are very worried that they do not have the equipment that they need. Many carers are going in and out of people's homes where the only protection that they have is a set of gloves. There can be up to four people coming in, and that is very worrying for the people in those houses.

Testing remains a major issue. If we do not know who has the illness, we do not know how to isolate. If people in the health sector are isolating for 14 days at a time, that means that they are taken off the wards and off the floor for 14 days. A test could be turned around in 48 hours to get those people back on to the floor if they do not have the illness.

I echo the remarks that have already been made and say that we need to get a clear message out as an Executive and as an Assembly to curtail people socialising at this time. In constituencies such as mine, resorts, including Newcastle yesterday, were absolutely jam-packed, while beaches had tailbacks of cars trying to get into them. People have to realise that they have to heed the advice and stay at home. If they have to go out, it is simply for work, to go to the shop or to care for somebody, and really not much reason beyond that.

Finally, I hope that some Departments do not use the crisis as an opportunity to settle some old goals with regard to relocating and closing down services. I am hearing some very

worrying remarks about the Downe Hospital. Many people and staff have contacted me. If things have to be done for safety, that is perfect as long as it is detailed out. However, I hope that the opportunity is not taken, under the cover of this crisis, to realign services and leave rural areas deprived.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for all that. First, I concur and will restate again — we cannot say it strongly enough — that we need people to follow the advice. The actions of some individuals over the weekend endangered lives. Going to beaches, caravan parks and doing any of those things puts more and more people's lives at risk. We, collectively as the Executive and Assembly, need to send out the strongest possible message: you are killing people by doing those things. It is time not for soft language but for us to be very straight with people. We need to keep driving home that message.

With regard to information, I understand that it is frustrating. It is frustrating for me. We are involved in a situation that is changing rapidly, minute by minute, hour by hour. We are endeavouring to pull all that together. We will have one information portal to which people can go to get information, whether that be advice on health, economics, benefits, the school situation for key workers, and all those issues. It is a one-stop shop that will be launched over the coming days. I think that it went up this morning, but it will be built upon. That will be helpful. We will ensure that all Members get notification on how to access that information. It is vital, because everybody has so many questions right now. It is difficult to get the information out. There is a lot of noise, and we have to give people key, essential information. Hopefully, the portal will be helpful.

We will also roll out a communication plan. We have taken steps to enhance the communication output. Over the course of the next two days, Members will see a significant difference in the Executive's response to ensure that people get key messages and that they are shown where to go to get those messages. People will see a great improvement in that over the next couple of days.

We are taking very seriously the situation with regard to PPE. At a meeting this morning, we were told that, through Finance, we have been able to secure a contract for additional PPE. That is good news. We will continue to keep those matters under review. It is crucial that we have enough and that people and staff are not fearful that we do not have enough. We will

continue to work our way through that. The Member referred to carers — people on the front line — who go from home to home. They need protection, too. It is important that we have sufficient stock across the whole range of protection equipment for them. I can definitely give assurances that we are working day and night to ensure that they have that.

On testing, we have to do more. The World Health Organization says, "Test, test, test". It says, "Test, isolate, trace". That is what we have to do. We continue to work with the Health Minister. Testing has been ramped up significantly, but we need to do more. It is not there yet; it is not enough. We can assure the House that we will work to ensure that that is the case and that we get there.

It is a challenging time. It is not normal business. We cannot behave as normal, because these are not normal times. We have to be responsive and act decisively. We have to be quick on our feet. We are here to tell the public that every decision that we take, we take in people's best interests. In every decision that I have to take as a Minister, I am thinking about my family, too. In every decision that we take collectively here, that is how we will be guided.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their presence in the Chamber. I agree with the deputy First Minister about the need for testing, especially in order to keep key workers working when we need them.

Another scenario has been raised with me with regard to MOT testing. A key worker got in touch to tell me that her car needs to be MOT tested, but, because of the MOT difficulties, it will now not be able to be tested until April. That takes either her or her husband, who is also a key worker, off the road until then. Is there any way in which key workers could get priority? Is it actually appropriate that MOT tests continue at this critical time?

Mrs O'Neill: The Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, is looking at all those things and is working her way through them. I will raise your concerns with her. We have prioritised protection for key workers and facilitated them in schools to assist them with getting to work, so the logic follows that we will do the same with MOT testing. I am happy to talk to the Minister for Infrastructure about that. I am sure that she will be very positive and open to doing whatever is necessary to make sure that we support those workers to do the work that we are asking them to do.

Ms Anderson: I want to acknowledge the leadership that has been given by the joint First Ministers. Yesterday, above all, I was inundated by people commenting on how you interacted with each other and the public. I want to make that general point.

Most people are listening to you; most people are taking your advice. However, can you comment on those who are treating this as an inconvenience? We have heard about some of the behaviour that is happening across sites. Most people are hearing about how we have a responsibility to stop the transmission of the virus and that all of us have a role to play in that. So, it goes back to what you said about "test, test, test" and the intensification of that. Like many MLAs, I am being inundated by people demanding that we test, we trace and we isolate in order to stop the transmission. I know that you have answered some of that. However, can you reassure people, as test centres open in the Twenty-six Counties, that more test centres will open here and that we will have an all-Ireland approach? Politics cannot come into this: this is about protecting people's lives.

Mrs O'Neill: First, I cannot say it strongly enough: people who are being reckless and ignoring the advice are killing people. We need people to hear that, because this is what we are talking about. This is not planning for something that may happen or could happen somewhere down the line in the future. This is here; this is now. We are now in the week where it is spreading without people even noticing. It is so important that we collectively take every opportunity that we have to drive home the message and ask others to join us in driving home that message. We all have our different heroes in life, and people look up to different people, and I really welcome the fact that a number of sports personalities and others have come forward to drive home that message. We implore them to keep doing that over the difficult days and weeks ahead of us. Let us all be consistent in driving home the message.

Testing is so important. Over the weekend, I spoke to a midwife whose child has symptoms, so the family is now isolated. She now cannot go to work. The testing is about trying to get our health service staff back into work. If the daughter was tested, she would be able to get to work. It is so important that we ramp up testing and that we do it with speed. The First Minister and I are working on this as we speak.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement. Probably the most useful thing that I can say on behalf of the Ulster Unionist

Party is again to thank the wonderful staff of our National Health Service and to applaud every citizen and group of citizens who have shown the finest side of humanity by helping others. I wish the deputy First Minister, the First Minister and the Executive godspeed in this uncharted and unprecedented journey.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his comments. I concur with him on the health service staff who are absolutely amazing. They are in for tough times, and we have to do everything that we can to support them. I really welcome your warm words, because we have tough decisions to take in the time ahead, as it will take a collective, joined-up effort from us all to get through to the other side of this. It is important to say that we will come out the other side of this. However, we will have a lot of building to do, we will have a lot of people who will have lost loved ones, and we will have a societal challenge to build it all up again, but we can do that collectively. I have no doubt about that.

Mr Storey: Mr Speaker, I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the update to the House today. I also place on record our appreciation to our Executive colleagues for the way in which they are endeavouring to deal with what, everyone will concur, are unprecedented times.

The deputy First Minister said that we would look back and say that we did the right thing. She may be aware that a Matter of the Day that I tabled in the House last week calling for a day of prayer was rejected by the Speaker. She will also be aware that I wrote to the First and deputy First Ministers at the weekend encouraging them to call on our people to recognise that there is a God in heaven and that, at a time when we face a crisis, people should resort to the greatest place of safety, which is calling on the God of heaven to intervene, and to earnestly pray that we will see the other side of this and that, out of that prayer, there will come to all our families the peace, confidence and comfort that we need, ever mindful of what the scripture says:

"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray ... then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

It is that healing that we need along with the work that we, collectively, all must do.

Mrs O'Neill: I have not received the Member's letter, but I am sure that I will pick it up. We will

all need to look to our inner strength throughout the period ahead and to look deep down into our soul to be able to support not just our own families but everyone else around us. This will be the most trying of times. It is an understatement to say it is unprecedented: this is the challenge of our lifetime and we will all have to work with each other, support each other, look out for those who are more vulnerable and do everything that we can. We will also have to be creative in how we reach out to people. Not everybody has somebody. That is an unfortunate reality of life: not everybody has somebody. We all need to think about others at this time.

Mr McCrossan: I begin by applauding the tremendous efforts of the First and deputy First Ministers throughout what has been a difficult and challenging few weeks. It comes as a great relief that the House is restored, we have an Executive in place and the First and deputy First Minister working together throughout this tremendously difficult and unprecedented challenge. This is, as the deputy First Minister rightly said "the challenge of our lifetime". It has instilled a huge amount of fear in our community in people of all walks of life and even church leaders.

I know that there is discussion on the Coronavirus Bill today. What powers has your office to enforce a lockdown of Northern Ireland, for want of a better description? You have put out a clear message and have continued to repeat that message. It has resonated with a large percentage of the population across Northern Ireland, but there is still an element of people who are just not listening. It frustrates me deeply to see, even yesterday, huge numbers of people continuing about their business as though this is just the flu, with some people even treating it as if it is a holiday. We need to make it very clear that this is a life-or-death situation. People will die around us, and we are very worried about that.

With regard to advice, Dr Gabriel Scally, on the news during the week, was very good. He said that his advice to the public would be to behave as though we already had it. In doing so, people will self-isolate and realise that it is the best possible measure that they can take. Staying indoors is the solution to this.

With regard to testing, even in the health service, a huge amount of people are concerned about the lack of testing. I know that that will be largely resolved. I spoke on the phone yesterday to a nurse who was in tears and was frightened because she sees in front of her what is coming. She feels the pressure

now. She is entirely and absolutely dedicated to saving lives and supporting people, but her mother, father and her family are worried about her, in turn. I worry too about mental health and the impact that that has on those in front-line services. I know that you will continue doing all that you can to support them.

I will make a final point about information for businesses. With every problem that occurs, we face 100 questions emanating from that one problem. I am continually being asked, as are other Members, by business owners, business leaders and people who are self-employed for reassurance about what will happen in the coming weeks.

Now, information is coming out, but we need clarity on how people can access the necessary provision that is being, gratefully, granted.

Finally, we, in the House, must work together, all politics aside. This is us standing shoulder to shoulder for the greater good of the people of this place. I know that if we focus our attention strongly on protecting human life, we will save countless lives. I thank you both for your leadership.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you very much for that and for your positive comments. On the question of a lack of information or the desire for information, you are right: everyone wants answers when something is announced and a lot of questions come on the back of the announcements. We are trying to have all that information collated and put on the one-stop shop portal. That will be a game changer that will signpost people to the right place and give them exactly the right information, which, we know, everybody wants.

The Member asked about self-employed people. Last week's economic package was very welcome and it gives people assurance that their livelihoods will be protected. That is a welcome thing, but the self-employed category has still to be resolved and we need it to be resolved. There are companies that are out working today and that should not be the case. We need to find a way to support them, so the Executive have made the case for self-employed people and will continue to do so. As a matter of fact, the junior Ministers are on a call as we speak and they are making the case for self-employed people as part of the conversation that they are having.

The Member's points about testing are well made. We concur, and we are going to do everything that we can to make sure that testing is significantly ramped up.

We all need to mind our mental health at this time — every one of us, even, and everybody else out there. People are isolated and cut off from their normal circles and activities — going to bingo or to a community hall — and they cannot do any of those things now and that will be difficult. We have to be creative, and I have been so impressed by people who have come up with different things online. We need to do a lot more of that as we go through what are going to be very dark and difficult days.

The emergency legislation that is going through will give us a lot more powers to shut things down as required. We need to have the tools and the powers to take the right action at the right time, and that is what the legislation will give us. We welcome the fact that we are going to have those measures, but they are going to be temporary. They are available to us for a period of time in order to get us through the situation and they are proportionate to the threat that we face. They are stark and draconian powers, and we would not allow legislation such as that to go through at any other time, but these are the most extraordinary times, so we need extraordinary legislation. That law will come into operation tomorrow and it will give us even more certainty to be able to take the right action at the right time.

Mr Newton: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the statement. It is, indeed, helpful and encouraging to see the actions that they are taking. Many points have been made in the Chamber and running through all of them is the concern for the individual, for society, for our health workers, for our teachers, for supermarket workers and for the people who run small food shops and chemists' shops. Those people are all on the front line of this crisis.

References have been made to the health crisis as it is, but are we not going to face another health crisis further down the line when this issue has been solved? There will be an impact on the health of those who have been serving on the front line. As we know, soldiers returning from war suffer from PTSD, and it is likely that many in the health service and other services who are fighting this battle will suffer from something similar. Should we not start thinking about what, at the end of this crisis, the outcomes will be for those who are fighting this battle on our behalf and how we are going to treat them?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes; absolutely correct. People will have to make very tough decisions. People working in the health service, on the front line, will have to make very tough decisions. They

will be working in the most challenging of circumstances. They will be trying to support patients. Their number one priority is always their patients. They will be dealing with people's families. It will be very distressing, so we have to mind our health service workers. We have to think about how we will respond to all of that when we come out the other side. Life as we know it has changed; that is the reality of what we are dealing with. We will come out the other side, and we will have to support everybody who has been involved on the front line. We will have to support everybody to rebuild on the other side of this. However, our priority for now has to be how we can save lives — and we can save lives. Everybody out there has the opportunity to save lives. If they follow the advice, if they do the right thing, if they make sure that they wash their hands and if they stay apart, we can bring down the level of deaths.

Mr Allister: I want to direct attention to the knock-on effect in our health service. What should I say, Minister, to the family of the 32-year-old mother who have contacted my office? She is a patient with a very serious cancer, and she has a two-year-old child. She has just been told that her chemotherapy will end because choices have to be made as to who will be treated.

We have talked much about social distancing, yet I was contacted this morning by a worker in a production factory in Ballymena who told me that the production line continues as was with people working elbow to elbow. What instructions have been given to factories in that situation?

Mrs O'Neill: On factories, the First Minister and I intend to make some more announcements later today. We both said on 'Sunday Politics' yesterday that non-essential services should be shut down. Nothing but essential services should be operating right now, and we are working our way through that. The additional powers that we will have will be important in order for us to be able to take things to where they need to go.

What do you say? What can you say? What can you say to that person? These are the challenges that we will have to deal with.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two. Thank you. *[Long Pause.]* Do you want to take a break for a few minutes?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I am OK.

That is the kind of situation that we will have to deal with. That is the kind of situation that staff who work on the front line will have to deal with. That is why we have to mind our healthcare workers in this period. Robin Newton made the point about how we mind their mental health when they come out the other side of this. This is the kind of stuff that will be so challenging and so difficult. There are no good answers to those kinds of questions.

Mr Carroll: Testing was referenced already. There is a perception in society that much more needs to be done to make testing more readily available to everybody and to roll it out much quicker and much more rapidly, especially to NHS workers, some of whom are off work because they are showing symptoms but might not have COVID-19. Have there been any discussions in the Executive about the requisition of private healthcare facilities to ensure that everything possible is being done to enable us to test quickly and that public health is coming before private profit?

2.00 pm

Mrs O'Neill: The Department of Health has published its surge plan. It will be a living document and will be constantly refreshed and looked at. We will have to do that, because we will need those hospital beds. We are working our way through all those things. We will need the hospital beds in the private sector and every available resource.

To be fair, I have been astounded by the public's goodness. People have offered up hotels that have closed, their services, their kitchens, their laundries — everything. People have been absolutely amazing. We have to think outside the box, and we are trying to look at how to collate all those sources of information and offers from people who want to help and then funnel them through the right Department, the one which it would be most helpful to. We are discussing those things, and, yes, we will need those beds.

Ms Sugden: I want to make a point about the leadership of both the deputy First Minister and the First Minister. It certainly has not gone unnoticed by my constituents. It is something that I always saw was there, and we will need to build on it when we pass this difficult time.

I appreciate the comments of the deputy First Minister about the communications portal. It is critical. We, as MLAs, are the voice of the people we represent but it does not directly find its way to the Executive table. Those ideas on

the gaps in the policies that are being announced so quickly may help the Executive identify where we can better support what they announce. I welcome that opportunity.

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

Perhaps it has already been raised, but we should try to find more support for the self-employed and sole traders. I appreciate that it is not within the financial gift of the Northern Ireland Executive to bring forward those measures, but how will you engage with the UK Government to ensure that they give them support? In Northern Ireland, we know that comparing our situation with that in England and Wales is almost like comparing apples with pears or oranges. We have a significant number of self-employed and sole traders who are not being supported. The measures that have been announced are for businesses that have premises or employees. If we are to underpin our economy, as much as helping those individuals, the Assembly has to encourage the UK Government to support the self-employed and sole traders.

Mrs O'Neill: The portal — the one-stop shop with all the information — will be continually built on. Perhaps we need to find a way for Assembly Members to flag up questions that are not already reflected in that. We will open up a course for all MLAs to contribute to that. This is a commonly asked question, and we need an answer to it. We will lend ourselves to doing that.

As regards the economic package, the Finance Minister and Economy Minister have been in touch with the Treasury over the weekend after Friday's announcement to say that there is a gap with the self-employed and we need to have it addressed. As I said, there is a COBRA call as we speak, and I know that the junior Ministers are involved in that. We have to continue to champion the needs of the self-employed. When we come out the other side of this and we have to build, we want people to have jobs to go back to. It will be a difficult and trying situation, but, if we can support those people as best we can to maintain their operations, when we come out the other side of this, they will still be there.

Ms Bradshaw: I place on record my condolences to the bereaved families. These are very sad times, and I am sure that the passing of those people was gravely felt by the healthcare family.

I welcome the information that the deputy First Minister has provided regarding the self-employed and the efforts of the junior Ministers. That is great, so I have no need to raise it.

I have two things, Minister. First, you will recall how well received the sign language interpreter was in the Chamber, when your colleague, the Communities Minister, spoke about the Bill coming forward. Have you any plans to incorporate, notwithstanding social distancing, sign language into your daily statements?

Secondly, given the apparent lack of consideration among some young people about social distancing and the gravity of the situation, can one of your daily sessions facilitate questions from groups like the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and other peer groups? We might find that young people start listening. It is clear from some of the feedback and imaging on social media at the weekend that a lot of young people are just not taking heed of this.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, we can certainly look at that. We need to find creative ways to engage with people, and we can see whether there is something that we can do there.

We can certainly look at sign language being part of our daily conference, because we need to make sure that we get our message out to everybody. As part and parcel of our new communication plan that will be rolled out in all the TV ads, there will be a signer, and I think that that is important. I am not sure whether it would be practical to do that as part of a press conference, but we will certainly look at it.

Mr Buckley: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their presence today. It is true that, in situations like this, we see the best and the worst in humanity. We see the best in our local health workers whom we send to the front line to fight the virus. I pay tribute to them, because I have seen what they have done in my constituency in Craigavon Area Hospital. They are truly heroes of our time, and, when we pass this awful period, it will be said that never has so much been owed by so many to so few. In that regard, Minister, I have watched how you have echoed the point that it is key now that our healthcare professionals receive the testing that they need and, more importantly, even at this stage, the vital PPE supplies that many of them are crying out for. I know that that work is ongoing.

We saw the worst in society as we watched over the weekend how people openly flouted the recommendation to socially isolate and keep social distancing. More has to be done to

encourage everyone to take this as seriously as possible at this time.

I wanted to lay on you the key message from many of my constituents who are worried for their income. While I recognise, as, I think, the entire House will, the blessing that was that huge financial package from the Chancellor, which really did put a lot of people at ease regarding day-to-day incomes, the self-employed, who represent a huge part of our economy and our society, feel vulnerable, as do their families. That is understandable. I know that a lot of work has been going on among Executive colleagues to address the issue, but I plead with you all to put it as a matter of priority and ensure that self-employed people have some form of cover in these deeply uncertain times.

Mrs O'Neill: I concur. We will do everything that we can to make sure that we can get support for the self-employed, because that allows us to ensure that there is economic security for people across the board and that all the measures that we take mean that people are less anxious about their income and about putting food in their family's mouths. I wanted to restate that.

To clarify the point for Paula, we have two sign language interpreters. We will do the daily press conference to give people information every day at the same time. It will be live-streamed so that people are able to keep up to date with anything that has happened throughout the 24-hour cycle. We will do that every day.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the deputy First Minister and, indeed, the First Minister for coming here today, when their time is precious. First, I congratulate them on the last day or two and the improved commitment to giving a joined-up, serious, humane message to the people of Northern Ireland. It is completely critical, and, I suppose, I encourage them to keep it up. I know that, in the days and weeks ahead, it will be difficult. In a sense, in Northern Ireland, we have a unique political context because we have a unique society. The old Irish saying, "We live in the shadow of one another" is one that we should bear in mind, and, in a sense, that unique political context, that unique societal context might be one that we can draw strength from. We know that we share things, and we know that we have to work together. That is something that we as a society have learned. Hopefully, we can draw strength from that in the weeks and months ahead, and I encourage the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in their endeavours to do that.

I have a few specific questions about a couple of specific issues. The first is about engagement with companies and manufacturers of things that, we know, we need and, we know, are critical in the days ahead. One of those is ventilators. We have talked about the need for all-island working and all-Ireland partnership. One of the biggest manufacturers of ventilators in the world, Medtronic, is based in Galway. What conversations have happened with them and with the Irish Government to expedite, frankly, them giving us ventilators? Secondly, there is Randox, a major diagnostics producer based in County Antrim. I do not mean to use the bully pulpit here to name individual firms, but I would like to know what conversations are happening. A third industry I will mention is clothing manufacturers. I know that, over the weekend, O'Neills talked about being in contact with Altnagelvin and seeing what PPE could be produced. What conversations are happening with it and other clothing manufacturers in Northern Ireland to get PPE? We know that they can be innovative and nimble when it comes to turning around their production lines, hopefully with social distancing rules on the production lines.

The final ones are that, in Ireland generally, in Northern Ireland and all over the place, we have seen in the last few years a flourishing of distillation. We have many more craft distillers. They can make hand sanitiser. There are craft distillers not just in a certain north Antrim village but all over the place. There are people making gin, vodka, all over Northern Ireland: what are they doing to make hand sanitiser? We think that should be relatively straightforward. What conversations are happening? That is essentially what I want to ask about all those manufacturers.

I also want to ask about testing, which lots of colleagues have asked about. It is vital. In addition to testing, are we giving thought to ramping up contact tracing? One thing that we are fortunate about in Northern Ireland is that we have a relatively dispersed rural population and have small, cohesive communities. I speak as someone who only relatively recently moved back here from London. In my morning commute into central London, if I had COVID-19 and was asymptomatic, God knows how many people I would have infected on the train and Tube. Driving from where I live now in the great constituency of South Belfast up to Stormont, it is very unlikely that I would. That does not mean that people should not be social distancing and staying at home, but we have small, cohesive communities and very often people will know 50% to 75% of the people they

might have met, if they have tested positive. In addition to testing, what are we doing about setting up phone banks of people to do contact tracing and to say, "Who did you come in contact with in the last 24 to 48 hours?". That is a strength that we have in a relatively rural, dispersed population. We do not use very much public transport, which would be good in the long term, but right now that might be something that is a strange advantage. What are we doing to ramp up contact tracing?

Those are my three questions, really. What are we doing to talk to manufacturers and what are we doing about contact tracing?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for all those questions. Going back to the spirit of people and how good they are, we have had numerous companies that have offered to repurpose what they do. Manufacturing companies are offering to repurpose to build ventilators. People such as O'Neills and others who are offering to see if they can be of help with PPE. We are continuing those conversations, which have been ongoing across the Department of Finance, the Department for the Economy, Invest NI and others. We are actively talking to a range of businesses. The Medtronic company in Galway is being talked to, and they certainly can play a role. We have one company here in the North that can also help. We are looking at everything because we have to be prepared for this. All those things are really helpful and are being worked on as we speak. Certainly, conversations with the likes of O'Neills have been really good about what they are offering. They could make up disposable scrubs really quickly for staff. That would make all the difference, because they would then not be worried about washing uniforms and carrying things home with them. We have to be creative about all those things.

I do not have much information about hand sanitisers, apart from saying that I know that there is a company, perhaps in Derry, that is producing sanitisers, even though it does not have the proper trademark that you normally would have, but we are not in normal times.

Mr O'Toole: There are loads of craft distillers all over the place.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, there are the craft distillers. It is time for creative thinking and thinking outside the box, so we can certainly do those things.

On testing, the World Health Organization is clear in saying — Mike Ryan said it again at the weekend — that, even if you are in lockdown,

that is not enough. You need to test; you need to isolate; you need to trace. We need to follow this right through and remove those people, so that we can get actually get on top of this. In my mind, those three things have to work together. It is not enough just to test; you have to do the other things as well. We are in conversation and will continue to be in conversation with the Health Minister, the Chief Medical Officer and all concerned. There was work done over the last few days around the testing piece. The Chief Medical Officer brought together a group of people to look at how we can ramp this up and what we can do. We will have a conversation about that, hopefully, later on today.

It is a moveable feast. We are working our way through it, but certainly, people are great. They are great in the way that they have been offering to, just like that, turn their business from one thing to another just to meet the need that we will have.

2.15 pm

Mr Muir: I echo other Members' words of thanks for the collective leadership that you have been showing in recent days. It is exactly what we need at this time. I also thank the officials. Policy decisions are being made in Northern Ireland at breakneck speed; they would usually take years to be made but have been made in days. I also thank the healthcare workers for the service that they are giving.

I was particularly disappointed — that is a diplomatic word — to see the disrespect shown to our healthcare workers in recent days. Some people are treating this as a national holiday rather than a national emergency. It was shameful to see Crawfordsburn country park and Helen's Bay car park overflowing and to see people bringing elderly relatives out for a walk in the country park. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland are observing the guidance and showing respect to our healthcare workers, but seeing other people showing such disrespect filled me with a lot of anger and shame. I know that 35 outdoor organisations have encouraged people to engage in exercise, but do that locally. You do not need to travel to the beach to do your exercise. Go out for a jog or take your dog for a walk. You do not need to go to the country park or the beach. My first question is: when will we get to a point that, if people do not observe the guidance that we are giving them, we will have to close the beaches and the parks?

Last week, there was a very welcome announcement about grants for businesses, but

when will we get a bit more information about when they will be distributed? The Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement last Friday about PAYE is welcome, but it will not come into place until April and businesses need to have some money to assist with cash flow. When will we be able to distribute those grants? There are also concerns that some organisations pay their rates as part of their rent and service charge to the landlord. We need to ensure that the money goes directly to those businesses. Lastly, what representations can we collectively make to ensure that the self-employed are covered? They face significant hardship. They are the backbone of many aspects of our economy, and we need to see what way we can support them.

Collective leadership is what we need, and I really hope that, today, we do not see beaches and country parks packed, because that is shameful, disgraceful and disrespectful and is not the Northern Ireland that I am proud to be part of.

Mrs O'Neill: It is important to restate that this is not a holiday. This is not school holidays; it is an emergency. That is the message that people need to hear. I agree that the number of people who went to beaches over the weekend was disgraceful. We need to send a clear message from here. All of us need to take every opportunity to use every forum that we have to make sure that we drive that message home. The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will probably have more to say over the coming days on issues that are within his Department's remit. We know that councils have moved to close parks and public areas, and that is necessary.

I understand that this is difficult. It is difficult to be cooped up in the house, and children want to exercise, but we cannot behave as normal; we have to act in a way in which we have never acted before. This is ultimately about saving people's lives, and we need to drive that message home.

We are working to get the grants for businesses out the door as quickly as possible. More details will be finalised this afternoon, but we are hopeful that grants will be processed and out the door and, within a couple of days, will be in people's bank accounts.

Mr McNulty: I start off by paying tribute, once again, to our healthcare workers, who are facing an unimaginable challenge. I wish them all well with that challenge. I also want to applaud the First Minister and the deputy First

Minister for working in unison and doing what it takes to guide us all through this crisis.

I have a few questions that I would like clarity on. Schools have been semi-opened to provide childminding facilities for our key workers. I question the wisdom of pulling all the children of key workers together at one location and want to point out that some teachers, staff and principals feel very compromised. Equally, front-line healthcare workers feel let down because those facilities are not in place. Can we build a sustainable, safe solution that can be implemented even after a lockdown scenario?

On the implementation of measures, with the business rates grants and the 80% of salaries that are available to employees, what provisions will be available to the self-employed and freelancers? I suggest that 80% of last year's earnings should be made available to them, with up to a £2,500 limit. Those are all very positive initiatives, but people want to know when they will be implemented. When will those moneys be available to them?

Testing has already been raised. Forty-one testing stations are available in the Republic, with more due to open today. Are there any in the North? Healthcare workers need not be quarantined just because they have a head cold. We need those testing facilities available widely, specifically for our healthcare workers.

On PPE, some front-line medical professionals are refusing to make patient contact or even to carry out assessments because they do not have the correct equipment and cannot protect themselves. What initiatives are planned? Thinking outside the box, as you mentioned earlier, deputy First Minister, has O'Neills been engaged? O'Neills has staff ready and waiting to deliver equipment to our front-line healthcare workers. Has that initiative, to get that equipment to people when they need it most — now — been put in motion?

To reiterate a point that has been made in the Chamber, the penny does not seem to have dropped with large sections of our society. They do not recognise that this is do-or-die time. It is crystal clear: stay apart to stay alive. I hope that you can re-emphasise that point, deputy First Minister. I wish you and the First Minister well, and I wish all of us well in this huge challenge that we share.

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to repeat some of the things that I have said, particularly on PPE. We need our healthcare staff — not just our healthcare staff but anybody on the front line, our emergency services, and our domiciliary

care workers who are going house to house caring for people — to have protection. We have committed to do everything that we can to make sure that we have adequate protection, that it is ample, and that people have no fear about being protected when doing their job. Just this morning, we signed a contract that will see additional PPE brought in. We are also, as I said, working with and have been speaking to O'Neills, and others, who can perhaps support us at this time. A number of things are under way that will help the PPE situation, give the assurance that our healthcare staff need and ensure that we are doing the right thing to protect those who are helping to protect our families.

On the testing centres, we have to ramp up testing. I cannot say it enough. We must do much more testing; we must isolate, contact and trace. We have to do all those things. People are looking at the level of testing elsewhere. We do not have that here, but we need to get it here, and we will get it here. They are looking towards Croke Park and saying, "Where is our Croke Park? Where are our centres?" The Minister of Health will make some more positive announcements on that over the next number of days.

On school closures, let us be very clear: schools are closed. However, we are using school facilities to deal with the emergency and to support our key workers. We have to be nimble right now. It is not all clear-cut, and it is confusing for people.

My appeal to everybody who works in a public service, across the Civil Service and public services is: we need you. We need you to help us through this period, to help key workers to do their job, and to help to save lives. That means that we will not do what we always used to do all the time. Teachers might be asked to do something that is not in their normal run of duty. Somebody who works in the Civil Service might be asked to do something completely different, and alien, from what they have ever done before. We need people to respond in that way at this time.

This is not normal, and people need to stop thinking that it is normal. These are not normal times, so we have to behave differently. We need everybody to put their shoulder to the wheel and do their bit. That means stepping out of our comfort zone and doing the right thing, because we are trying to save lives.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, First Minister and deputy First Minister for your statement and for being here today. It has been widely

acknowledged, as has already been mentioned, that the general public are reassured to see you stand so strongly, shoulder to shoulder, over the past few days and throughout this time.

I commend you for working so well and for being so strong, particularly under such extreme pressure. I can only imagine the emotion that goes behind every decision that you have to make and carry out over the coming weeks. For that and the work that you are putting in, thank you.

There are, of course, ongoing issues, and things will change. Are there plans in motion to launch a series of public announcement campaigns to keep the public updated and informed, particularly given the large gatherings that we saw over the weekend? It is not just about young people and gatherings in open spaces. We are talking about it, and we have seen it in our supermarkets and other areas.

On the fiscal packages, what are we doing to address the situation faced by those who are renting and expected to pay their rent, when we have seen a mortgage holiday given to those with mortgages? We have the bizarre situation where we are seeing workers who have lost their jobs continuing to have to pay rents to landlords who have been given a mortgage freeze. That is not OK. What are we doing about that?

Have conversations been held at Executive level to move Northern Ireland into a full lockdown situation? We hear Boris Johnson announcing that flights and airports could be closed and that London could be moved into lockdown. Are we having those conversations?

A lot has been said about testing, but are the Executive looking at any epidemiological modelling to predict and plan for the virus and its spread? Are they looking at how we will plan to measure it going ahead and allocating resource to that?

Thank you for the work so far.

Mrs O'Neill: We are working our way through the issues you raised regarding renters. We have heard disturbing news from Housing Rights and others who are saying that some unscrupulous landlords are moving to try to evict people at this time. The Minister for Communities will bring forward legislation that will protect people against being evicted in this period. That is important. We are working with the Housing Executive, the housing associations and others and looking at the issue of rents. We need to help people to get

through this as best they can. Last week's announcement on the financial package for income was very important, but we also need payment holidays for mortgages and rents to help people survive this period. We will continue to do that, and we will keep the Assembly updated as we move our way through that.

The Executive will be launching a public ad campaign; you will see that being ramped up over the next couple of days. You will see it everywhere. It is part and parcel of the work that we have done around the portal and the one-stop shop for information. There will be consistent messaging and people will see the factual position on all these things. You will see that being rolled out to drive home messages, and it will be very much welcomed.

You asked about a full lockdown, or whatever way you describe it. We will have additional powers tomorrow, but, as of now, anybody who is not involved in essential services should not be out and about. That is it. That is it in a nutshell. As of now, people should not be out if they do not have to be. We will have additional powers tomorrow that will give us the flexibility to move our way through this and take the right decisions with the right powers behind us. That is important.

I want to drive home the message that we must not strike fear into people to such an extent that they run out and panic-buy food. We have solid food supply chains, and we have medical supply chains. We are working with the hauliers and the retailers — with everybody — to work our way through this. That will not be a problem in the work that we are doing, so, my message to people is this: please, please, please do not go out and panic-buy. Not everybody can, and if they think that they are not going to be able to get anything at the shops for their family, it adds on to them an unnecessary tension. There is enough food. We will have sustained food supplies and sustained medical supplies, and we are working with all the relevant partners to make sure that that is the case.

2.30 pm

Committee Business

Standing Orders 49(2)(a) and 52(2)(a)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion from the Committee on Procedures to amend Standing Orders.

Mr T Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move:

That the Standing Orders of the Assembly be amended as follows:

In Standing Order 49(2)(a), for "11" is substituted "9"; and in Standing Order 52(2)(a), for "11" is substituted "9".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that an hour should be allocated for the debate. The mover will have 10 minutes to move the motion and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr T Buchanan: On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to amend Standing Orders to the House today. I will begin with some background to the proposed amendment.

Under the Assembly Members (Reduction of Numbers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the number of MLAs per constituency was reduced from six to five, leaving a total of 90 seats in the House. Following the resumption of the Assembly on 11 January 2020, parties agreed voluntarily to allocate nine seats to Statutory and Standing Committees instead of the 11 required by Standing Orders 49(2)(a) and 52(2)(a). Whips and party representatives agreed memberships of Committees, and they are available in the Assembly reports NIA 5/17-22 and NIA 6/17-22. Subsequently, the reports were agreed by the Business Committee on 20 January, when it was also agreed to suspend Standing Orders 49(2)(a) and 52(2)(a) prior to moving the two motions on the Committee membership reports. The Assembly agreed the motions.

Recognising that suspending Standing Orders was only a temporary solution, the Business Committee agreed to refer the matter to the Committee on Procedures. On 27 January 2020, the Business Committee wrote to the Committee on Procedures asking for consideration of the issue and the introduction

of a more sustainable arrangement in Standing Orders. At its first meeting, on 29 January, the Committee on Procedures, noting a letter from the Business Committee, commissioned research on the matter. In addition to asking Research Services to look into the number of members on Committees in the other devolved legislatures, along with the Houses of the Oireachtas and the House of Commons, the Committee also agreed to look into issues relating to the quorum of the Committees. On 12 February, the Committee considered the research findings and deliberated on the matter. I will briefly cover some of the discussions held during the deliberations.

On the issue of a larger Committee of 11 members, there was discussion around occasions when having a larger number of members on a Committee may mean it can be difficult to reach consensus on an issue. However, on the other hand, with a larger Committee, members were of the view that there was a greater representation of parties and, therefore, more views and ideas provided on the issue. In respect of a smaller Committee of nine members, members fully acknowledged that there was a risk of less representation of parties but discussions and decisions could be made more quickly and therefore the Committee might become more effective in carrying out its business. Some concern was raised by members around the quorum for a smaller Committee and particularly on whether quorum could be maintained on a consistent basis. I will come back to that a little later.

There was discussion between members on whether Committee members were adequately resourced. If some members sit on multiple Committees, does that constrain the time available for them to read, research and prepare for each Committee? Does it have a corresponding effect on the capacity of members to undertake high-quality scrutiny? Those were some of the questions and issues that were raised by members during our deliberations on the issues.

Continuing on discussions around resource, some members highlighted the fact that a member may be on one or more Committees. However, compared with other members, they may have a very different level of background support behind them in terms of what they can give. It was the view of some members that support mechanisms for individual members on Committees may be an issue that the Assembly could look at at some time in the future.

On the issue of quorum, members noted that the Assembly's current quorum of five was

relatively high compared with other legislatures that the Committee looked at, which mainly have a quorum of three. As I mentioned, there was concern amongst members as to whether a quorum could be consistently maintained. It was the view of some members that a quorum of five gave a better chance of a wider range of parties being in attendance at the meetings.

On the conclusion of its deliberations, the Committee agreed that the Standing Orders should be amended to reflect the change from 11 to nine members. The Committee also agreed that the quorum should remain at five but with a review of the issue in several months' time, when the Committee will write to Committee Chairpersons to ask whether they have experienced any issues or have any concerns about the quorum remaining at five. The Committee agreed to consider the issue again at a later date. However, the ongoing problems brought about by COVID-19 could mean that quorum for Committees is an issue that needs to be considered again sooner rather than later.

It would be remiss of me not to point out that, at its meeting on 26 February 2020, a member who was not available for the deliberations expressed his opposition to the reduction of members on the Committee. However, following consideration of the legal advice, the Committee agreed the motion that is on today's Order Paper by consensus and without Division. On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I commend the motion.

As a member of the Democratic Unionist Party, I say that we agree with the motion. It will be in the best interests of Members, and the Assembly will be best served by Committees with a membership reduced from 11 to nine. That will give more focus, result in quicker Committee decisions and allow business to be brought to the House in a much more efficient and quicker manner. Therefore, I commend the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have only one other Member listed to speak and then Mr Middleton to make a winding-up speech. Priority will be given to members of the Committee if they wish to participate in the debate. One has indicated that she wishes to do so, and that is Mrs Rosemary Barton.

Mrs Barton: Mine is not a speech. Being mindful of the extraordinary times in which we meet in the Chamber today, I will not reiterate what my colleague Tom said. However, I wish to express the Ulster Unionist Party's support for the amendments to the Standing Orders.

Mr Muir: The Alliance Party is content to support the motion. One thing, perhaps, that needs to be considered is a result of the adjustment to the numbers on Committees. For example, I cover the two portfolios of Infrastructure and Finance, but I am not a member of the Finance Committee. The current arrangement is that I do not get access to its papers. I find out all that I do by sitting there on a Wednesday afternoon, watching the Finance Committee's deliberations and sometimes wondering what members are discussing. Allowing Members to access the papers for other Committees, which they do not have access to as a result of the change to numbers, would be useful.

Another issue, which is to do with the current, completely unprecedented circumstances, is about allowing members to access Committees without having to attend in person and whether that could be via telephone or videoconferencing. We need to consider that as a modern Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The only other Member whom I have listed is Mr Gary Middleton to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to conclude on today's riveting debate on the motion to amend Standing Orders. I thank all the Members who contributed. As this is a fairly straightforward amendment, there is little that I can add, except perhaps to summarise.

As outlined, the amendment has come to the House following a request from the Business Committee to introduce a more sustainable arrangement in Standing Orders regarding the reduction of Committee members from 11 to nine. As responsibility to amend Standing Orders lies with the Committee on Procedures, the Committee agreed to consider the matter. The Committee commissioned research on Committee size and quorum in other devolved legislatures, the House of Commons and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Committee considered the advantages and disadvantages of Committees consisting of 11 members and Committees with nine members. Members' discussions on Committee size and quorum have been outlined, so I will not rehearse those.

Ultimately, the Committee agreed that Standing Orders should be amended. It also agreed that the quorum be kept at five. The Committee will write to all Committee Chairpersons in several months' time to gain a more informed awareness of any issues relating to quorum. It was the Committee's decision to revisit the issue at a later date to allow Committees to

have a bedding-in period following their reduction in membership. It may be that current circumstances mean that the Committee will come back to the issue sooner rather than later.

In the debate, we heard from two Members — Mrs Rosemary Barton and Mr Andrew Muir — and we thank them for their comments. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Standing Orders of the Assembly be amended as follows:

In Standing Order 49(2)(a), for "11" is substituted "9"; and in Standing Order 52(2)(a), for "11" is substituted "9".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am satisfied that cross-community consent has been demonstrated.

Adjourned at 2.42 pm.

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