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Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)

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Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (Strangford)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 23 November 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Ms Nicola Brogan

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Nicola Brogan has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the West Tyrone constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of Ms Catherine Kelly. This morning, Ms Brogan signed the Roll of Membership in the presence of myself and the Clerk to the Assembly and entered her designation. Ms Brogan has now taken her seat, and I welcome her to the Assembly and wish her every success.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, I welcome the fact that we start our business today with two statements from Ministers on decisions taken by the Executive in relation to the current situation. We are obviously aware that these matters inevitably have an impact on the wider community, and all Members will have heard views from a range of perspectives over the weekend. I think that, right across the House, we all recognise that there are very difficult decisions to be made and that, given the variety of the issues involved, there are no easy choices. Therefore, it is very positive and appropriate that we have Ministers in the Chamber to address the issues and to take questions from Members before we move on to any other matters. Thank you.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Over the weekend, it was confirmed that Sinn Féin had emailed thousands of party members and supporters to tell them that the wake for Bobby Storey would be public. That is at odds with what the deputy First Minister told the Committee for the Executive Office on 1 July: "We actively discouraged people". Mr Speaker, I ask you to inform the House about what sanctions the House has on Ministers who mislead a Committee of the Assembly and show a total and blatant disregard for the rules and regulations of the House during the crisis.

Mr Speaker: The Member will be aware that it is not for the Speaker to adjudicate on comments that people have made or are alleged to have made elsewhere. Therefore, it is not appropriate. The issue has been discussed and, no doubt, will be discussed again; in fact, I have previously taken a question for urgent oral answer to the deputy First Minister that was debated in the Chamber, so it is not as if the matter has not been discussed. I have no doubt that, because it is being looked at and dealt with in other places, it will return to the Chamber at a future date. The Member has made his point on the record.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Justice Minister slipped out on Friday a decision in which she said that she did not have sufficient information to consider Gerry Kelly's grossly offensive tweet. Has the Minister advised the Speaker's Office of whether she has any intention of providing a statement to the Assembly to explain the position that she has taken?

Mr Speaker: I have not received any correspondence on the matter from the Minister of Justice, or from anyone else.

Ministerial Statements

Health: COVID-19 Decisions

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members do still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, but they can do that by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question, as long introductions are not necessary or appropriate.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): As the House is aware, the Northern Ireland Executive have decided to introduce tighter restrictions to break the chains of infection of COVID-19. The measures were detailed in a written statement to Members that I issued following last Thursday's Executive meeting. They take effect from first thing this Friday morning for two weeks.

In summary, we will in large part revert to the lockdown situation that applied earlier this year during the first surge of the pandemic. The major difference is that schools will remain open. I will set out the rationale for the new restrictions. In summary, they are essential to preventing a further spike in infections overwhelming our hospitals. The onus is now on all of us to follow strictly the public health advice and to comply with the letter and the spirit of the tightened restrictions. We can each play a part in saving lives and preventing avoidable deaths. That is how serious this is and how high the stakes are.

As a society, we can now look forward to 2021 with some optimism, given the progress made towards mass vaccination. I do not want to have to look a grieving relative in the eye next year and say, "Yes, we could've taken action before Christmas and that would have saved your loved one's life". I do not want to have to say, "I am sorry that we did not intervene. I am sorry that they are not here with us to enjoy these better days".

Today, I make a heartfelt plea for unity around the Chamber. The public are watching and looking to us for united leadership. It is, of course, the duty of the Chamber to hold the Executive to account and to scrutinise policy

decisions without fear or favour. That is the Assembly's job. There are strong and legitimate opinions, and feelings have run high. That does not mean, however, that we have to descend into party political point-scoring. This is far too important an issue for that. To say that the past few weeks have not seen devolution at its best is something of an understatement. Frustration and anger are widespread. We could spend hours in the Chamber raking over the ashes of the decisions that were made and not made. I have made my views known both inside and outside the Executive. Nevertheless, I fail to see where another bout of division and recrimination would get us now. What good would it do? Whose cause would it serve? We could also spend hours pointing fingers about years of underfunding of Health and Social Care (HSC) and years of underinvesting in staff, but, again, what would that achieve today?

I trust that everyone in the House is united in wanting the new restrictions to work. We have to give our hospitals and our heroic staff some vital breathing space. If we successfully drive down infection rates, we have the opportunity of having a better Christmas. It will not be a normal festive season by any means, but we all have the power to help change the atmosphere. We can do that by abiding by the new restrictions and strictly following public health advice. I urge all Members to promote public health messaging at every opportunity. Please do not undermine it. Please choose your words carefully, both inside and outside the House, today and in the coming days and weeks.

Let us remember that many countries, including near neighbours and, indeed, large swathes of Europe, are currently in lockdown. Those include countries with health services different from ours. We should not kid ourselves that we are so special or so unique that we can avoid taking similarly tough decisions. We cannot simply wish this virus away.

The paper that I presented to the Executive last week made the case for strengthening restrictions in light of the path that the pandemic is taking. With schools open and existing restrictions in place, the R rate had settled at around 1 by last week. That meant that we had reached approximate equilibrium with regard to community transmission of the virus. There has been a sustained reduction in the number of cases per day since the onset of restrictions, but numbers of cases, admissions, hospital inpatients, ICU occupancy and deaths remain at a relatively high level. In particular, hospital inpatients are at a higher level than was reached in wave 1 and have been declining

only very slowly. As a consequence, the hospital system and staff remain under serious pressure.

By last week, we were on the verge of permitting a significant relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions. It was highly likely that that would have resulted in the R rate rising significantly above 1, with a subsequent increase in cases, admissions, inpatients and ICU occupancy in December. That increase in transmission would have occurred from a relatively high baseline, meaning that an already serious situation would have rapidly become much worse. Without decisive intervention, the hospital system would have been at risk of being overwhelmed in mid-to late December. To care for the increasing number of critically ill COVID-19 patients, we would have been forced to halt some, or even all, planned activity for other conditions, some of which are urgent in nature. We would be facing the prospect of a significant increase in both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 deaths. In such circumstances, it is also likely that even a full lockdown, beginning around 14 December, would have been insufficient to prevent the current levels of hospital pressure being significantly exceeded. That is the bleak picture that the Executive were faced with last week, and that is the context for the lengthy and difficult discussions that we had.

I know that Members will ask whether other measures could have been deployed. The reality is that, given our current position and the rates of transmission, there are no feasible alternatives. As I have stated, other countries with different health services from ours have arrived at the same conclusion during the second surge in Europe. There has been considerable interest in the potential of rapid mass testing to reduce the transmission of the virus. However, it is important to recognise that that is largely based on theoretical considerations and that there has been, as yet, no clear demonstration anywhere in the world that mass testing can significantly reduce transmission in a short period against the background of a high level of community transmission. Modelling suggests that repeated mass testing of most of the population would be required to maintain control of transmission by that means. That would mean a very high degree of population buy-in and would present huge logistical challenges. Slovakia and Liverpool required military logistical support to deliver their programmes and at least a two-week run-in period before the testing was implemented. It remains unclear whether the required number of tests would be available to us in Northern Ireland. However, I have written and spoken to the Secretary of State for Health,

Matt Hancock, to request four million rapid lateral flow device tests for Northern Ireland.

I want to see us playing a pivotal role in the UK pilot on mass testing. My ambition is evident. At the same time, it needs to be remembered that we are still at the stage of pilot programmes. They will help us to assess the effectiveness and accuracy of rapid testing technologies. Reliance on mass testing alone would represent a high-risk approach in the run-up to Christmas. It may not be viable for logistical or test-supply reasons. However, there may be scope to target more limited mass testing to high-risk areas. That would be of help, but, again, it would not avoid the need for Northern Ireland-wide restrictions at this time. Mass testing is an exciting development, and, together with a vaccine, it offers great hope for a way out of our nightmare. However, it is not a panacea; certainly not at this time, and certainly not without restrictions in place before Christmas.

Enhancing hospital capacity is also cited in some quarters as the answer. In theory, measures to increase hospital capacity would allow an increased epidemic level to be managed without a further lockdown. However, that would inevitably be associated with increased deaths and might be limited by the need of staff to self-isolate, as a consequence of healthcare-related outbreaks in hospitals, or clusters and outbreaks in the community. It is also the case that the associated levels of community transmission would inevitably result in a further significant increase in outbreaks in care homes, among extremely vulnerable older people, as was experienced in the first wave, which would result in excess deaths in that population.

12.15 pm

For practical purposes, it is simply not possible to increase hospital capacity in the short to medium term. The key factor here is the supply of staff and, given the specialist skill set required, there is a long lead-in time for this. While some marginal gains in capacity can be made in specific areas such as ICU, they come at the cost of reduced capacity elsewhere in the system and involve the redeployment of existing staff. In addition, when doubling times of cases are in the region of seven to 10 days, even a doubling of hospital capacity, were it achievable, would buy only a limited period of relief before intervention was required.

It is, of course, important to give people hope as we face into this most difficult of winters. There are real grounds for optimism, given the

progress on vaccines, the development of rapid mass testing and improvements in treatments.

I need to be candid with the public. I will not offer false hope or pretend that there are shortcuts available to get us through these next few months. We all have to hunker down and play our part in abiding by restrictions, staying at home, working at home when possible, cutting our contacts, keeping our distance, wearing a face covering and washing our hands. We can do that. We must do that.

The restrictions that start on Friday will make a difference. We all have to play our part in making them work, by our words and deeds, and that includes everyone in the Chamber. The Executive must now put the last few weeks behind them. These are extremely difficult decisions. Governments around the world are grappling with the same awful dilemmas, but we need a collective spirit and a unified purpose, not just in the Chamber but across society.

Everyone across Northern Ireland must do their bit. We can help change the course of this pandemic. We can help save lives. Hope is on the horizon, and a happier new year stands before us. Let us do all we can to make sure that as many of us as possible get to enjoy much better times in 2021.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement, and for discussing it with me and the Deputy Chair of the Committee this morning. I also thank him for acknowledging the efforts that staff are making at present in dealing with the pandemic. When did the Minister first bring these restrictions, closing non-essential retail and hospitality, to the Executive?

Mr Swann: A paper was presented to the Executive for the meeting on Thursday. It was circulated two days or a day before, as is normal practice —. Sorry; I apologise to the Chair. It was circulated to members of the Executive the night before, when the paper was finalised. The Executive met the following morning.

I am led to believe that the BBC had the paper before the Executive had the opportunity to discuss it. I want to make this point. One of the challenges to decision-making in the five-party Executive is enhanced and amplified by the running commentary that comes from the Executive to multiple strains of the media. We should be making those challenging, difficult decisions within a space closed for discussion.

However, papers are transcribed and transmitted, often through social media, before our conversation has finished. Whoever it is and whatever avenue is providing that information out of the Executive, it is not helping the cause that we are trying to achieve in coming to a united purpose.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for the statement to the House this morning. We certainly do not underestimate the job of work that the Executive have to do in making these very difficult decisions.

For practical purposes, it is simply not possible to increase hospital capacity in the short to medium term. The key factor in that is the supply of staff, as we know. Given the special skill set required, there is a very long lead-in time for that. What is the lead-in time for the training of staff? Was the eight months, between the first wave and now, not long enough to increase staff numbers? Has the workforce appeal not achieved the supply of additional key staff members who will be required to help during this next wave?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. When we talk about the wave, the timeline often gets confused. It is nine months since the first. The first case of COVID in Northern Ireland was in February, so it is nine months since that case. We have been through a wave; we have been through the first pandemic, which lasted for months. We saw a return to a glimmer of normality only in July or August, when our staff were already overwhelmed, over-exhausted and at a point where they needed a break. To train an ICU nurse, an anaesthetist, a doctor or anyone in the short space of a few months is not practical or possible. I am sure that many of the colleges that register professionals will make that same point.

The workforce appeal was launched again in the approach to the second phase of the pandemic. The appeal has been a more targeted approach to the skill sets that we need. As of last week, we had received 3,157 applications, and 516 of those are tentative job-ready offered or actually appointed. Over 600 applications have been rejected as they do not meet the skill set or are not applicable for the position. There is a balance in the workforce appeal working. It is not possible to get an increase in the highly professional skills that we need — that is the ICU nurse, the anaesthetist and the respiratory ward professionals — in that time. We see that across all jurisdictions. In parts of England and Wales, the Nightingale facilities cannot be opened because they do not

have the skilled workforce. They have the premises, but they do not have the staff.

As I said earlier — I have said it many times — when this place came back on 11 January, one of the collective achievements was the agreement to invest in our health workforce. The Executive put in an additional 300 nursing training places per year, over the next three years. However, it takes a number of years for them to come through that basic training, never mind getting the enhanced skill set that is needed to operate in our ICUs, with anaesthetists and the additional workforce there. Our workforce really is stepping up at this time, and it is incumbent on us to give it as much support as we possibly can.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the cohesive tone of today's statement. I hope that all Executive Ministers can pick up on that tone and use it. Last week was an embarrassment to us all and was not of our making as MLAs. To have faith in the message, we must have faith in the messengers.

What avenue is the Department taking to explore how to better detail the public message? Families are really concerned about Christmas. They want to know exactly what they can and cannot do, and they need to know that soon. Does the Minister have a sense of how that message will be detailed to the public?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. One of the messages comes from Christmas, and it is not simply about family gatherings; it is about hope, faith and belief. That is the message that we need to portray for this Christmas. How do we do that collectively?

I was involved in a meeting on Saturday with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, our First Minister and deputy First Minister, the First Minister of Scotland, the First Minister of Wales and a number of Chief Medical Officers on how we get what we do at Christmas the same across these islands. I am glad that there has been an ongoing conversation between Her Majesty's Government in London and the Irish Government to make sure that we come to a collective message across these islands to ensure that families get as much continuity of messaging as possible, especially at that time. For Christmas, we should take not only a message of hope and encouragement but a message of faith and trust. We need to instil that message, and our Executive and our Assembly need to put that message out with a unified voice for our people. Although times are tough and will be tough over the next couple of

weeks, with everything that is coming, a new dawn is coming, and it will come sooner if we can all work together.

Mr Chambers: I came across something on social media that caught my eye. It came from a doctor in the United States of America:

*"We are the healthcare workers, are not your frontliners any longer. We are your LAST LINE OF DEFENCE.
YOU, my fellow people, are the frontliners now.
The war has shifted ... to the community and it is up to you. This cannot be won in the confines of the hospital."*

Does the Minister agree that those are wise words that we all need to pay heed to and reflect in all our actions and, indeed, our words, especially those of us who serve in the House?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comment. I do not spend much time on social media at present, but that is an accurate message. We fight the virus now in our streets, in our shops and in our homes, where transmissions have taken place. As Health Minister, the ask that I make on behalf of our health service is the same as the ask that that doctor makes. If we encourage the people of Northern Ireland to come together and work together to break the chains of infection by following the messages that we have consistently put out of social distancing, good hand hygiene, good respiratory hygiene, wearing a face covering and reducing the number of contacts as much as possible, we can break the chains of infection that lead to hospital and ICU admissions. The message that that healthcare worker put out may have come from America, but I am sure that it will be echoed and replicated by any healthcare worker in any facility that is combating COVID-19.

Ms Bradshaw: From today, weekly testing of domiciliary care workers will begin in England. Is the Minister minded to replicate that in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: As capacity increases with the mass-testing programme, we are considering that.

Mr Buckley: Please be assured that this question is not political but is, indeed, personal, as it is, I am sure, for many Members. The Minister's statement says:

"I do not want to have to look a grieving relative in the eye next year and say, 'Yes, we could've taken action before Christmas that would have saved your loved one's life'."

Sadly, I found myself doing that this week not in relation to COVID but in relation to cancer. A GP from north Antrim wrote to me on Saturday saying:

"In our bid to manage COVID, we have unleashed a tsunami of other medical problems into what is already a crippled service. It is now broken, and I don't see how that can change as we tell our patients with potential cancer, 'I am sorry, it will be six months before you can see a consultant for diagnosis and treatment'. It gets to be a harder job every day."

What grieves me most is what has been missed during the lockdown period. The register for general quarterly statistics shows that cancer deaths to date are 3,490. Minister, can you update the House on the establishment of a regional cancer reset cell to oversee the resumption of cancer services to give patients some certainty in the days ahead?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question, and I know that it is in no way political. I received the same email. I am sure that the Member is well aware that I receive many emails from our healthcare professionals, from families and from individuals who find themselves in exactly the same situation.

12.30 pm

While we are expanding and expending our health service resource on combating COVID, the challenges come in meeting the needs of non-COVID patients. That is why we published our surge plans and rebuilding plans and why we announced the cancer reset cell, which the Member rightly referred to, and discussed how that could approach how we deliver cancer services on a regional rather than simply a by-trust basis.

The work of that cell is ongoing on how we can bring together the operations, diagnostics and care pathways that were operating across trusts almost as silos. Although that is not the correct term, they were operating on a trust basis rather than across the whole of Northern Ireland. I will certainly be able to provide, which I look forward to, an update on the specifics of the outworkings of that cancer reset cell once I receive them. I do not have them with me

today, but I will get them for the Member and will update the rest of the House on how that work is progressing.

It is crucial that we allow our healthcare staff to look after the patients of Northern Ireland and provide the care that they need. We can do that by ensuring that the staff do not have to look after more COVID patients and by following and abiding by the regulations that are coming forward from this Friday so that we can break those rates of transmission and many of our healthcare professionals can get back to work on their specialities and the areas of expertise that they trained for and we can provide the best healthcare system that we can.

The Member referred to the email that he received that talked about a crippled service. I do not disagree with it. Our health service has been under stress and strain for many years, but we have a number of things in place that will see it rebuild and rebuild better and not go back to the way it was. It would be a detriment if we allowed our health service simply to go back to where it was. That is why I welcomed, when we came back in January, the Executive's commitment that our health service would be a priority, as would not only the people who need it but the people who work in it.

Ms Flynn: Go raibh maith agat to the Minister for today's statement. My question is similar to another Member's. The statement mentions the request that has been put in for four million rapid-testing devices. Will the Minister detail a bit more how the Department plans to roll those out? Are you thinking more about population-wide testing or about trying to target more high-risk groups like the care homes and meat plants etc?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The four million testing devices would allow us to do the entirety of the population. That would be a massive logistical challenge. This morning, I attended Queens University Belfast, which is running one of our first mass-testing initiatives. It has already been set up in the Whitla Hall. Its intention is to be able to do 6,000 tests per day by the end of the week, which is highly ambitious. That will allow us to work out what that will actually look like and how mass testing will deliver what we want it to. We have been involved at a departmental level in what has been happening in Liverpool and in the outworkings of that, where the wider mass testing of the population maybe is not just bringing forward the results that many would hope for.

In regard to the Member's question of whether we will be or are looking at more targeted interventions in mass testing, I will say that we are trying that initiative in one of our trusts and in care homes. We are putting those testing devices, while they are still limited in number and still new, to the best use and best purpose in order to identify those who are asymptomatic and those who are testing for COVID so that we can get the best support in place.

What I saw in Queen's this morning on that collaborative piece on mass testing was impressive in how it interacted with our test, trace and protect system so that a test positive case there, which can come forward in a matter of hours, was already being contacted by the test, trace and protect system to make sure that it is fully locked in to the entirety of our support programme.

Mr T Buchanan: On the basis of the modelling that the health service uses, the restrictions in place over the past four weeks have not worked. The R factor has increased; not dropped to the level that was expected. What plans has the Minister in place should the R factor still sit at 0.8 or 0.9 at the end of the two-week lockdown that is being brought in? What plans does he have in place to ensure that there will be no further extension of the lockdown and that our businesses, and especially our churches, will be allowed to open? The closure of our churches is a retrograde step.

Mr Swann: The Member makes the point about our four-week intervention not having completely the desired effect that we thought it would have. We saw a decrease in the first two or two and a half weeks, when schools were closed, but, unfortunately, when schools reopened, we saw that rate start to go back up. The Executive policy, as stated in a meeting in May, was to keep the R rate at or below 1, which means a continual decrease in the number of positive cases in Northern Ireland. The deciding factor for the Executive on Thursday was the number of hospital admissions. The severity and depth of the two-week intervention that we are bringing in on 27 November, which will take us through to December, should get us to a point at which the rates of transmission are being driven down and allowing our hospitals breathing space to enable them to discharge a number of the COVID patients who are already there.

As my statement referred to, the next steps are the forthcoming initiatives. The initiatives relating to mass testing are at an advanced stage. This morning, there was an

announcement of another vaccine. That will be three vaccines approaching a level of effectiveness of between 70% and 90%. It is about such stages as those and asking the public to re-engage with us when these restrictions end on 11 December. They are time-limited to that date because of their severity. I thank my Executive colleagues for supporting the asks that were made, because they are dramatic and will have an effect on the public of Northern Ireland and our businesses.

Mr Speaker, you referred to an Executive announcement on support packages that will follow this statement. I look forward to that. I left the Executive meeting to come here. I hope that the support packages are as beneficial to the people and businesses of Northern Ireland as the BBC seems already to know they are.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas seo ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement. The new restrictions are absolutely necessary. It is a pity that they were not implemented a bit sooner, but we are where we are. It is important that those who need financial support during these restrictions, receive it, and receive it quickly. In October, there was an announcement that £27 million would be made available to care homes for the care partnership arrangements. Will the Minister confirm that none of that funding has yet made its way to care homes?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I announced a new £27 million funding package for the care home sector. The funding was also to support care homes to continue paying staff at 80% of their salary when on sick leave for COVID-19-related reasons. That measure was first announced in June and then extended to the end of the 2021 financial year. The £27 million funding package is in addition to previously announced support packages, and it includes financial support for testing and visiting, to recognise some of the additional management time that is needed to respond to COVID-19. It is widely accepted that a fine balance had to be achieved on care home visiting. I am conscious of the extreme pressures on homes, but I do not want to see their doors totally closed to visits. I was hopeful that the new funding package would facilitate those visits, to the immense benefit of residents and their families.

The way that the funding package works is that expenditure can be claimed back by homes on a number of grounds, which include support for additional staffing because, for instance, there were more acutely unwell residents or there was a need to support individuals who were

self-isolating, and also for block-booking of agency staff and continued enhanced cleaning support for changes to the physical environment, and that was to include the support for safe visiting. Trusts were provided with funds to administer applications to this fund in a regionally coordinated and consistent way. Work will be ongoing with the sector to ensure that there is clear guidance on what can be claimed and a streamlined and efficient process for administering the applications. It is about those care homes making claims to the trusts for expenditure that they have incurred, rather than an upfront payment.

Mr McNulty: Thank you for your statement, Minister. I am really worried about the mental health implications of the restrictions for churchgoing congregations, publicans, business owners and their families. That said, Minister, what is the impact of the constant sniping from the sidelines by other Ministers and other parties about the decisions made in the House? It is very easy for us all to say that we are going to have a unified, positive message coming from the House. How difficult is that for the business owners who are on their knees and need help? It is easy for us up here; to quote another elected representative, we are all "well-heeled". How important is it that the grants are forthcoming quickly from the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance to encourage adherence to the guidelines and restrictions?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his statement. Look, unity, and unity of message, is important. We are united in having one enemy, and that is COVID-19. I have been consistent in my messaging and my position since I took up the role of Health Minister in this pandemic. Have there been opportunities where I could have scored political points? There have been many. Have I taken them? No, because I do not believe that that is how I, in this position, am best served in supporting the people of Northern Ireland who need healthcare, and in supporting our healthcare workers as well. I will say to the Member to be careful that he does not get drawn into the trap of others and criticise their political messaging and sniping by sending political messages and engaging in political sniping. It is too easy; it is far too easy. The difficult messages are the ones that we have repeated consistently about how we combat this virus: good social distancing, good hand hygiene, good respiratory hygiene, wearing face coverings and reducing the number of contacts that you have in a day and in a week. With regard to the financial support mechanisms for not just businesses but individuals, as the Speaker indicated, the

Finance Minister will be making another statement to the House, and I will support him in that.

Mr Beggs: Restrictions are put in place not only to help save lives but to protect non-COVID activity within the NHS. Minister, can you confirm that, as a result of the surge plan, non-COVID elected surgery has continued at a much higher level than previously, and that the public can play their part in ensuring that our Ambulance Service and accident and emergency units do not become overwhelmed so that, irrespective of what someone is suffering from, they can receive treatment from our hospital services?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. There was a question for urgent oral answer specifically on surge planning last week, when I addressed some of the misconceptions about the detail of work that has already been done by not just my Department but all six of our trusts, including our Ambulance Service. The point that the Member makes is the main one: while our hospital and care system is supporting COVID patients, those are beds, support mechanisms, specialists, specialities and skill sets that are being taken from elsewhere. To give the Member an indication of where we are with the work that our surge plans have done, I will compare where we were in October, as the last verified numbers, to where we were in April.

Under the three main headings of new outpatient activity, review outpatient activity and inpatient procedures and day-care activity, we conducted in the region of 57,000 procedures in April 2020. In October 2020, when we still had an increased number of COVID patients and increased support for them, the figure had gone up to 98,500. That is nearly 40% higher in those areas of expertise, while we were still looking after a high number of COVID patients, because of the work that was put in place by the Department, by the trusts and by individual care pathways to support their own patients while dealing with an increase in COVID patients.

12.45 pm

Mr Humphrey: The Minister is right: there are difficult decisions that all Ministers have to take on this hugely serious issue.

Apart from worship and prayer, many people attend church for solace and comfort. There is real anger and anxiety at the decision to close churches. Why was the decision taken to close churches despite steps taken by churches

across Northern Ireland to purchase PPE and other equipment? What evidence was given for the closure?

Mr Swann: As the Member will be fully aware, there are decisions that I do not take easily or lightly as Minister. In response to his specific question, we saw, through contact tracing, outbreaks and incidents that related specifically to churches. What was very clear in what our Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer put forward was the data provided to our test, trace and protect system by those who had contracted COVID on where they had been. Those who attend church were more open and up front about where they had been. It was pointed out that there were a number of incidents involving churches.

I have had the conversation with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, and I am still supportive of reopening places of worship for acts of private worship, provided that social distancing and hard surface hygiene guidance is followed and face coverings are used. It is important at this time that people be given the opportunity to pray in private if that is their wish. The power of prayer is that it does not matter where it is done; it is the act itself and the belief in doing it that matter.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his statement. The role of carers in our society was widely recognised and acknowledged pre-COVID and has been further emphasised throughout the pandemic. The restrictions have had an even bigger impact on support networks for carers, both on a statutory level and in their informal settings. That said, we have seen money provided for care homes and domiciliary care, as Members have mentioned. On the basis of that and the increased role that they have played throughout the pandemic, is the Minister considering a one-off grant payment for unpaid and informal carers?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The role of our carers has been highlighted many times in the House, not least by Ms Armstrong, who has been an advocate for carers, as have many other Members.

The advice document that was specifically developed for carers and young carers was first published on 10 April. Additional funding of £500,000 was provided to trusts via the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) to allow for direct payment flexibility to be introduced, and that option is still there. We have not yet put in a bid for additional payments for carers or the support networks that have been asked for, but

I am aware that the Minister for Communities has made specific bids for funding with regard to what the Minister of Finance may announce after this statement — I do not want to pre-empt anything — that would provide additional financial support for those in receipt of some benefits.

Ms Armstrong: It will not come as a surprise to the Health Minister when I ask him more about carers. I thank the previous Member for asking that question; I was going to ask it. Minister, I will say this to you clearly: carers across Northern Ireland, whether they receive extra payment or not, are exhausted, and I ask — plead with — you to go back to your trusts and ask them what supports will be made available over Christmas for carers, before we end up putting more pressure and more challenges on the health service due to the breakdown of older carers, most of whom are women. They are at breaking point. That is not an exaggeration. I have had people in tears who cannot cope any more; they are working 24/7 and are exhausted. Can you, please, confirm that something will be done with the trusts to make sure that there is equitable provision across Northern Ireland to support our carers in the run-up to and over Christmas?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I know the passion and personal experience that she brings to this. I am fully aware of the challenges that our service users, carers and families face throughout the pandemic, and the Member has raised with me specifically the impact of the closure of day centres. She talks about equality across the region. Day-care centres provide valuable opportunities for people to reach their full potential, but they also provide respite for those with caring responsibilities. In July, the trusts restarted that day-care centre provision in line with the public health guidelines. However, the Member will be aware that there are significant barriers to restoring full-time provision because ensuring the safety of service users, families and carers is also paramount.

I appreciate the frustration felt in the House, by service users, by parents and by carers that day-centre provision is not yet available at the level at which it was accessible pre COVID to bring about that respite. My officials are working closely with the Health and Social Care Board and the trusts to identify ways to increase day-centre provision. In the interim, however, services are continually monitored and assessed so that service uptake is checked and the unfilled spaces are reallocated, where possible, as quickly as possible. Aligned to that process, trusts have been working with families

and community colleagues to scope out additional and alternative supports, should that be from direct payments and domiciliary and the respite options. However, as I am sure the Member will appreciate, we can progress to full service in day centres only when it is safe to do so.

Mr Givan: First, let me register an interest with family members who work in the National Health Service, and I pay tribute to those in the health service for the work that they are doing.

We all share the same objective of minimising the number of deaths, but there is a difference of opinion on how best we can do that. On the evening that the Executive announced further restrictions, a friend of mine who is responsible for hundreds of members of staff rang me to say that a vulnerable person in their employment who, they knew, was, because of isolation at home, vulnerable — they were putting in measures to assist — had taken her own life. They put that down to the lockdown measures. We all want to minimise deaths.

In reaching decisions on restricting people's movement and seeking to contain where they can go and what they can do, what analysis are the Executive and the Health Department, which leads the Executive on these policy decisions, doing of the behaviour of the public and how they respond? We all saw the scenes over the weekend of the queues outside multiple retailers across Northern Ireland and the spike in that contact as a result of the decision that was taken.

The decision that was taken on churches is putting people of faith into an impossible position where they are conflicted with their allegiance to an authority higher than civil authority. Is the Minister saying that he will continue to enforce lockdown and allow only solitary prayer as opposed to public acts of worship? My church, for instance, can easily accommodate —

Mr Speaker: Question, please.

Mr Givan: — over 100 people with proper social distancing, and churches take that responsibility seriously. Is he saying that he will continue to recommend that those churches —

Mr Speaker: The Member needs to conclude.

Mr Givan: — have to stay closed?

Mr Swann: On the Member's last point and given the Executive's interaction, through the

junior Ministers, with the leaders of the Churches, I think that they all recognise the responsibility that they have and the challenges that they have in following the advice and guidance on how we manage COVID. As the Member will know, they are not easy decisions for me or for the Member's colleagues in the Executive, where the conversations were had. It is not about restricting anyone's freedom to worship or pray, and I am disappointed that the Member would even try to put that allegation to me because it is not in keeping with me.

With regard to the analysis of behaviours, one thing that is increasingly challenging for my Department and the Executive is that there are those who seem intent on undermining our health message by their words or actions. Once you see that happening, it makes it harder for any individual to follow that advice and guidance in good faith. However, I welcome the statements from our Churches and religious leaders on the difficult decisions that have been made by the Executive as we once again try to bring the spread of COVID-19 under control.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members to keep your remarks very brief please and get to your question. We have a number of Members who wish to ask questions.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Just briefly, I ask the Minister and Members of the House to join me in offering our condolences to the family of Bredge and Owen Ward, the husband and wife who died 12 hours apart last Wednesday as a result of the virus. It is completely devastating and a painful loss for the family and the entire community.

In relation to the restrictions in place, there is huge concern among the teaching profession and parents about schools remaining open. Given the spread of the virus and the need to take every possible step to prevent its spread now, in the mouth of Christmas, what conversations has the Minister had with the Minister of Education on the early closure of schools to ensure that we can enter the Christmas period as safely as possible and to ensure that teachers have a period of isolation prior to meeting with their loved ones, if possible?

Mr Swann: We have all heard some of the heartbreaking stories about those who have lost their life due to COVID, and there are many other stories that we have not heard or seen that are equally tragic and hurtful to many a family who will have an empty chair or chairs

around the table this Christmas. I pass on my condolences to all families who have lost loved ones. I have said before that the hardest reports that I have read and continue to read are the daily reports that give us the number of positive cases and deaths. Behind each of those numbers is an individual with a family.

An assessment has been made and a conversation has been had in the Executive on the importance of education and continuing our young people's education as much as it is practicable and safe to do so. One of the conversations has been around early intervention and bringing forward the school holidays by a week. One of the points that have been made and been listened to is that, when schools are closed, if there is no adequate provision for young people to interact, they could end up being in a worse situation when it comes to the spread of COVID than they would be in their places of education.

During the four weeks that we had, the only difference that we saw between the first two weeks and the second two weeks was the opening of schools, and I think that the Chief Scientific Adviser indicated that, where we saw the R rate increase, it was not solely attributable to what happened in classrooms but was associated with schools. That was part of our messaging. It was not just about the activities in the classroom or in the school building; it was about what happened at the school gate, what happened when transporting pupils to schools and what parents were doing when their children were in school.

There is an ongoing conversation. One of the decisions that the Executive have made is to prioritise young people's education. More non-pharmaceutical interventions have been suggested as means to allow education to continue in a safe and practical manner. My Department engages regularly with the Department of Education to bring forward and discuss those suggestions.

1.00 pm

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answers. Whilst it is, by no means, the only solution, advances in testing will play an important role in restricting the transmission of the virus. Can the Minister provide an update on Northern Ireland's participation in pilots of the new lateral flow tests?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I touched on the issue earlier. I attended what is the first initiative in Northern Ireland, which is being

rolled out by Queen's University. It will see its students and staff tested using the new devices. That is part of the programme of travel corridors that will allow students to return home for Christmas. While mass testing may be part of a solution, it is not the solution, nor should it be seen to be. A lot of work is ongoing. We have considered mass testing of the population, but we have to make sure that it is an appropriate use of those lateral flow devices when we receive them and with regard to the number that we receive. However, it is part of the armoury that we are now building up that will make 2021 a safer place.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. I do not envy him his task. In his statement, he said that it is important to give people hope. What hope can the Minister and Executive give to the person who has recently received a devastating cancer diagnosis and been told by their cancer nurse, who had tears in her eyes, that no date could be given for any of their treatment to commence?

Mr Swann: The message that I give is one of apology to that individual and many others across the community who cannot engage with the services that they need because we are supporting patients who are coming forward with COVID and need to be hospitalised due to clinical decisions and interventions. The challenge — it is not one of a message of hope, because that message would bring little comfort — to us all is to drive down the rate of infection and to break the chains of transmission, so that we can successfully reduce the number of COVID inpatients in the hospital system and people like the person whom the Member mentioned can be brought forward to see the specialists they need to see as quickly as possible.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and commend him on his efforts. Over the past few days, I have been inundated with concerns about the closure of gyms. The Minister will be well aware of the positive, essential role that exercise plays in the preservation and promotion of physical and, even more so, mental health. Can the Minister explain to the House and those anxious people the scientific rationale for the recommendation to close gyms, which have gone above and beyond to ensure that their premises and practices are sanitised and safe?

Mr Swann: Again, I acknowledge the benefits that gyms provide. However — this is similar to a previous answer — through the test, trace and protect system, we saw outbreaks that

were associated with gyms. That is why we took that decision and made the recommendation that gyms, too, close for the two-week period. I must stress to Members that it is for a two-week period while we reinforce that key, simple message to stay at home. That is the rationale that was taken. There is little point in a gym being open if the key message is to stay at home. There is still the availability of outdoor exercise that any individual can participate in. When it comes to what we could see through the test, trace and protect system, gyms were indicated as a source of infection. The steps that had been taken are commendable and had broken many a chain of infection, but we were still seeing a number of cases coming through.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. I also thank all those working in the NHS in dealing with the health of our population. As we know, not all heroes wear capes. There was mention of the opportunity for a better Christmas, yet, over the weekend, we heard from Professor Gabriel Scally, a public health expert at the University of Bristol, who said, on the Prime Minister's proposals, that there was no point in having a merry Christmas only to bury friends and relations in January and February. There seems to be some disconnect. When will details on Christmas be issued to the public? Will the Minister support the establishment of an expert task force to increase transparency and to take the politics out of decision-making on COVID-19?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her two questions. The messaging on Christmas is being discussed with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the First Minister of Scotland and the First Minister of Wales to ensure that there is a consistent approach. That conversation also involves the Chief Medical Officers to make sure that there is not a higher price to pay for what we do at Christmas. I look forward to that work concluding and a joint message coming forward. The Government of the Republic of Ireland are also included in that to ensure that there is consistency across these islands for all families.

The Member asked about bringing forward an independent task force to take over in order to take the politics out of decision-making. I know that many individuals are stepping forward to volunteer for that. However, I have always found that, when it comes to such positions, those who volunteer may not be the best people for the job, because they come with preconceived ideas that may not be of benefit. When such people were brought into either the

health service, the Health and Social Care Board or the trusts, some of their ideas were not practicable or workable.

Mr Allister: Last week, the Executive Office came to the House to make a statement; this week, the Health Minister has been sent. Is that because the Executive Office wants to keep its distance from the unpopular U-turns and the effect on business?

Can the Health Minister reconcile for me the return to lockdown with the fact that, from looking at the dashboard this morning, it is demonstrably clear that the number of COVID-positive tests is now half what it was six weeks ago, yet we are heading back into lockdown?

As for the Churches, did he even consult them? Does he understand — I am sure that he does — the hurt that has been caused? Will he publish the evidence so that they, too, can know why they are having to close, given that they tried so hard to do all that was asked of them?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his three questions. In regard to the First Minister and deputy First Minister not wanting to be here in case they were tagged with an unpopular decision, one of the things that have become clear since I took up post is that it is not about trying to be popular; it is about trying to do what, I believe, is right not just for the people of Northern Ireland but for our healthcare workers.

The Member rightly indicates the fall in the number of positive cases. However, I encourage him to look on through the dashboard to the number of COVID-19 inpatients who are in our hospitals, and he will see that, since 9 November, that number has not fallen below 400. While that may sound like simply a number, to put it into perspective, I ask the Member to picture in the back of his mind an eight-bed ward, which, I am sure, he will be familiar with from visiting many friends and family in hospital, and then picture 50 such wards solely supporting COVID inpatients. That demonstrates the challenges that our health service faces in supporting not just COVID patients but all other patients.

With regard to the decision on churches, as the Member rightly indicated, it is not one that I recommended or brought forward easily. The Executive, the junior Ministers, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser engaged with Church leaders after the decision was made about what is necessary and why it is necessary. As I indicated, the Church leaders have made statements. I would not say that

they are fully supportive of the decision taken and the challenges that that brings, but they recognise that it was done in order to break the chains of infection.

Mr Carroll: The Minister's statement indicated that mass testing will not be a magic bullet in the crisis as long as community transmission rises. I suppose that is true, but it is important to have a system of mass testing. Does the Minister therefore agree that, until now, the Executive have utterly failed to implement adequate testing and an adequate track-and-trace system when our R rate decreased? Have any lessons been learned as we peer into a two-week circuit breaker?

Mr Swann: My answer to the Member's main question is no, because we made advances in our testing capability and in the ability of test, trace and protect. As for lessons learned, we have instigated a backward tracing programme in which our test, trace and protect individuals are now asked where they have been for the past seven days. That is an enhancement. We have also made technological advances with test, trace and protect so that those who test positive can interact by a text message or online and additional advice can be provided. Steps were taken during July and August to make sure that those systems were more robust.

With regard to the testing regime, by using pillar 1, pillar 2 and now mass testing through the lateral flow, we have an increased capacity that is meeting our current need.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Could Members please take their ease for a moment or two?

Finance: 2020-21 November COVID-19 Funding

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to provide Members with an update on the further allocations of COVID-19 support funding for the financial year 2020-21. I offer an apology for the statement being slightly late going into Members' pigeonholes, but, as Members will know, the Executive met this morning and ran on beyond 12.00 noon.

The COVID crisis has created a highly uncertain financial context. We have not known what course the virus would take or what the health experts would recommend in response to the virus, and we have not known how much money we would receive from the Treasury. That uncertainty has made financial planning

difficult. The background to the allocations that I am announcing reflects that financial reality. Just over two weeks ago, Treasury provided a further £400 million to the Executive to support our response to COVID-19. I requested urgent proposals from Executive colleagues to use the funding to support businesses, public services and vulnerable people.

Some Members have asked why that funding was not disbursed immediately. Had we, as an Executive, allocated it immediately, we would not have been able to take into account the new restrictions agreed by the Executive last week. It was my view that it was right to have a plan in place to take us to the new year before making the allocations.

It has been argued that the financial package that I am announcing today should have been made at the same time as the new restrictions were agreed last Thursday. The first indication that I had of the restrictions being proposed was that Thursday morning. The proposed restrictions were discussed by the Executive throughout the day and agreed on Thursday night. It was only at that point that a financial package could be finalised, and my officials and officials in other Departments worked over the weekend to put it in place.

COVID is, first and foremost, a global health crisis. However, it has created a global economic crisis, and extensive support to businesses and workers has been provided to protect people's livelihoods. The extension of the current restrictions means that there is a requirement to extend the current support measures. An additional £55 million is being allocated to extend the localised restrictions support scheme operated by my Department. That will be expanded to include the non-essential retail, leisure and entertainment businesses that are required to close for two weeks. The Department for the Economy's COVID restrictions business support schemes will also be extended.

1.15 pm

I understand the frustrations of businesses at the speed at which payments are being made. It is important to understand that schemes that would usually be designed and implemented over many months are being turned around in days. Many Departments have repurposed themselves to provide grant support. Land and Property Services (LPS), for example, which is in my Department, is a rates collection agency. It has transformed itself into a grant-making agency and taken on new powers to do so.

Similarly, the Department for Communities has stepped up to deliver a scheme for social enterprise and charities. The Department for Infrastructure has done likewise for taxi drivers. Designating a Department, devising a scheme, checking applications and issuing payments takes time, and we have a duty to minimise fraud and error. The grants are taking longer to issue than I had hoped, but officials are working as fast as they can to process payments.

Today, the Executive have agreed to provide a further £213 million of business support. The Executive provided a full year's rates holiday to the sectors worst affected by the pandemic: retail, hospitality, tourism, leisure, childcare and airports. I appreciate that those sectors will continue to suffer stress into the next financial year. I fully understand this, and my Department is considering options for how best to deliver further rates relief. Therefore, today, I am setting aside £150 million for that purpose while the work is completed as a matter of urgency.

A £95 million high street voucher scheme will give people a prepaid card for use on the high street, which has been devastated by COVID. The Department for the Economy is finalising the details of the scheme. Twenty million pounds has been provided for company directors, a group excluded from previous support. Twenty million pounds has been allocated to extend this financial year's 12-month rates holiday to manufacturing businesses. That will bring the sector into line with what has already been offered to hospitality, tourism, leisure and retail. An allocation of £10.6 million has been made to what are known as "wet pubs". That will support approximately 1,000 licensed premises that are experiencing additional financial hardship as a result of the health protection regulations. Five million pounds will top up the tourism and hospitality scheme, reflecting the extraordinary costs for some businesses that have been forced to close. There is £4.1 million for bed and breakfasts, which is aimed at approximately 953 certified accommodation businesses that were excluded from previous support because they paid domestic rates rather than business rates. There is £3 million for the extension of digital selling capability grants to help local businesses to grow their online sales. The allocations are in addition to the £60 million previously provided by the Department for the Economy-led COVID restrictions business support scheme.

The Department for Communities has been allocated £71.5 million, £44.3 million of which will enable a one-off heating payment of £200

to disabled people on higher rate allowances and older people in receipt of pension credit. That recognises the additional cost imposed on those vulnerable groups by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also includes a further £10 million each in support for councils and sport, £2.25 million for social enterprise support, which will allow the oversubscription to the social enterprise fund to be funded, and £5 million in respect of charitable grants, which will ensure that no charities are left unsupported for the remainder of this financial year.

The Department of Education has been allocated £20.6 million for COVID response measures and £5.8 million for COVID Education Restart measures. That includes vital funding to ensure that the families of young people who are entitled to free school meals will receive food grants during school holidays.

From the £10 million set aside for support for airports, the Department for Infrastructure has been allocated £1.2 million to provide further support to the City of Derry Airport. The Department has also been allocated £26.3 million in relation to lost income across it and its arm's-length bodies.

Today's allocations total £338.1 million. An additional £150 million has been set aside for the consideration of longer-term rate support, and a further £26.6 million is being held in reserve. Previously centrally held allocations, including £6 million for taxis, buses and coaches, £8.8 million for airports and £60 million for Department for the Economy-led schemes, remain pending. I will continue to keep the Assembly informed of funding for further measures as they are agreed.

Mr Speaker: I call Paul Frew. Sorry, I call the Chairperson, Steve Aiken.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I rise as the Chairperson of the Finance Committee —.

Mr Frew: For now [*Laughter*.]

Dr Aiken: You are not going to get it that easy. It is not going to happen.

I thank the Minister for meeting me earlier today and briefing me on the content of his statement before he came to the House. Minister, I thank you for your statement, and we welcome the much-needed funding as a means of supporting businesses. However, those businesses need the payments to be made without unnecessary delays. A number of businesses are still

awaiting payments from previous announcements. Therefore, it would be helpful if you could outline what is being done to prioritise the payments for those still waiting and advise whether the applicable Departments have sufficient capacity to ensure that payments are progressed quickly. We note your comments about LPS and how quickly it has managed to repurpose itself. We also ask what commitments you can give to assure those who are eligible for support that payments will not be subject to undue delay.

Further to the announcement of the expected £95 million for the household voucher scheme, whilst it will provide a much-needed boost to local business, it would be helpful if you could outline the rationale for applying the scheme to every household, particularly as many of the households will probably not need it; whether a targeted scheme, offering a higher amount, would have been a more sensible approach to support those most in need; whether any households will be excluded; whether there will be an expiry date for vouchers; and what will happen to money from unspent vouchers. I am looking at the Department for Communities website, and there are 487,000 households in Northern Ireland. If it was approximately £100 each, it would equate to £48 million. Is it to be £200 rather than £100?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Chair for his comments and questions. Of course, the balance has always been between getting payment on the ground as quickly as possible and ensuring that — it is not two or three weeks since we had a debate in the Assembly about payments that had gone awry and the consequence of that. It was a very small proportion of the £10,000 and £25,000 grants, but it draws particular attention and reminds us of the necessity to ensure that public money goes to where it is designed to go to and gets to those most in need. It is a balance of getting payments out quickly. Also, the more focused or selective, if you like, the payment is, the more data is required to isolate it from other, broader groups to make sure that it gets to the right person. That data is not just the LPS data; other data can be required to verify that people are in certain businesses that are entitled to receive support. More focused restrictions from the Department of Health add complexities to the paying out of the schemes. We do not know what the Department of Health restrictions are until they arrive with us and the Executive agree to them. That said, we want to see the schemes get out as quickly as possible. They have been slower than I would have liked or the Executive or, I am sure, all MLAs would have liked. We will continue to encourage that. Certainly, the support scheme that LPS is

rolling out has gathered pace and has started to pay out. LPS was well through those payments last Friday when I got the last figures.

Obviously, we have been working on this over the weekend, but I will get up-to-date figures before Question Time tomorrow so I can advise Members where that is.

The voucher scheme is being operated by the Department for the Economy, which will, I am sure, expand on the detail as time goes on. It is not meant to support households; it is meant to stimulate the high street. The primary focus of it is to stimulate spending and growth on the high street and to give certainty to businesses. I am told that it is likely to roll out in the new year, because it takes about six weeks for such a scheme to be put in place. I believe that you are correct that it is about £200 per household, and it is intended to be sent out in the months when the high street is at its leanest — in January and February. It is really a stimulus to high-street spend rather than support to the household.

Mr Frew: Minister, what use is the statement to the House when it is completely devoid of any realism and completely disconnected from the real world? What use is the statement to the single mother of three who runs a hairdressing salon and has not received one penny of support from you?

How much money did the Department for the Economy bid for, and what percentage of that bid has it received?

Mr Murphy: The scheme is designed to pay out to the sorts of people whom you reflect: those who own a hairdressing salon. If they have not already received money, they should be getting it in the very near future from Land and Property Services (LPS). Perhaps the Member can take the matter up with LPS rather than grandstand here in the Chamber. Most other MLAs are taking up individual cases and pressing them for people. The Member is saying that an allocation of almost half a billion pounds, when you add in the intent that I have for rates holidays to continue into the new financial year, is not to be living in the real world, but it is largely all of the money that the Executive have at their disposal to provide support. That is what we are doing. I understand the battles that are going on in your party. Those battles are affecting not only your party but the entire running of the Executive, because of the dysfunctionality that they cause. [*Interruption.*] We are trying to manage as best we can to get all those schemes done —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Murphy: — to get support on the ground where it is needed and to get Executive decisions taken, and not only taken but supported by Ministers. All of that is a challenge, but we will meet it, regardless of what goes on in your party.

Mr McHugh: Ba mhaith liom mo bhúiochas a ghabháil leis an Aire fosta as a ráiteas. Unlike the Member who spoke previously, I welcome the support measures that you have announced, and many other Members will welcome them. I appreciate the time constraints that you will have been subject to when drawing up the proposals and so on. Apart from the extension of rate relief and the £5 million that will be allocated to tourism and hospitality schemes, should travel agents in particular expect any further funding in the future?

Mr Murphy: It is perhaps not a case of providing further funding but a case of getting some support to them. I know that travel agents have been particularly badly hit. Not only have they lost business but deposits that they were paid have had to be paid back to some customers. I had a meeting just a few short weeks ago along with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, at which we met representatives of their group. It was agreed that they would provide further information on their specific request for support that they want to see from the Executive. My officials have been engaging with them to collate that information and provide me with some guidance. Once that has been put together, it will be provided to the responsible Department to make sure that we can include travel agents in the support given. I am very keen to give them support if we can.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for his statement. Many of the measures are welcome. Critical for many of the people who are in extreme distress financially and, in many ways, emotionally as we head into Christmas, such as small business owners and people whom they employ, is getting the money out the door. I appreciate that that is the job of the Economy Department, which has, I am afraid, not been very fast at getting the support out. What assurances has the Minister had from the Economy Department that the support that is particularly aimed at some of those businesses will go out before Christmas so that people can spend it on some kind of Christmas for their family? That is absolutely essential.

People will want to understand more about the allocation of £95 million for high street vouchers. Is there any prioritisation of small independent retail over some of the large multinationals? They have online operations, over to which some of their business has transferred. I ask for clarity on those two things: when money will go out the door and whether the £95 million makes any differentiation between independent and large-scale retail.

Mr Murphy: We, of course, want to get the money out the door as quickly as possible. I have encouraged other Departments' Ministers to make allocations to do that, not just the Department for the Economy's. There is a balance to be struck between trying to verify information to support a funding application and trying to ensure that the money goes out quickly. I encourage people who are applying to try to make sure that the details that they give are correct, that they are what is required and that they check in case there are return requests for details. Quite often, people miss emails that ask them to provide additional information. People need to keep a watch on that to assist in our getting the money out quickly, which we want to see happening as quickly as possible.

Some of the detail of how the voucher scheme is intended to operate will have to be expanded on by the Department for the Economy.

1.30 pm

I appreciate what he says about the online presence favouring much bigger business. That is why there is a £3 million fund in this as well to assist local businesses to get more of an online presence so they can avail of that and that it is not just left to the big multinational companies. However, in terms of the target, and how much more can be spent, that is something that the Department for the Economy will have to respond to.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the actions taken to help some who are considered to be excluded, such as company directors and B&Bs. Will the Minister confirm that the £26.2 million held in reserve will be considered for those who are still excluded, such as the newly self-employed? Will the Minister consider allocating additional staff resources to ensure that the grant payments are made on time? We need resources to ensure that those payments are paid out to businesses.

Mr Murphy: The £20 million scheme is in addition to the £10 million for the self-employed scheme, which the Department for the Economy has already announced, so those things should be addressed. We are trying to provide additional resources. In my Department, Land and Property Services has a very specialised role; you cannot just put people into rate collection from other sections of the Department. However, we are trying to give them assistance with communication, answering questions and getting advice out to people. I hope that in other Departments, where speed is of the essence in getting support out on the ground, they provide additional resources to the teams that are working on it.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind Members that they should not ask multiple questions because they eat up valuable time. Other Members want to ask questions of the Minister. I call Christopher Stalford.

Mr Stalford: This has become a pattern, Mr Speaker. The last time the House was warned about that, I was called.

Mr Speaker: Show leadership. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stalford: I have seen the annex with the figure given for the Department for the Economy's allocation of £137.7 million. My colleague from North Antrim Mr Frew asked a question that was not answered. I ask the Minister: what was the total amount requested for the Department for the Economy?

Mr Murphy: The total request was in the region of £390 million, although I stand to be corrected. On top of the figure that you mentioned, there is an additional £60 million, which the Department for the Economy is holding.

Bear in mind that the Department of Finance is also paying out to businesses: there is an additional £55 million, which totals £90 million, which the Department of Finance is paying directly to businesses. It is not just the Department for the Economy that is paying out to businesses. The Department of Finance is paying £90 million, in the business support schemes that we are running, plus the £150 million that we have set aside. We were working closely with the Treasury over the weekend and hope to conclude negotiations very quickly. We hope to provide a rates holiday into the next financial year. That is also business support. It is not simply one Department that has responsibility for business

support. A sizeable proportion of that business support function comes from the Department of Finance as well.

Of course, not all the bids can be met. We need to ensure, so that we can cope with bids, that they can be spent in this financial year. When Departments come forward with options, we have to be certain that they can be spent, as the last thing that we want to do is hand money back at the end of the financial year. That was the balance, and the Executive agreed to it.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Some very welcome measures are being announced. How does the Minister intend to use the £150 million set aside for rates relief in the next financial year?

Mr Murphy: As I said in response to a previous question, this is one of the key issues that businesses have been pressing us on. We have had lots of engagement with business over the last weeks and months. Those that availed of the year-long rates holiday for this financial year have said how beneficial it was in ensuring that those bills were not an additional cost at a very challenging time. It offered some certainty in the new financial year and gave some early indication of that certainty. We have been trying to work on that, and I intend to use the £150 million for a further six-month rates holiday for those businesses that availed of the full-year rates holiday in this financial year. We are working with the Treasury on that, and I hope to be able to confirm it soon.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the efficiencies brought forward by the Economy Minister, particularly the £95 million high street voucher scheme. That will be a great boost to our high streets. In saying that, the Minister will be aware that it falls significantly short of what was requested. When the details are confirmed for this scheme, will the Minister consider fully funding the request that was brought forward to ensure that we can recover as we come out of the pandemic?

Mr Murphy: As I said, it is a question of getting the right balance of packages. We are supporting businesses that have been closed down. The Department of Finance actually picks up the lion's share of the support because we are providing the scheme for the premises. The Department for the Economy's part is much smaller. It is the rate support scheme that will go on into the new financial year, the high street stimulus scheme and the voucher scheme that the Member has referred to. Of course, if we

had more money, and if we do get more money, we can consider additional allocations to any of these schemes. However, it is a matter of trying to get that balance across a whole range of packages.

Ms Ennis: I very much welcome the Minister's statement today. We now need to see every Department getting its finger out to ensure that payments get out to the people who are still waiting for the support that was promised to them.

Mr Givan: It is Finance. Speak to your Minister.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ennis: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Minister, B&Bs that pay domestic rates are now part of what has been termed the excluded group. Why was that group excluded, and what support can they expect in the package that you have put forward today?

Mr Murphy: As you have correctly said, B&Bs that have six bedrooms or fewer are classified as domestic properties and, therefore, were not able to avail themselves of the previous £10,000 and £25,000 support scheme grants. When we spoke to B&B owners, as part of the group that was excluded on a range of issues, they said that they could be identified through community information held by the Tourist Board, their certifying body. We were able to get that data and include B&Bs in the current scheme. So they will be paid during the current restrictions. We also recognise that B&Bs had previously missed out, and £4.6 million has been put into the scheme to assist them with the previously missed payment.

Mr Catney: Thank you for the statement, Minister. It was very detailed. I believe that it will go some way to taking some of the stress and heat from our business community.

Minister, you have allocated £10.6 million to wet pubs, and that is very welcome. I hope and trust that that will be rolled out as quickly as possible. I am sure that the Minister is also aware that there are public houses that have a rateable valuation of £50,000 and above. Is there a specific package to help those businesses?

Mr Murphy: As I say, the scheme for wet pubs is very welcome. I had pressed for a scheme for some time. In my own village, some pubs did not open again. Some pubs were only open for a number of weeks before they were closed again. They have been effectively closed down

since March, so that scheme is very welcome. There should be a very clear list of those wet pubs and how to get funding to them. I hope that the scheme can be delivered to them very quickly.

The £10·6 million tourism initiative is aimed at properties and businesses with an NAV over £51,000 that missed out on the £25,000 grants. Of course, how that is allocated will be a matter for the Department for the Economy. However, that is intended to meet the needs of those premises.

Mr Nesbitt: I will be grateful for the Minister's assessment of what more might be done for businesses that are falling through the cracks. I was contacted by a business owner this morning who had missed out on the small business support scheme because they did not have a rates ID. However, they did not have a rates ID because it was a new business, and they did not get an assessment of rates in time. Will the Minister consider some sort of committee that might act as an appeals body to look at specific and exceptional circumstances like that?

Mr Murphy: I know that LPS has been trying to meet the process date to get the payments out very quickly and to deal with businesses that have submitted incorrect information or have a question over them. LPS has been trying to be flexible. On the £10,000 schemes, LPS is trying to be very flexible with businesses that had been in the process of getting valuations and assessments done and to allow space for that to happen. If the Member sends me the details, I will write to the Department and try to ensure that there is a follow-up. I know that they do come back to all those who missed out on the LPS schemes and try to work with them to see if they can be put on a scheme.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. We all share the pain of those businesses, small or large, that are feeling the impact of COVID at this time. A set of bids was submitted by the Minister for the Economy, and they are detailed in your statement. It is very welcome that £20 million has been allocated to the manufacturing sector, and I understand that the money will be on top of any business relief. Will that funding run through until the new financial year that begins in April 2021?

Mr Murphy: The short answer is yes. It is to make up. That is another grant that comes out of the Department of Finance, as we manage the rates system, even though it is a support for the broad economy, not from the Department

for the Economy. Yes, it is intended to allow the same rates holiday that other businesses have to the end of the financial year.

Dr Archibald: Minister, thank you for your statement. I think that the point that you made to Mr Muir about the allocation of resources is an important one. There has been some lag time between the allocation of funds from you, as Finance Minister, and schemes being opened and delivered by, for example, the Economy Minister. It is important that resources are put in place to ensure that that happens as quickly as possible.

Is the £20 million that has been allocated for company directors in addition to previous announcements of allocations to the Department for the Economy, for example, for the newly self-employed?

Mr Murphy: Yes, it is. It is in addition to the £10 million that was previously given for the newly self-employed.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister, for your statement. Minister, the devil is in the detail, and there is a lot of information in your statement. I am particularly interested in the allocation to the Department for Communities, where the statement talks about a one-off heating payment of £200 to disabled people on higher rate allowances and older people in receipt of pension credit. I am sure that the detail will come, but do you know, at this stage, whether that is a payment per person or per household? We have many elderly carers who have not received an additional payment of carer's allowance throughout the pandemic. It will be interesting to see whether this, at long last, will be two payments in one household as opposed to just one.

Mr Murphy: I do not have that level of detail on whether it is a household or a person. Particularly with the pandemic, people will be spending much more time at home during the winter and, obviously, running up heating costs. The Communities Minister brought forward a proposal to help that group with its heating bills, and, obviously, I was very happy to support that, as were the Executive. I understand that the payment will be made in January, when the support is needed most, and I assume that the details on who will be eligible will be brought forward before then.

Mr Givan: When I look at the allocations to the Communities, Economy, Education and Finance Departments, I see that they are all

from requests to give money out to support people. However, the Department for Infrastructure has an allocation to shore up a failing Department, run by the SDLP. That party needs to focus, Finance Minister, on delivering for taxi drivers and getting people tested. Instead, it pontificates about and lectures others

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Givan: — on their failings to run a Department. On the need to move forward and get this money out —

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Givan: — the Minister's colleague rebuked him about the need for the Department of Finance to pull its finger out and get the money. Will he ensure that his Department gets Land and Property Services to ensure that it gets this money out? How many applications are waiting to be processed? Will he give two thirds of the allocation to the Economy Minister, who is fighting for businesses?

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Murphy: I am not sure where you get that. The Executive collectively have allocated about half a billion pounds, the lion's share of which is to support businesses across a range of Departments. To suggest that only the Economy Minister is fighting for businesses is a nonsense, and you should understand that. I know that you are making political points. The Department for Infrastructure bids were met in full. I encourage the Infrastructure Minister to get out the door the schemes that she is paying out as quickly as she possibly can, and I encourage the Economy Minister and other Ministers to do that too. Of course, the additional payments that we have offered up today are very welcome, and, when the payments are hitting the ground and the people out there who are suffering as a consequence of the pandemic are feeling the benefit, we will all find that we are in a much happier place. To be quite honest, I am not interested in the sideswipes and the arguments. I am interested in getting these schemes effectively out on the ground.

Ms Mullan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the free school meals payment that will apply across all the school holidays, and I commend all those who have worked and lobbied on the issue for many years. Minister, can you confirm for us

the period that the free school meals payment will cover?

Mr Murphy: The money that we are allocating is COVID money, so it has to be spent in this financial year. The contribution that I have made for free school meals takes it up to the end of the financial year. Last Thursday, the Education Minister brought a paper to the Executive on the continuation of free schools until the end of the mandate, for which he got Executive support. That is very welcome. We are now working out the budgets for Departments and will have to work with Education to meet that budget, as the Executive have agreed, and we want to do it until the end of the mandate.

1.45 pm

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for your statement and for coming to the House today. I appreciate your acknowledgement of the delays in getting payments out, but those delays have very serious consequences. This morning, I got an email from a constituent. She wrote:

"I have applied for two grants. The first for our premises in the city centre and another one for the outskirts of the city".

She has received emails to say that payments would be on their way, but she has received absolutely nothing. That has gone on for seven weeks, not just a few days. Those payments have not been honoured for weeks. She wrote:

"Our landlords are putting us under immense pressure to get a payment to them or action will be started. This is quite worrying. We have maintenance to be carried out and the money simply is not there to facilitate it".

Mr Speaker: Will the Member get to a question, please?

Ms McLaughlin: She continued:

"We have been in business for 15 years and I am considering closing my salons in January in the city centre".

Minister, what are you doing to ensure that your Department speeds up this process and gets money into this constituent's bank account as soon as possible?

Mr Murphy: We are encouraging LPS to act as quickly as possible. The data that it needs to

assess close contact services was not possessed by it alone. A lot was possessed on the councils' environmental health side, so it had to get data transfer and match-ups. That is what caused the delay in the initial phase.

As I said — I am not suggesting that it is the case here — but, in general, if anyone comes back and says that they have not received payment, we need to make sure that the information is correct, it is in and people have responded to requests for further information. That can sometimes hold up a payment. Of course we recognise that people are suffering on the ground and want payments to happen as quickly as possible. We want to see that as well.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, I asked you about the number of payments made to applicants over the first four weeks of the restrictions. As of 13 November, 3,418 payments were made out of 11,589 applicants. That is less than 30%. Given that so many of the payments have not been made in the first tranche — the first four weeks of the restrictions — what confidence can you give to businesses that payments will be made this week? Businesses cannot wait. A Christmas tree has been erected in this Building, but I am not finding much cheer, and people —

Mr Speaker: A question, Mr McNulty. Thank you.

Mr McNulty: — in business in my constituency of Newry and Armagh are not finding much cheer.

Mr Murphy: I do not have today's up-to-date figures because I was too busy over the weekend trying to distribute half a billion pounds right across economic and community support. I will get the up-to-date figures for tomorrow's Question Time, but the last up-to-date figures that I had at the weekend show a significant increase on the figure that the Member quotes, which is from over a week ago.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement. While he will be aware of businesses that have not received support payments weeks after they were promised them, he will also be aware that some have fallen through the gaps and have been unable to trade since March. Those people have received no financial help from the Executive. What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister for the Economy to make sure that there are no gaps and that the people who run

those businesses get the financial support that they need? Do the new allocations fill those gaps?

Mr Murphy: I have said repeatedly at Executive meetings over the last while that there is a particular urgency in ensuring that the people to whom the Member referred who have received no support get support.

We are now into our second and third rounds of support for some businesses. While that support is clearly vital, it is grossly unfair on those who have not received it. I have met people from different sectors that are not the responsibility of my Department to try to offer assistance and steer them to the right place to get support, and to offer officials to assist them to gather up the right information so that they can take it to the relevant Department to present it and get support. I am keen to get support out. I am acutely aware that, as we roll out further levels of support for business, some people have still to receive it. I encourage those people to contact the relevant Departments to make their case. If they need assistance, I have always offered to meet people in order to steer them in the right direction, to encourage them and to tell them the type of information that they need to present to make a case for themselves.

Mr Allister: Can I seek some clarification from the Minister about whether all of the £338 million that was today is Barnett consequential money from the Treasury, or is it supplemented by any savings that the Executive have made in various Departments? More specifically, what about Belfast International Airport? It is our primary airport, and it is now closed for a number of days each week. I see £1.2 million, again, for the City of Derry Airport, which must be the most over subsidised airport that we have. What about Belfast International Airport? Where is the money for it?

Mr Murphy: This is all Barnett consequential money. We used the October monitoring round savings to allocate to departmental pressures and to keep them separate from these allocations. Of course, I anticipate further surrenders of money in the January monitoring round, which will be used to meet some departmental pressures.

I intend to bring a paper to the Executive next week on airport funding. The Member may know that, when we made a previous payment to airports, the International Airport did not at that stage require any assistance from us. It is clear that it now does, and we are working through that with it. The payment that he refers

to for City of Derry Airport is an outstanding payment; it is not new as part of this allocation. It is an outstanding payment that is coming from money that was held in reserves for the airports; it has been sitting in reserves for some time. Some £10 million was sitting in reserves for airports, and I hope by next week to be able to identify which Department is to pay that out — it will probably be Infrastructure — and work it through with Belfast International Airport, the City Airport and City of Derry Airport.

Mr Carroll: The Minister stated:

"We have not known what course the virus would take or what the health experts would recommend in response to the virus".

I repeat:

"We have not known ... what the health experts would recommend in response to the virus".

Can the Minister seriously stand over that statement, knowing full well that, as an island, we saw the virus spread across other parts of the world and that his Executive were warned by health experts that reopening the economy too soon would risk a second surge? Is the Minister seriously saying, "Sure, we didn't know what would happen. It's not our fault. Nothing to see here. Move on"? Does the Minister think that that is acceptable?

Mr Murphy: I will give the Member the benefit of the doubt and say that he is misunderstanding what I said rather than deliberately misrepresenting it. Clearly, the criticisms that I was referring to and that he would have said had he gone on to quote further related to the people who were saying that we should have a financial package ready to go with the restriction announcements last Thursday. We did not know what the health experts were recommending with regard to non-essential retail until Thursday morning or 11.30 pm on Wednesday. For me, who goes to sleep at that time, it was Thursday morning. We were not aware of it, so we could not bring a financial package to the Executive on Thursday for agreement. As I said, I will give the Member the benefit of the doubt that he misunderstood that, but that is what I was referring to, not the global effect of the pandemic.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you advise whether it is in order for the

Member for Lagan Valley to make pathetic and inaccurate statements about the Infrastructure Minister's handling of support schemes given that the Department reacted to the failure of the Economy Department to provide a support scheme for taxi drivers and the continued failure of that Department to provide support for a wide range of sectors? It is worth putting on record that the Infrastructure Minister got the legal powers and was able to get a scheme up and running within 10 days.

Mr Speaker: You will be aware that a number of comments were exchanged across the Chamber; you were involved in them. I will leave that matter for now.

The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.53 pm and resumed at 2.00 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Communities

Personal Independence Payments: Appeals

1. Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to outline the average success rate for a personal independence payment (PIP) appeal in the last 12 months. (AQO 1141/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I thank the Member for his question. For the period of 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, there were 3,779 successful PIP appeals and 2,201 unsuccessful appeals. Therefore, 63% of PIP appeals were successful in 2019-20. For the period of 1 April 2020 to 31 October 2020, there were 104 successful PIP appeals and 133 unsuccessful appeals. Therefore, for the seven months up to 31 October, 44% of PIP appeals have been successful. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, no appeals were listed for hearing between 18 March 2020 and 6 July 2020. Since then, a limited number of appeals have been listed for hearing.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Minister, for the answer to that question. The significant rate of successful appeal shows the need for appeals to be heard as soon as possible, and certainly within a reasonable amount of time, yet there is a backlog of over 4,000 people waiting for their appeals to be heard — a problem that has predated the pandemic, Minister. How many appeals does the Minister expect will be heard by the end of the year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member that there was a backlog prior to COVID and that COVID has not helped at all. I have asked officials to try to expedite ways in which people can have their appeals heard. Many people are not comfortable with a desktop review and are looking for telephony, should that be a video call or a phone call. Some have the opportunity for face-to-face, but it is important that we get not only the pre-COVID backlog addressed, but also the backlog since. I suspect that the figure that you have quoted has actually increased since that response was given.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I welcome Ms Nicola Brogan to her place and wish her all the best in the House.

Ms Brogan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle; thank you. Minister, which of the different types of appeal available to claimants is the one most favoured by appellants?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I welcome the Member to the Assembly and wish her all the very best. The least favourite — also in response to Daniel McCrossan, as both of you share the same constituency — is probably the desktop. We are looking at video and telephone calls to try to assist people, because it is very stressful applying for this benefit, and it is even more stressful appealing it. We need to make sure that it is as smooth and stress-free as possible when people are applying for a PIP appeal.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, I am glad to hear you talking about an alternative to telephone as a means of communication. Videoconferencing would be very much welcomed for PIP assessments. I ask the Minister whether whatever system she is considering will be hearing-compatible for those with hearing impairments. Can those who are using this new type of system have someone with them? Quite a lot of people have had mental health issues due to the way that they have had to go through assessment so far.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I completely agree with the Member on all of the points that she raised. If people are doing video calls and have hearing impairments, they should absolutely, under disability law, which should be human rights-compliant as strongly as possible, have an interpreter there, even for those who have difficulty communicating. The other aspect is that we need to make sure that, particularly as I said to Nicola, this process is as stress-free as possible, so I am looking at alternatives. I met the Participation and the Practice of Rights group (PPR) last week, and that was one of the issues that was on the human rights checklist that it is asking us to bring forward.

Mr Allen: Minister, can you advise how many of the unsuccessful appeals went on to stage two appeals to the Social Security Commissioner? Also, do you have any data on how many of those within the backlog of appeals are currently in receipt of welfare supplementary payments? Can you give a guarantee that none

of those payments will be impacted whilst they wait for their appeal to be heard?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his three supplementary questions. [Laughter.] Fair play to you. I do not have the answers to the first two questions, but I will certainly get the Member the data that he has asked for. It is probably here somewhere, but it certainly did not jump out at me. I will get that response to you.

I have said this to others, but, as the Member will be aware from his constituency, going through the appeals process is very stressful. The last thing that we need is for people's stress levels to be increased, and we do not want the appeal to impact on other benefits and entitlements. We therefore need to make sure that it is done as smoothly as possible. That sounds like an easy thing to do, and it should be an easy thing to do, but the backlog is such that we need to tackle it head-on. We perhaps need to use this opportunity, if it is appropriate to call it that, to do things a bit differently and make sure that there are better outcomes for people who are waiting on good decisions.

Miss Woods: The Minister will be aware that people are much more likely to get a PIP award if they have support from another person or from the independent advice sector. Will the Minister support a list of independent advice sector organisations or advice lines being sent out with the PIP form and the overturn rate for mandatory reconsiderations being made available in the information that is sent out on how best to challenge a decision so that more people can make more of an informed decision about whether to take the matter further?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. That is certainly one of the issues that I am considering. It comes up time and time again from the independent advice sector, as well as from GPs, social workers, family support workers and a whole range of others. I absolutely will consider that, and, as I said to Kellie Armstrong, I think that it would be more human rights-compliant and more humane if that were allowed to happen.

Mr Carroll: I was dealing with the case of a constituent who sadly passed away. My constituent was waiting for a long time on a PIP appeal and a PIP decision and got the award after having passed away. Minister, are you or your Department aware of how many people have tragically passed away from COVID whilst waiting on a PIP appeal or a PIP decision?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am really sorry to hear that, Gerry. Pass my sympathies and thoughts on to the family. I am not aware of the answer, but, when I am asking for the data that Andy asked for, I will ask for that as well. The last thing that should happen is that someone's grief be compounded by a letter, either successful or unsuccessful, coming out after a loved one has passed.

COVID-19: Sports Funding

2. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for Communities when applications will open for the funding allocated to the sports sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1142/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. In short, early next month is when we hope to have applications for funding open. Following a successful October monitoring round bid, I secured £15 million, and I am sure that the Member heard that I successfully got another £10 million on top of that. The aim of those funds is to ensure that the sports sector, which is representative of such a diverse range of interests right across our community, is not only sustained during the ongoing COVID period but supported.

My officials and Sport NI are working on developing programmes that will deliver a needs-based scheme to ensure that the funding is distributed fairly, with full transparency, to those who can evidence that the financial loss has been incurred as a result of the restrictions. I have met a lot of representatives of governing bodies and have spoken to a lot of clubs, and I am well aware of the financial impact that the COVID interventions have had on the sports sector. It is my intention to launch the fund as soon as possible.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her response. I welcome the news that applications for funding will open early next week. I also welcome the financial package that the Minister has agreed with the sporting bodies, her continued engagement with sports governing bodies across the North and, indeed, her engagement with local GAA clubs in my constituency recently. Given that she said that the money will be distributed fairly, can she provide assurances that the money that she has allocated will be accessible by grassroots sporting clubs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: For clarity, the Member said "early next week", but I said "early next month".

Mr McGuigan: No problem.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are OK. I could see Members' body language change there, so cool your jets and give me a couple of weeks.

Yes, it is really important that the governing bodies, of which there are many, be supported, and it is certainly important that grassroots clubs be supported as well.

Across all sports, grassroots have been part of the first response during the pandemic and are still playing the role of lifeline to people, even though it is not their primary function. They have lost money as a result of the restrictions that we have placed on them. As we all know, in the charitable and voluntary sector, the ability to raise money through these months has been greatly hindered. Grassroots are well entitled to expect some share of the funding.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the much-needed financial aid for sports. When might we expect a restart of grassroots youth sport? Will she be open to reviewing which sport can be included in the elite category?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I am very conscious that many young people in particular have been prevented from getting involved in sports and training as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. I have no plans to review what is in the elite category unless the Member has specifics. Some of the correspondence that I have received from people asking for their sports to be categorised as elite will not fit the criteria, but that is not to say that the one that the Member has in mind will not. It may.

As the Member will be aware, I am working on the current health and scientific advice on the restrictions, and I have confidence. I spoke to the governing bodies and the clubs on the measures that they are taking, and I am keen to get youngsters and people like me, who are not so young, back out training.

Mr Buckley: The Minister will understand how critical it is to get funding out to sports clubs as soon as possible, and I welcome the announcement that that will happen at the end of this month or at the start of next. We know that COVID relief funding will not be enough to sustain a lot of clubs, given the serious pressures that they have. With that in mind, will the Minister give an update on the progress of the subregional sports stadia funding and the need to ensure a regional balance to that funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There will be a regional balance to that funding. If you listen to some of the clubs in Belfast alone, you will hear that they have it all spent, so I give the Member that assurance. We are working through the business cases and all the outstanding items that we need to get it concluded before I bring it to the Department of Finance and, indeed, the rest of the Executive for approval. It is really important that people who live in the Member's constituency can expect to get some money.

The Member may be aware that, this morning, I received an additional £10 million for the sports hardship fund. That is £25 million in total, which, I am sure the Member will agree, will go a long way to help clubs that are struggling at this time.

Social Housing: Zero-carbon Buildings

3. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she has had with the Minister of Finance on requirements for new social housing to be zero-carbon buildings. (AQO 1143/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have had extensive engagement with Minister Murphy, particularly on the future of social housing, and I welcome any changes to the construction of social housing if it results — hopefully, it will — in improvements to overall environmental standards. In the meantime, my officials continue to engage with DOF officials. For example, our officials are also represented on the development of DFE's new energy strategy and on DAERA's future generations group on climate change. As the Member will be aware, primary responsibility for introducing a requirement in building regulations for dwellings to be zero-carbon rests with the Department of Finance building standards. However, we are working collectively to have those regulations introduced after a public consultation.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. In response to a question for written answer to my colleague Clare Bailey, the Minister of Finance indicated on 30 October that his Department was still consulting on technical documents relating to nearly zero energy requirements. What is the Minister's assessment of social housing being built without the relevant regulations and technical documents being in place in the Department of Finance?

2.15 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly, I am on the record as looking at new construction methods. They will look at the best possible environmental standards. The documents that the Department of Finance is working through are quite technical. My understanding is that not only are they technical but there is a substantial volume of them. We want to do our best to get to them as part of the consultation, so that whatever changes are needed to the building control regulations will be done as soon as possible. I assure the Member that I will ask my officials, the Housing Executive and, indeed, housing associations to liaise closely and keep an eye out for the best possible standards. What we do not need is for new houses to be built that will have to be retrofitted a few years later. That is a waste of public money and people's patience.

Ms Dillon: Can the Minister give the House some detail on the difference that it will make to the grant that housing associations get if they are able to achieve zero carbon?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I imagine that that will be part of the total cost indicator that housing associations and the Housing Executive will receive when they get to build. I will just double-check that. Certainly, if there is any increase in construction costs, as there may be, as a result of any improvements in building regulations, I would imagine that that would go into the total cost indicator. I will check that and get back to the Member in writing.

Mr Durkan: Has the Minister assessed the adequacy of the housing fitness standard in providing high-quality, environmentally sustainable housing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will just let the Member know, through you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that I have not made a final decision on that. However, with regard to the point that was raised by Rachel Woods in her question, that would almost be signing off on a fitness standard that is old and is not fit for the 21st century. As part of looking at the regulations, we will look at the fitness standards not just for the public sector but the private sector.

Ms P Bradley: I thank Rachel Woods for tabling her question. I absolutely agree with her sentiments on it. Right now, many homes in the social housing sector are not fit for purpose. They have damp, poor heating and no cavity wall insulation. Their carbon footprint is through the roof. Can anything be done about the homes that we have now?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will not be shocked when I say that at least 40,000 homes are in need of serious repair. I consider being able to live in a home without developing a respiratory disease to be a basic ask. That is part of the reason that I made the statement on the reconfiguration of the landlord side of the Housing Executive to a mutual or cooperative. The Member will also be aware, from her previous days in the Committee for Social Development, that the Savills report put it at a cost of at least £7.1 billion; I imagine that the figure is probably closer to £7.8 billion now. Homes need to be safe, clean, warm and dry. We also need to use the proper models, materials and tools to ensure not only that we reduce fuel poverty but that we achieve better health outcomes. For many people, particularly in our constituency, the level of respiratory disease is completely unacceptable.

Libraries: Enniskillen

4. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on a new library for Enniskillen. (AQO 1144/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. On 14 August 2020, my Department approved the outline business case for the redevelopment of Enniskillen library on the existing site at Halls Lane in Enniskillen. While the project is at an early stage, my Department has already allocated £150,000 in this financial year to Libraries NI to allow it to advance the project to the design and procurement phase. I can also confirm that a design team has been appointed to progress the concept design and the necessary feasibility studies and develop the design for the project. The construction of the new library has been projected to require an investment of £4.5 million. The estimated completion date is 2023.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for that welcome news. I am sure that we will have some happy people in Fermanagh. Can I invite the Minister to come and visit the library when it is safe to do so?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly. During my previous days in DCAL, I visited quite a few libraries in the Member's constituency. I am delighted to see that the library is receiving the support that it needs, because I can remember, from 2012 and 2013, that it needed support.

When the restrictions are lifted and when the time is appropriate, I will be more than happy to visit the Member's constituency and that library.

Mrs Barton: Minister, now that you are on the issue of libraries in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, can I ask for an update on Fivemiletown library?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I do not have information on that library, but I will get that to her in writing. I should have anticipated a question on at least one library in every constituency. That library was not on the list, so apologies for that.

Social Housing: Ring-fencing

5. Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Communities when ring-fencing of new-build social housing, as outlined in her statement on housing policy, will come into effect. (AQO 1145/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am currently considering a range of options to increase the supply of social housing to address demand. A key element of that plan will be to ring-fence and weight the social housing development programme's output so that it is better at providing new social homes in greater numbers in the areas of most need. My officials and the Housing Executive are progressing that work. It is my intention to see the ambition of ring-fencing reflected in the new three-year programme that will be submitted to me in January 2021.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. My supplementary question has, to a great extent, been answered. It was about when we will see the beginning of the changes that were promised in the very welcome statement that she made.

The Minister will be aware of damage done to Housing Executive premises in Ardoyne caused by a faulty shower unit. Is there an investigation of that, especially given that, as I understand it, those shower units were on a recall list from 2018? My worry is that we may have a huge problem in social housing throughout the North.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I saw some media reports about that, prompted, I am sure, by the Member. It is very worrying if it is the case that those shower units were recalled in 2018 and a fire has subsequently happened in a home. Certainly, I await the outcome of the initial investigation. To assure you and, indeed, other Members, I will ask whether there were recalls in any other constituency and what has been done since. That is a fairly credible question to ask. If the

advice that I get flags up concerns, I will share that with Members.

Ms P Bradley: North Belfast, as we know, will be one of the ring-fenced areas. Minister, when you look at the policy, will you look at North Belfast in its entirety, because, quite often, Newtownabbey is left out of the social housing figures when it comes to reflecting the demand in North Belfast? Can the Minister give me an assurance that Newtownabbey will also be taken into account?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I will look at the geographical area, but I can certainly talk to officials to ensure that that is the case. There is need in all constituencies. When the details on the policy's progress come back, I will look to see which areas are covered. As the Member will be aware, the issue for me is that, every year, the number of people in acute housing stress grows by 1,000. There are unacceptable levels across — it is right across — the constituency. I will wait to see what I am presented with, but I assure the Member that, if Newtownabbey is not there, I will certainly ask about that.

Mr Durkan: Does the Minister recognise the importance of enshrining flexibility in the reintroduced ring-fencing policy? When the policy existed before, the Housing Executive demonstrated that it did not have sufficient flexibility, which impacted negatively on social housing provision inside and outside ring-fenced areas.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right. I remember when the policy was removed and the consultation on it. Let me be clear: I expect the Housing Executive to present me with proposals that look at the areas most in need. The Member's constituency is, unfortunately for him and for everybody else, at the top of that list, and that has persistently been the case. We need to look at ways to tackle that. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. We need flexibilities or even the ability to contract in and out because it needs to reflect the true need and have an outcome for those on the waiting list.

Ms Armstrong: Ring-fencing new-build social housing will mean that opportunities for builders will increase fantastically. However, there is an issue about the number of apprentices and younger people going into the industry. Is the Minister working with the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education to

identify opportunities so that more people can be brought into the workforce?

Ms Ní Chuilín: When the proposals come back, I will talk to other Departments. I want to go further to ensure that the way in which procurement happens is not open to as much challenge. Even current Housing Executive contracts are challenged at a low rate, which holds back procurement and contracts. I want to make sure that it is done as part of any contract, so social clauses, social benefits and social value need to be built in at the start and completion of a project — not for just a couple of weeks here and there — so that apprentices are fully supported from the day and hour that they walk in to the day and hour that they leave, hopefully with a trade.

In relation to the question from Rachel Woods, I hope that there will be an opportunity for new ways of construction. That is a new market not only for current tradespeople but for new and prospective tradespeople.

Mr Allen: Minister, in the past 10 years, we have been in and around meeting the target for social housing starts. As we discussed in Committee, however, that is clearly not having the effect that is required to house the many thousands on the waiting list across the Province. I appreciate that part of your revitalisation is to increase the number of houses. Are you able to indicate at this stage what a more realistic and ambitious target of new housing starts will be?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Even through the Programme for Government negotiations before this place was brought back, I think that every party wanted the Programme for Government to have a housing indication and, within that, better housing targets.

I have given a policy direction. At the end of January, I will have proposals not just on tackling the ring-fencing but on increasing the number of housing starts. I think that the target was met one year, and that is not acceptable.

Arts: Financial Support for Performing Artists and Tutors

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the support and funding her Department is offering to those performing artists and tutors who continue to be excluded from other support schemes. (AQO 1146/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. From my contact with people across the arts and culture sector, I understand the impact that the restrictions are having on their ability to make a living and the need to continue to provide support to individuals and organisations. As part of a wider package of measures to support the culture, arts and heritage sectors, the Arts Council, on my behalf and that of my Department, has delivered two rounds of funding to individuals working across the arts and creative sectors. The artists' emergency programme was open for applications from 27 April to mid-May, with payments made in May and June. The individual emergency resilience programme was open for applications from 31 July to 17 August, and offers of grant were issued in October. The two programmes have resulted in grant awards totalling £4,400,000 to over 1,300 individuals. I will shortly make an announcement on further programmes to support individuals, and it continues to be my intention that those should be available to as wide a range as possible across the arts and creative sectors.

Mr Beggs: Many music and drama tutors operate from home, are usually self-employed and have been unable to benefit from the furlough scheme. I am aware of a highly successful local arts company that established itself as a company to minimise its tax liability. It has had no income since February. Will the new scheme to which the Minister refers include those who have been excluded to date, or will they, perhaps, have to rely on schemes that the Finance Minister might bring out?

Ms Ní Chuilín: A lot of companies that previously may have gone to the Arts Council got support from, for example, the Department for the Economy and some from the Department of Finance, particularly for rates.

However, the issue for me is that a lot of people who are self-employed have not had access to any public funds, and that is a problem. I encourage the Member to encourage companies and individuals like that to apply to the Arts Council, because that is exactly the sort of support that we are trying to get out, particularly for people who have not had access to any public funds, who may not be eligible to universal credit or anything else and who, in the run-up to Christmas, have been put under additional pressure by not knowing where they will get support from.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Musical Instruments: Funding

T1. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for Communities what guidance she has given the Arts Council about the fund for musical instruments, which is due to close today, in light of the Committee for Communities supporting the forwarding of a letter seeking an extension of the fund. (AQT 701/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not seen the letter yet, but I am happy to look at it. When I do, I will decide whether to reissue guidance to the Arts Council or ask whether it could extend the fund. As the Member will also be aware, even the Ulster-Scots Agency has access to musical instruments, particularly for bands. It is really important, particularly when people are self-isolating and trying to do tutorials over the internet, that they are given access to instruments to teach with.

Mr M Bradley: Why was that funding open for only 17 days? Many bands have been unable to have meetings, practices or any sort of committee meeting to apply for the funding. Will it be open again for further applications?

Ms Ní Chuilín: To give the Member assurance, I was not aware that it was open for only 17 days, so I make a commitment to him that I will find out what the criteria were, how long it was opened for, what notification the Arts Council gave, and then, if there is the need for an extension, I will talk to the Arts Council about how it can happen. I do not want anybody to fall out of the loop here, particularly if they can use their skills and expertise to help others, especially during COVID.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As a point of housekeeping, I should say that question 5 has been withdrawn.

Social Security: Appeals

T2. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Communities why she is failing the most vulnerable in society because people have to make appeals, which can be horrendous, about personal independence payment or employment and support allowance (ESA) by

phone and because the Kickstart programme has not been commenced. (AQT 702/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the Member's last question first. First of all, it is not my intention to fail anybody. I just want the Member to accept that.

Mr Frew: You are.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not, so I respectfully disagree.

The Kickstart scheme will not be introduced this month, because we are not calling it "Kickstart"; we are calling it "Jobstart". It will be far better than what the British Government in England introduced. It will be a bespoke programme, and, if I introduced it, it would be done during a two-week lockdown. I do not want that to happen, because, as soon as it is introduced, the clock starts ticking.

With regard to PIP, if the Member had been here — I appreciate that we have to do a skeleton rota because of the restrictions — he would have heard me say — I will repeat it for him — that I am not happy with people just being given the opportunity to talk about their appeals over the phone; I want other avenues to be made available to them. People have said that they prefer that to happen by desktop, phone or videoconferencing. Again, I do not accept that I am deliberately failing anyone. If there are things that I could do better, I am happy to look at them, but I ask the Member to reconsider that.

Mr Frew: I assure the Minister that she is failing people when she cannot use two decent side rooms in Ballymena to have oral hearings for PIP and ESA. A laptop or a desktop will just not cut it, Minister, when you have vulnerable people who are not able to speak or to address other people across the phone or through computer technology. You are failing in that regard, Minister.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will certainly ask officials what happened in the Member's constituency. He can rest assured that I will do everything that I can to ensure that people have a fair hearing, because that is what it is about. I do not stand over anything that did not work or caused more stress. To be fair, the officials in my Department do not want that either, so something is not working. There is a massive backlog, and we need to fix it. We need to fix it so that people who are already going through a stressful situation are not put under additional stress,

particularly given that the benefit is for people who need it most. That is my commitment.

Social Housing

T3. Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for Communities what matters she is considering to increase capacity in the social housing development programme to better target areas where there is acute need for such housing. (AQT 703/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware of the statement that was made here some time ago. Across the North, the need is growing, and it has been growing exponentially every year. For people who live in acute housing need or what is described as "housing stress", that is completely unacceptable. That is why I introduced ring-fencing. That is just one example, but there are many other ways in which we need to tackle this. I am in discussions and will advance those discussions with housing association and Housing Executive colleagues, as well as councils, to see what land we can develop collectively as part of the local development plans. Then, we need to get houses that are fit for purpose and meet the needs of people in the area where they live. Those are some of the ways in which we hope to address the acute housing shortage.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell us what areas have been identified as having the highest need?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Mark Durkan is still here, and his constituency, Foyle, has the highest need, followed by North Belfast and West Belfast. Going back decades, those areas have had the highest need. That is why those areas need to be ring-fenced, and we need to have ambitious plans to reduce the stress that people live in, as well as future-proofing all of this for future generations. It is clear, not only anecdotally but evidentially, that, because the supply is not there and has not been there to meet demand, we need to start lifting the curve. The only way to do that is through proposals that address it head-on and look for opportunities for land development, particularly in areas of housing need. I believe that, up to now, that has not been the case.

Sport: Funding

T4. Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities how and when the £25 million that her Department has, which comprises £15 million already allocated to combat sports hardship and £10 million announced by the Finance Minister today, will be spent, particularly as sports clubs and organisations need that money now as opposed to next February or March. (AQT 704/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member. I am aware that, at a recent meeting with Sport NI, governing bodies were told that they would not get any money until, perhaps, the end of March, which sent everybody off in a spin. My intention is that, certainly early next month, those applications will open. I also welcome the additional £10 million that Conor Murphy has given, because it is clear that, without even getting down to the grassroots clubs, the governing bodies could have spent that £15 million themselves. We need to make sure that the money addresses the losses that people have now from a big governing body right down to a small grassroots club with a handful of people. It is important that they all get some money.

Mr McNulty: Minister, I have been contacted by numerous gym owners over the weekend. All are concerned about the closure of their gyms and the impact on their clients physically and mentally. Does the Minister share my view that gyms should be kept open with strict social-distancing guidelines from the perspective of mental and physical health?

Will the Minister indulge me, please, by applauding the achievements and success of Cavan and Tipperary at the weekend? It is extraordinary that Cavan won its first Ulster title in many years and Tipperary its first Munster title in 85 years. It is an extraordinary coincidence that, in 1920 and in 2020 — 100 years after Bloody Sunday — the same four teams were in the semi-finals of the All-Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I totally agree. I watched the match yesterday, and I watched matches over the whole weekend, whether I wanted to or not, because they were blaring from every TV and radio in the house. I congratulate them all. This is historic, and the way in which it all happened was almost freaky.

I wonder whether you were talking to my youngest son: he is a personal trainer. Even in my home I have one in my family. My neighbours are asking, "Why are the gyms

closing?", and then people understand the restrictions. At the end of the day, people have to earn money. There needs to be some approach, even through the Department for the Economy, to try to get that. There is a walking club in my constituency of North Belfast where the people are 2 metres apart. It is like kids coming from a nursery, but at least they are outside, trying to do a bit of exercise and support each other. Some gym instructors are involved in those as well. They are trying to do their best in very difficult circumstances. I fully appreciate and understand that a lot of them are losing income when they can least afford to, but the ones who I have spoken to also want to keep their clients and customers safe and well.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Looking around the Chamber, I dare suspect that, if the Minister's son were to come up here as a personal trainer, he would do a roaring trade in the Assembly [Laughter.]

Charity Funding: Royal British Legion

T6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will give a commitment that she will consider including the Royal British Legion, if it is not already included, when her Department distributes the £5 million for charities announced by the Finance Minister today, which was welcome, because the Royal British Legion has seen a drastic shortfall in donations compared with what would normally be raised at this time of year. (AQT 706/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am not aware of it being excluded, but I will certainly check. Charities have had an absolutely horrendous time since March. A lot of the work, the purpose, the companionship and, indeed, the lifelines that those charities give to individuals is second to none. I want to make sure that they are supported as best as possible. Conor Murphy has supported my additional bid for moneys for charities in his announcement today.

Mr Chambers: Thank you, Minister. I am confident that you will be fair in how you distribute that money, and I am sure that all the local charities will have welcomed the news today.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly hope that the charities heard the news today. I know many of them, and our officials have been working with them. I know that the work that they are doing not only during this year but certainly going into

the new year is really important. I give the Member my commitment that every charity, regardless of who it is, is respected and valued. I appreciate the work that they do to help so many despite having so little resource and investment. I am personally committed to making sure that charities get as much money as I can afford.

Personal Independence Payment: Appeals

T7. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Communities, after congratulating Cavan and Tipperary on what was a great weekend for the GAA, how many appeals for personal independence payment remain outstanding. (AQT 707/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: To be honest, Cathal, there are thousands and thousands, which is unacceptable. The number is anything from 5,500 to 6,000. As I said to Daniel McCrossan earlier, the number increases all the time. I assure the Member, as I have done with other Members, that I am committed to trying to get those appeals heard as soon as possible and in a manner that helps the appellants. That is the concern that I have: the stress that they are under because they are not able to have their appeal heard in a way that suits them.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for that. What can she do to dispose of that great number of appeals?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said to Paul Frew, I will look again at opportunities to have people's face-to-face appeals heard, as close to their constituency as possible and with maximum confidentiality and sensitivity. At the end of the day, people should feel that they have been given a fair hearing. That is one of the most frustrating things for people who are waiting for an appeal.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment. If you are exiting the Chamber, make sure that you give the Bench a wee scrub before you leave.

2.45 pm

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

Economy

COVID-19: Airlines

1. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for the Economy what support her Department has provided to airlines to maintain connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1156/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for his question. He knows that my responsibility is to maintain and enhance Northern Ireland's air connectivity, both domestically and internationally.

I played a key role in securing the £5.7 million support package announced in May for Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport and for airlines operating essential flights. That money safeguarded our air connectivity with GB during the initial COVID crisis period. In recent monitoring rounds, I have secured £2 million to fund marketing support by March 2021. That will be delivered by Tourism Ireland. Some £0.8 million relates to cooperative marketing support for airlines operating to all three of Northern Ireland's airports, with £1.2 million for a campaign highlighting all air and sea carriers serving Northern Ireland and their routes.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her reply. I will refer to my learned friend from South Belfast on the issue, but there is about £2.6 million in air passenger duty (APD) mitigation that we still return to the Exchequer each year. Will the Minister explain whether she or her officials have been in discussion with Belfast International Airport about supporting new transatlantic or Middle East routes? If so, has she made the necessary commitments for funding for those to occur, thus allowing us to improve our economy and our tourism offer for next year?

Mrs Dodds: The Member raises an important issue. Yes, I have been in discussion with Belfast International Airport on two transatlantic routes, one to New York and one to Boston, as well as another to Doha. The proposal from Belfast International Airport is a reserved matter, as aviation is a reserved matter, falling to the Department for Transport. I have, however, instructed my officials to investigate the idea of having support for routes, particularly to North America, as part of our recovery from COVID, but it is also

important for Northern Ireland's centenary year that we can expand our markets, horizons and cultural exchanges to other parts of the world.

I have also engaged with the Department for Transport on the UK aviation recovery plan. I trust that the Government will bring that forward and finalise it as quickly as possible because it is an important part of our recovery plan. Of course, APD on domestic flights is an important issue in the recovery plan as well. I view APD as an unjust tax on travel to Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I welcome the fact that the Minister has made £2 million available to support airlines at this difficult time. She will agree with me that more support should be provided by central Government to help with our connectivity, including scrapping APD on short-haul flights, at least in the short to medium term. What emergency support is available for Belfast International Airport — a very large employer in south Antrim — from the Assembly to help in what are dire financial times?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. I put on record that, tomorrow, I will have a conversation with Sir Peter Hendy, who is conducting the Union connectivity review. Of course, I will be raising the issues of APD, the inter-connectedness of our Union, and the importance of connectivity to GB as our main market for both goods and tourism.

On direct support for Belfast International Airport, the Member will understand that it is the role of the Department for the Economy to give support to air connectivity; support for airports relies on the Department of Finance and, of course, the Department for Infrastructure. I note that the Infrastructure Minister has made £1.2 million available for the City of Derry Airport. I urge that recovery packages for both Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport come forward as quickly as possible. If we do not have viable airports and connectivity, our recovery will be slower, and that will be more difficult for everyone in the long term. I raised this very important issue in the Executive last week. I expect to see that package come forward as quickly as possible.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be aware that students are desperately seeking information as to when and how they can travel home safely over the Christmas period, whether to here or from here to somewhere else. Will the Minister work in conjunction with the Health Minister to ensure that students have that information?

Mrs Dodds: An interdepartmental group is looking at that issue, and it is being governed by advice from the Public Health Agency. You will have noticed in today's headlines that Queen's University has already introduced significant testing so that students can travel and go home with a degree of confidence. Of course, we have had a constructive engagement on the issue with the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, and Michelle Donelan, the Universities Minister.

COVID-19: Business Support

2. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the total spend by her Department on support for individuals and businesses adversely impacted by COVID-19, broken down by measure. (AQO 1157/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have found my glasses; things will look brighter.

I thank the Member for his question. My department has spent £353 million supporting individuals and businesses since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. That covers the period until 31 October 2020 and includes £243 million on the £10,000 small business support grant scheme; £73 million on the £25,000 retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure grant scheme; and £23 million on the microbusiness hardship fund. I will place full details of the interventions, broken down by measure, in the Assembly Library. In addition to the £353 million to support individuals and businesses, a further £6.6 million has been spent by my Department on COVID-19 interventions for the higher and further education sectors.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, it will come as no surprise that, repeatedly and daily, constituents right across Northern Ireland are contacting myself and other Members about the business support scheme for the COVID-19 restrictions, pleading for those payments to be made. Minister, can you advise what additional support will be provided to Invest NI to ensure that the money goes to the individuals who desperately need it now?

Mrs Dodds: The Member will be aware, but I think that it is worth reminding the House, as I reminded Executive Ministers this morning, that there are two schemes in operation. One is for businesses that are rates-based, and that is operated by the Finance Minister. That is by far the very largest proportion of the funding that will be able for businesses in the current period of restrictions. The scheme that I am running,

part A, is, obviously, for people who do not have a premises. It is a much, much smaller part of the scheme.

I can report that my officials in Invest NI worked throughout the weekend. Around half of those who have applied have now been paid. Everyone who applied and used an accountant's letter as a verification has now been paid, and that means that about £3.6 million has gone into the local economy. We are now down to some of the elements where this is very much a manual scheme and where we are now having to phone to address issues of assurances and verification. I am sure that the House will agree that it is important to get the balance right between getting money out and getting the verification and assurance around that money that taxpayers deserve.

Dr Archibald: Similar to Mr Allen, I know that there is some frustration among businesses and individuals about slower payments. Have you looked at, or will you look at, allocating additional resources, particularly personnel, to ensure that schemes get out quickly, particularly as there are new schemes coming on board to help the newly self-employed? When is that scheme expected to open?

Mrs Dodds: Around 100 officials from Invest NI are working on the two parts of the scheme. As I said, they are complex schemes. They are not one-off payments, and they have to be verified and measured. They are complex schemes and are difficult to get through. Officials will continue to work on those as quickly as possible, but I ask that Members of this House help by getting information out. The more information that we receive about the application, the quicker the response will be. However, I recognise that there are many people who are hurting and who need money out very quickly and that the restrictions, in the run-up to Christmas, are very difficult for people to deal with. We will endeavour to do our bit as quickly as possible, although I do say again that the vast majority of support will be delivered through the Finance Minister.

If I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take the time to deal with the self-employed scheme. I asked for and circulated a paper for those who were recently self-employed and, indeed, for those who were company directors. My initial bid to the Finance Minister was for £70 million for those schemes. I have been allocated £30 million in total, £10 million that I was allocated in a previous allocation and £20 million today. Those schemes will reflect the allocation made to me by the Finance Minister.

Mr Stalford: My question is on the point that the Economy Minister has just made. In questions to the Finance Minister on his statement, I asked how much money the Economy Minister had bid for. I heard a figure in excess of £300 million, but, when I checked the BBC website, I saw that it was recorded as £190 million. Can my colleague confirm that she submitted a bid in excess of £300 million and has received from the Finance Minister £137 million?

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that we submitted a very wide-ranging number of bids to the Finance Minister. Those were well in excess of £300 million, because we believe that the economy needs to be stimulated in order to recover. We need to offer help to those who have been impacted, but we also need to have the stimulus scheme that the economy, particularly the high street, will require to recover.

Miss Woods: A number of financial assistance schemes were outlined today by the Finance Minister, as we have heard. Can the Minister outline whether any of that funding will be allocated to fill the gap and give support to those who have received nothing to date? If not, why not?

3.00 pm

Mrs Dodds: The Member will have seen the variety of schemes that were allocated today. If she would like to identify the gap that she talked about, of course, we can talk about it.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: Employee Rights

3. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for the Economy what actions she is taking to ensure that employees made redundant then rehired to benefit from the extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme do not have their redundancy or other employment rights impacted negatively. (AQO 1158/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for your question. My officials are actively engaging with their counterparts in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to ascertain what, if any, changes are required to employment law in Northern Ireland following the extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme.

HMRC is responsible for the scheme and its eligibility criteria. However, I understand that

employees who were on the payroll on 23 September 2020, but who were made redundant or stopped working for their employer afterwards, can be re-employed and claimed for. As the scheme is operated by HMRC, any employer requiring information on the extension should contact HMRC directly.

I firmly believe that employers who have been able to take advantage of the scheme should treat staff fairly and respect employee rights, including those relating to redundancy consultation, notice period and redundancy pay. That is why I previously introduced legislation to ensure that employees furloughed under the original scheme would not see reductions in those entitlements.

Any individual who believes that their employment rights have been breached should consider contacting the Labour Relations Agency's workplace information service for confidential and impartial information or the Law Centre Northern Ireland, which continues to provide free, independent, specialist legal advice on employment rights.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response. The extension of the furlough scheme is something that the entire House could welcome but the lateness of the hour for that announcement — hours before it was about to expire — is a real issue.

Will the Minister consider introducing primary legislation or other rules and regulations to ensure that people do not lose their accrued entitlement as a result of being made redundant and then re-employed? Is the Minister prepared to consider that?

Mrs Dodds: I am. I agree that the lateness of the hour in bringing forward the extension of the scheme has caused significant problems for employees and for employers, who had already made their business plans based on another set of circumstances. I fully agree with you. You will have heard me call numerous times for the job retention scheme to be extended, particularly for sectors that still have and will have a significant tailback in their recovery from the pandemic.

I will, of course, instruct officials to look at any gaps that there may be, but no employee being re-employed should suffer disadvantage. If there are to be redundancies while that person is on furlough, it should not be based on their furlough wage but on their full entitlement, so that people are not disadvantaged in that way either.

Mr Dunne: The Minister will be aware that legislation on domestic violence went through the House last week. That was long overdue, and we really welcome it. Will the Minister advise the House on her views on special paid leave for victims of domestic abuse?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is beyond this question, but, if the Minister wishes to answer, that is over to her.

Mrs Dodds: This is an issue of huge importance, and it is important that the Minister charged with employment rights should take a view on it. I know that there is huge support in the House for this issue. I recognise that some employers already act in a compassionate and progressive way in relation to this issue with people who have worked for a long time in their business. Therefore, I have asked officials to give consideration to this, and I will revert to the House in due course.

Ms Rogan: It is concerning that some employers have recently adopted policies of firing and then rehiring workers under poor terms and conditions, such as zero-hours contracts etc. Will the Minister look to amend the legislation to ensure that workers are not open to that exploitation in such a way?

Mrs Dodds: It is difficult for me to speak of individual circumstances, but employers should not use the pandemic to abuse or negate employees' rights. That is why I introduced the legislation around furlough payments and potential redundancies. I advise any employees who feel that their rights have been abused to contact the Law Centre or Labour Relations Agency where there will be specialist advice and people who will be able to take it further for them.

COVID-19: Support Schemes

4. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy, following the publication of the report into the financial implications of the four-week circuit breaker, how her Department will get groups highlighted as being adversely affected back into employment. (AQO 1159/17-22)

6. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that she has stated that females, younger workers and those on low pay may have been most adversely affected by the impact of COVID-19, how her recovery plan targets resources at those most in need of support. (AQO 1161/17-22)

14. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for the Economy, further to her Department's report on the potential economic impact of the four-week circuit breaker, how the learning from its findings will be implemented in the consideration of any future COVID-19 restrictions. (AQO 1169/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 4, 6 and 14, and I ask for your permission for an extra minute to answer those questions. Were Mr Speaker here today, he would be astounded that I am answering question 14.

My Department has developed a number of packages to support younger workers and those most adversely impacted by COVID-19. An apprenticeship recovery package has been established to encourage the return to work of up to 4,500 furloughed apprentices and their retention through to the successful completion of their apprenticeship. Those apprenticeship skills will play a significant contribution in maintaining the skills pipeline and supporting the renewal of the wider Northern Ireland economy. I have introduced a scheme to support new apprenticeships and an apprenticeship challenge scheme to try to get innovative apprenticeships up and running.

I have also allocated £6.2 million to support the provision of free flexible training for up to 5,000 individuals who have been directly impacted by the pandemic. Courses are available in all of the further education colleges, Queen's University, Ulster University and the Open University. I encourage anyone whose employment has been hit by the pandemic to explore those opportunities.

Members will be aware that I recently launched the COVID restrictions business support scheme to provide support to businesses and individuals directly impacted by the ongoing restrictions and those within their supply chain. The majority of support is being provided to those who occupy premises through the localised restriction support scheme that is run by the Department of Finance.

I have said repeatedly that we need to find ways to live with the virus. Therefore, facilitating the safe reopening of our economy is, of course, the most effective way in which we can help those across society who are adversely impacted by the restrictions. Utilising assessments, such as that produced by my Department on the potential economic impact of the four-week circuit breaker, will help the Executive to take balanced decisions around the timing, scope and duration of restrictions.

Mr M Bradley: Does the Minister agree that, irrespective of what grant support is made available, the best support that the Executive can give is to allow businesses to trade? The Minister previously launched a scheme to help businesses to get online, which will allow smaller businesses to continue to trade, even if they are shut. Does the Minister have plans to continue or enhance that scheme?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I am on record as saying, over and over again, that the best way to help businesses is to help them to trade in an open, safe and effective way. I deeply regret that we will have two further weeks of restrictions in the run-up to Christmas, but the Health Minister has advised that that is necessary to stop our hospitals being overrun.

It will be difficult for those individuals who are impacted on. One of the ways that we can try to help businesses is to help them have a dual offering through some online presence as well. Back in October, we introduced the digital selling capability grant, which was a small tester grant to see how that would work in the economy. It has been significantly oversubscribed, and I am therefore pleased that the Finance Minister has allocated a further £3 million to that grant scheme, which we will be able to open up again. I have also asked Invest NI to look at the thresholds in that grant scheme so that it is open to a wider range of small businesses.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer and the commitment to apprenticeships and skills training, which target resources at our young people in particular. Will the Minister confirm whether her Department has looked at where job vacancies in the next six to 12 months are forecast for so that young people will be better informed through the careers advice that might be available to them on what options to take?

Mrs Dodds: We already know that COVID has not had an equal impact across sectors of our economy. Sectors like hospitality and the high street have been very adversely impacted by COVID, but some sectors have actually powered ahead in this really difficult and challenging period. We continue to see significant growth in the numbers of people of all ages who are able to gain employment in the digital and tech sectors, for example. We have been looking at how we can help young people to get into those sectors, particularly through the assured skills academy routes. I often mention the academy that we ran with

Microsoft, because it was a fantastic way for young people to gain experience of that sector and of employment. Twenty-four young people took part in that skills academy, which was delivered online at the height of COVID, and 23 of those young people are employed today.

Ms Bunting: We have heard a lot in the Chamber today about need and the delays in grants getting out. Unquestionably, it is imperative that people get the money that they so desperately need. Will the Minister confirm the ratio of the delays in grants between her Department and the Department of Finance? Will she also outline what support she receives from Executive colleagues when, in their discussions on restrictions and lockdown, she makes the case for the survival of businesses? Was her Department's report —?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member asked a number of questions.

Ms Bunting: Was her Department's report taken into account by any —?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Members have asked a number of questions and had a lead-in. I ask the Minister to answer the question. If you want to ensure that your key question is put, put it early.

Mrs Dodds: It will be no surprise to you that I advocate, at all times, for an open and free economy that is able to trade safely in these COVID pandemic times. That is difficult. Many people will have seen the agonies that the Executive have put themselves through with the restrictions over the last period. That is because the balance is very difficult to get right. However, it is also imperative that we recognise that, in closing down our economy, we impair the life chances of our people and our community. That weighs heavily on my mind. I never fail to take the opportunity to advocate on behalf of those people. COVID has disproportionately impacted on the life chances of the young, women and the working poor. We need to see our economy open up again before Christmas.

I do not have the figures for the finance grant, but I have given freely and transparently the figures for the COVID restrictions grant. I will continue to work in a transparent way with the Assembly on this issue.

3.15 pm

Mr Sheehan: Minister, two weeks ago, the DUP vetoed public health advice and created a

sense of confusion among the business classes about whether it would be safe to open. Does she accept that the entirely inappropriate use of a cross-community veto created unnecessary confusion and uncertainty among businesses and wider society?

Mrs Dodds: I will, of course, correct the Member and indicate to him that the decision that was taken on the previous occasion was taken with the support of the Health Minister. In fact, it mirrored almost identically, except for close-contact services and coffee shops, the request in the Health Minister's paper.

Furthermore, the decision to close down on 27 November is also at the request and recommendation of the Health Minister, backed up by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Officer. That is clear and has been respected by the Executive as a whole.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the period of listed questions. We now come to topical questions.

COVID-19: Business Support

T1. Mr Gildernew asked the Minister for the Economy whether, given that businesses have been kept in the dark for so long and waited for four weeks for the opening of part B of the COVID restrictions business support scheme, as well as the fact that she has stated that part A of that scheme will close to new applicants before payments can be made under part B, she will extend the application dates so that eligible businesses will have sufficient time to apply and receive money before Christmas. (AQT 711/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I congratulate the Member on a brave attempt to throw confusion over the issue. When I indicated that we would separate the two parts of the grant scheme, it was before we were to have a further period of restrictions. These schemes will, of course, run in parallel, and they will take account of the new timescales for those restrictions to apply.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that that will be a great relief to business. I ask the Minister to consider extending the scheme to photographers, who are largely unemployed, not directly but due to the businesses that they serve as part of the supply chain.

Mrs Dodds: At my request, part B of the grant scheme specifically indicates that those who

are not directly in the supply chain but cannot operate because they are part of the economy that is closed should be considered as well.

COVID-19: Safely Open Group

T2. Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the safely open group and the work that she will be involved in over the next few weeks. (AQT 712/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: These are issues that the Executive will take forward. I continue, of course, at all times, to have conversations with the wider hospitality industry and the retail industry etc. However, the Executive Office, officials from my Department, the Health Department and the Public Health Agency are involved in the rest.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for her response. Given that we know more about the transmission of the virus in enclosed spaces, are you minded to bring forward a financial support scheme for businesses with a large number of employees who are quite sedentary during the day, so that they can improve the ventilation systems in their premises?

Mrs Dodds: That was one of the issues that was raised. I think that, if it is identified as an issue by the Public Health Agency, it is incumbent on the Executive to make money available for that.

Project Stratum

T3. Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy, after welcoming the roll-out of Project Stratum, which will improve broadband connectivity for many in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency, when 575 premises in the constituency that will not benefit initially from the project, despite being in the target intervention area, will be covered. (AQT 713/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Of course, I was delighted that we were able to announce the beginning of Project Stratum. That is good news for Northern Ireland, and it is a direct result of the confidence and supply arrangement that the DUP had with the Conservative Government. It will be a lasting legacy for Northern Ireland. There are a number of premises that will not benefit in those target areas, and we are committed to working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make sure that we can include the vast and overwhelming majority of those premises within the intervention area. This is an

exciting project; 76,000 homes in Northern Ireland that are difficult to reach will have broadband and high-speed internet access. That is exciting not just for the individuals and families but for the connectivity and competitiveness of the economy in Northern Ireland.

Ms Dolan: Yes, Minister, I agree that it is exciting, but one of the ongoing issues with broadband and the digital divide has been that broadband providers prioritise urban areas for upgrades and improvements while rural areas are left behind. My fear is that, as technology develops, rural areas will be left behind and will be left with superfast broadband whereas urban areas will move to ultra-fast broadband. Minister, have you received any guarantees that Fibrus will upgrade rural broadband services in the longer term so that rural areas can keep pace with urban areas?

Mrs Dodds: First of all, I indicate to the Member that 97% of the target intervention area for Project Stratum is rural Northern Ireland or settlements of less than 1,000 people. As I have said before, that is hugely important for the connectivity of the economy, for the balancing of the economy in Northern Ireland and for making our economy more competitive. In terms of the actual broadband, Fibrus has a contract to deliver on the specifics of its particular contract. However, we recognise that these things are changing and moving very fast, and we will try to keep up with that, given the constraints of any particular contract that the company has.

COVID-19: Business Support Payments

T4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she agrees that the delay in payments made under part A of the COVID-19 restrictions business support scheme is unacceptable and has caused huge distress and hardship; and will confirm that the payments will be made as quickly as possible. (AQT 714/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I have said before in the House, the COVID restrictions schemes fall into two parts. One is the local restrictions scheme delivered by the Department of Finance, and I am not aware of and do not have up-to-date details in relation to that scheme. The second one is the restrictions one, which is being delivered by my Department. That grant scheme opened up for business on 28 October and made its first payment on 6 November. Almost half of all its payments are now out, and

that represents about £3.6 million of assistance to date. All applications that have had an accountant's letter for verification have been paid, and Invest NI officials worked over the weekend on others that are more difficult to verify. Part B of the scheme opened on 18 November. To date, 111 applications have been received, and officials will be working as quickly as possible to verify those applications and get payments out.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister. You have been provided with additional resources today to extend the scheme for the next two weeks. Given — I am going to be hard — the failure of the Department that you oversee to get that desperately needed money out as quickly as possible, can you provide a time frame for the delivery of these grants to the businesses, please?

Mrs Dodds: The business support schemes that are supporting businesses during the periods of restrictions remain the same. I indicated that, because it was so close to Christmas, many of our retail businesses should receive an enhanced payment, but I was told that that was not possible on this occasion and that doing so might even delay funding being paid out. We will, however, continue to work to ensure that businesses receive their funding as quickly as possible. I do not recognise this as being a failure. These are complex schemes that have to be delivered with assurance, as they involve the taxpayer's money.

Connectivity

T5. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating her on the announcement of Project Stratum and agreeing with her that we would not be in this position were it not for the DUP and the confidence and supply agreement, to expand on connectivity and the economy, particularly in post-COVID times. (AQT 715/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum is new and exciting. It is not available in any other part of the United Kingdom. It will provide greater connectivity, greater regional balance and help our economy to be more competitive. The current issues with the pandemic and the restrictions have clearly demonstrated how connectivity, and not just by road, rail or air but in the digital sense, is so vital for our economy going forward.

Many of the firms and companies that I talk to about investing in Northern Ireland have

indicated, some of them very recently, that access to good broadband schemes is important but that the skills and resilience of our people in dealing with the huge difficulties that we have had are of major importance if we are to attract investment to Northern Ireland. Project Stratum is therefore a very significant and lasting legacy of that DUP-Conservative confidence and supply deal.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will know that many indigenous businesses, local farmers and various other people in our rural communities have poor broadband connection. I do not understand it totally, because I am a townie and have great broadband, but what conversations has the Minister had with other Ministers about the concerns raised? We have had conversations during lockdown with the Education Minister about how children access online learning. What conversations have taken place with other Ministers?

Mrs Dodds: I am sure that everyone in the House will recognise the real difficulties that families with poor connectivity have had. I spoke to one family whose members had to take it in turn to access broadband in their home. That is a very difficult situation, when we have young people wanting to get online, schools trying to teach lessons online and folk trying to work from home. Project Stratum will start to address those difficult issues, and I am delighted that it is being rolled out. For Members' information, I have asked Fibrus to ensure that MLAs are kept well informed about the roll-out of Project Stratum in their area.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Caoimhe Archibald is not in her place.

Real Living Wage

T7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for the Economy whether, if she is serious about poverty, low pay and employment, she will guarantee that public money will be used to create jobs that pay at least the real living wage, given that she and previous DUP Economy Ministers have not addressed the issue of low pay and work poverty and that, since 2014, Invest NI has supported 2,950 jobs that pay less than the real living wage. (AQT 717/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He raises an issue that is very important to me. COVID and the restrictions imposed as a result have impacted significantly on families and the working poor. If you are on

furlough, receiving 80% of your salary, that will significantly impact on your ability to pay the mortgage, meet the grocery bill and do everything that a family normally does.

I am concerned that, if we continue in a cycle of lockdown, we will simply perpetuate the difficulties, particularly for the working poor, for women who rely on the hospitality sector for additional family funds and for the many other sectors for which it is a real issue. We need to get to the stage where the economy is open and able to function appropriately. We will do that not only with restrictions but with better testing and the vaccine that we hope to see rolled out in Northern Ireland in the future. I am committed to ensuring that we do not have a race to the bottom either in the jobs that we create or the conditions and restrictions that we impose on the economy.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes the period for questions to the Minister for the Economy. Members may take their ease for a few moments before the next item of business.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill: First Stage

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I beg to introduce the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill [NIA 12/17-22], which is a Bill to amend the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 to increase the statutory limit on certain grants and loans for harbour works etc.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: Members may take their ease for a few moments while we prepare the Chamber for the next item of business.

Committee Business

Committee for the Economy: Energy Strategy Report

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the special report of the Committee for the Economy on considerations for the forthcoming energy strategy; supports the development of an ambitious, target-driven energy strategy that will decarbonise the energy sector by 2050 while minimising the cost to the consumer; and recognises the strategy's potential to boost our economic, health and social well-being into the future.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the motion.

Dr Archibald: The Committee recently undertook a micro-inquiry to seek views from stakeholders on what they wanted to see in the energy strategy being developed by the Department for the Economy. That is in the context of the British Government's legislative target of net zero carbon by 2050. The energy strategy will determine the future priorities and potential changes needed to achieve that and other targets. During the inquiry period, earlier this year, the Committee asked stakeholders a range of questions about what they would like to see as the key elements of the energy strategy, what the future holds for the renewables industry and whether there would necessarily be a difference in the price of energy for business and consumers in the future. The Committee received over 180 responses from across energy organisations, consumers, individuals, businesses and academics. I put on record my thanks to those who took the time to respond.

The Committee has produced a special report summarising the themes that have emerged. It has shared the inquiry report with the Economy Minister, and it is that report that we are discussing today. In addition to the inquiry, the Committee heard evidence from departmental officials on the energy strategy and has, on the whole, relayed its encouragement of the process for the development of the new energy

strategy, the progress of which the Committee will continue to monitor regularly.

Through the micro-inquiry, the Committee identified issues that will need to be addressed in the energy strategy. We are about to go through a massive upheaval of the whole energy system through the electrification of heat and transport systems, and it is important that stakeholders are involved in shaping the design along with government. First, the energy strategy must have a statutory footing and binding targets that are clear, measurable, ambitious and in line with both the Programme of Government outcomes and the UN sustainable development goals. From looking in more detail at the current targets, we see that there may be scope to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 45% by 2030 on the basis of the Climate Change Committee's (CCC) recommendations, with a view to assessing the feasibility of a 70% reduction by 2030. The energy strategy should implement policies towards those targets while moving towards a target of net zero carbon before 2050. To that end, consideration should be given to establishing an NI climate Act along the lines of those already designed in Scotland and Wales.

The Committee is alive to the fact that the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) family expenditure survey shows that households in the North spend a higher percentage of their income on energy than those in other regions. More than one in five households here is in fuel poverty, so they cannot afford to spend more on energy bills. To tackle that, we must turn our attention to enhancing the existing energy efficiency schemes to ensure that homes and businesses are as energy-efficient as possible. That will lower consumption and, therefore, bills. In that regard, it is crucial that energy efficiency targets be identified and set, together with new building regulations that future-proof the energy efficiency of new developments. Above all, the most vulnerable must be protected during the energy transition.

Investment is urgently needed in a number of areas. With regard to transport infrastructure and the rise in the number of electric vehicles, there is clearly a need for investment in car-charging infrastructure. That, along with a modal shift to encouraging walking, cycling and using public transport, will have a significant impact on carbon emissions. Investment is also required in the electricity grid, with the successful deployment of large-scale renewables projects. That is becoming urgent, as it is needed to allow renewable energy to enter the system.

Careful adjustment is necessary for the planning system to succeed in allowing forms of energy production such as wind turbines and energy storage areas. Additionally, smaller companies wishing to install renewable energy technology may need to access funding support schemes to help to cover the initial outlay and to reduce financing risks. The ability to store energy will play a significant role in bringing more renewables on to the system. To that end, we need a separate action plan to encourage large-scale storage, localised storage and biogas. In relation to the natural gas network and its expansion, hydrogen is increasingly seen as a green fuel for the future that could replace natural gas. We note that plans are under way for gas networks to transition to hydrogen over the coming three decades.

Some sectors will be able to make a bigger contribution than others to lowering carbon emissions; for example, agricultural practices. The main opportunities for reducing emissions from agriculture are evidenced in crop and soil management and measures to reduce livestock intensity. However, there is a role for increased energy efficiency. To achieve all that, we need the local workforce to develop a suitable skill set to take forward new technologies and infrastructure.

An effective strategy should identify key areas of work for government, local government, educators, businesses and communities and, preferably, should be co-produced to maximise the available expertise and ownership of the changes to take place. There is so much to do. As, I am sure, you will recognise, the energy strategy has the capacity to be one of the biggest issues that our economy can gain from right now. The energy strategy has a considerable role to play in making the North a place that is investable, particularly through having the levers to keep manufacturing facilities here and being able to expand them. The Committee's primary concern, while meeting the carbon net-zero target, is to make energy affordable, so that businesses and consumers can thrive and enjoy higher levels of health and well-being. We have to get this right.

I will now make some remarks on behalf of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin made submissions to the DFE call for evidence and the Economy Committee's micro-inquiry. Tackling the climate emergency is one of the fundamental challenges of this century. It is an issue that we have discussed a number of times in the Chamber. In January, the first motion that Sinn Féin brought before the Assembly was to declare a climate emergency. Since then, a climate change Bill has been submitted with cross-party support.

That is an important basis for dealing with the challenge of climate change. However, the strategies underpinning the legislation will be key to achieving the targets. The energy strategy is one of the most important. It cuts across Departments and sectors. It is also a real opportunity to lay down a marker about the approach that we want to take to the decarbonisation of our economy and society.

Sinn Féin believes that the energy strategy must be based on a number of principles. Foremost of those is a just transition. As we seek to move rapidly away from fossil fuel dependency, there is an opportunity to tackle the economic status quo that has caused and exacerbated the climate crisis and to reshape our economy, creating a fairer, more equal and sustainable society. The COVID crisis has brought into sharp focus economic inequalities. As we plan our recovery, it is critical that a just transition approach is core to economic rebuilding. The second is public and community ownership of energy and renewable resources. Across the island, we have the resources that can be harnessed to provide the energy that we need. Communities and the public should have the opportunity to benefit directly from those abundant resources. Democratising our energy market not only gives communities a financial stake but increases the awareness and buy-in from the public towards the goal of decarbonisation. The third is rural and urban equality. Tackling regional imbalances in energy supply must be part of the energy strategy. On the basis of the principles of just transition, the barriers faced by rural communities — for example, the lack of public transport — must be taken account of. The fourth is a green new deal, which was a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. As I have said, it must be one of the key facets of our economic recovery strategy. The potential of our renewable resources provides huge opportunities for the creation of green-collar jobs through investment in research and innovation, infrastructure and skills development. Finally, the climate does not recognise borders, so, on this small island, there needs to be strong cooperation. Our energy market is already integrated, and we must ensure that our energy strategy takes account of that. It must harness modern technologies to assist in achieving our emissions reduction targets. An energy strategy based on those principles, with ambitious targets that are reviewed regularly and sectoral plans, would go a long way to achieving the progress towards decarbonisation that we need to see in the short, medium and longer term.

I thank those who shared their views with the Committee. The report is available on the Committee's web page on the Assembly's website. I encourage anyone with an interest in the subject to read it and to continue to engage with the development of the energy strategy. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

3.45 pm

Mr Dunne: As a member of the Economy Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

There is no doubt that energy affordability and security of supply are key issues, and we must ensure that they are kept high on the agenda. The cost of electricity to consumers continues to be a real challenge to domestic and commercial energy users. Energy has been an important issue in the Committee for some time, and the micro-inquiry has been an opportunity for stakeholders in the sector to have their say and to engage on this important issue.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for businesses and domestic consumers. While having a strategy in place to ensure that we have a sustainable energy future is important, it is paramount that our short-term challenge is to ensure that energy is affordable. The manufacturing sector has huge challenges with energy costs. Its high energy costs are very challenging for the sector in being able to compete globally in the world marketplace.

Wind energy has been the main source of renewable energy in Northern Ireland, which we all seem to be proud of, and it has achieved its renewable target of 40% by 2020. That was heavily incentivised through the renewables obligation certificates (ROCs) scheme, which has now closed. However, I question the total cost of the scheme, which providers have been tied into with 20-year contracts.

There are, of course, drawbacks with wind energy as wind is not consistent, and many wind turbines are producing surplus amounts of energy, which could be transferred to battery storage units for later use or to be fed into the grid system. However, there are many major challenges in getting sufficient battery capacity to deliver that.

Connections into the grid continue to be a challenge for wind turbines due to weak infrastructure in some parts of the country. There is a problem with most of the generation being in the west of the Province while there is

greater demand for supply in the east of the Province.

The gas network needs further support. More needs to be done to encourage consumers to connect to gas. Suppliers such as Phoenix Natural Gas continue to encourage uptake within the greater Belfast area, which ranges from 30% to 60% where networks exist, and gives consumers more value and cleaner energy. Approximately 70% of households across Northern Ireland still have oil-based heating systems, and the current price of home heating oil is relatively cheap in comparison with just a number of years ago as it has an average price, as I understand it, of £235 for 900 litres. It is important to have a mix of energy sources to ensure that no one is left in fuel poverty and to ensure that costs are kept competitive for domestic consumers and businesses.

I recently had a discussion with Phoenix Natural Gas about the use of hydrogen to replace natural gas. I believe that that will work within the existing network and will produce cleaner and more efficient energy. Hydrogen energy has also been described as the main driver for decarbonising the global economy. We have an opportunity here to become a world leader in hydrogen production and technology. Wrightbus is involved in development work on hydrogen buses, and I understand that Dublin is slightly ahead of us — it is hard to believe, but that is true — as it is trialling hydrogen buses. That presents an exciting opportunity for Northern Ireland. However, it will require significant investment, and I know that the Prime Minister has committed to investing in this new technology. There is the potential to create many jobs in hydrogen technology, in the aerospace industry and in advanced materials sectors and supply chains.

There is a role for education in a future strategy to encourage energy efficiency through focused education. We now have the green light for the development of the North/South interconnector, which went through in September. That will help to improve network stability and security of supply for energy users in Northern Ireland.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister, and I know that she is committed to bringing forward a fit-for-purpose energy strategy for Northern Ireland.

Mr Catney: I thank Committee members and the Committee Clerk for the work that has gone into producing the special report and their ongoing commitment to a new green future for Northern Ireland.

I stand here thankful that, finally, in 2020, we have got to the point where, despite some politically charged rumblings, I have heard our Economy Minister and our Environment Minister speak in the Chamber about the need to protect our environment and tackle climate change. In the context of the debate, I particularly welcome the Minister's recognition in her road map, which was published in June, of the central role of the green economy in rebuilding the Northern Ireland economy.

An effective energy strategy must have ambitious targets to tackle decarbonisation in heat, power and transport. It must be recognised that, when it comes to power, we have made some excellent progress. Fifteen years ago, 3% of our electricity consumption came from renewables; today, it is 47%. That is a great leap forward and a success that we should build on. It is good news not just for the environment, with 9 megatons of carbon saved in the last 20 years, but for consumers, with £135 million saved on consumer bills since 2000. I welcome the Minister's commitment to build on that success by setting new ambitious targets for emissions in Northern Ireland, which, she said, should not be below 70%.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. The Member is right to note the massive progress that has been made through not only the contribution that Northern Ireland has made but through the contribution, more generally, throughout the West. Does the Member agree that it cannot be right that there are countries in the world that are still building coal-fired power stations?

Mr Catney: Yes, I agree, and I have to ask that question, but we are looking at what we are doing here in Northern Ireland. It is good news that has to be commended and welcomed as much as possible.

The suggested target of renewable energy for Northern Ireland of 80% by 2030 would have the effect on the reduction of carbon emissions of every household turning off the electricity for 1.5 years. The key success to our increase in renewable generation has been the increase in onshore wind. The Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO), which was the main support stream for encouraging increased renewable electricity generation, spurred that on. However, the scheme closed in 2017. Any future targets must be accompanied by credible incentive schemes in order to spearhead movement towards our ambitious targets.

However, it is not all good news. Successive Executives have failed to produce a coherent

plan to realise the benefits of offshore wind, while all our closest neighbours have shot forward in that area. There must be continued engagement with partners across Government and businesses, including the Crown Estate, to address barriers and ensure that Northern Ireland has the potential to benefit from future seabed leasing rounds.

We need to consider the clear targets on heat that were set by the Government in Dublin to have 500,000 greener homes and 400,000 heat pumps installed by 2030. That goes beyond the structured thinking of just looking at heat, power and transport. It will require us to look at changing behaviour, and a model should be taken from the EU clean energy package's ambition to see citizens put at the heart of the future of energy. That behavioural shift will be key to any effective energy transformation.

We need to keep an eye on emerging transport technologies, which has been alluded to by my colleague. While hydrogen will be the key to unlocking the greener transport system, any energy strategy must have the flexibility to deal with new technologies that we may not have fully considered today. That will not only make the strategy more effective but will add to the longevity of it. I also welcome the work that the Minister for Infrastructure has been doing to develop a green transport strategy, particularly the groundbreaking cross-border work with Minister Ryan that I hope to see much more of.

A new green economy is not only central to protecting our area for the next generations but it is now clear that it is central to the recovery of our economy from the pandemic and will be a key driver for growth in the future. I know that the Committee will continue to work to make sure that any energy strategy realises that potential.

Dr Aiken: I welcome the report and thank the Chair and members of the Committee for it. It is entirely timely.

I need to make a declaration: I was formerly the chief executive of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, and I was heavily involved in the renewable energy sector. It always struck me that, when I asked businesses in the sector from across these islands why they did not want to invest more heavily in Northern Ireland, they said that there were four reasons that prevented a greater output of renewable energy. The first was the monopolistic position that was, very clearly, held by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and EirGrid, the large costs that were involved in connection and the lack of investment in the grid.

The second was the role of the regulator and the fact that, in many cases, the Utility Regulator seemed to prevent moves towards best practice, including in renewable energy. The third issue was the question of whether the Department for the Economy was fit for purpose and whether it had the breadth and scope to deal with the issue of renewable energy. Unfortunately, from what we have picked up from the RHI inquiry and other evidence that has come to light, the Department for the Economy was not fit for purpose and could not deal with that issue. We hope that that has changed.

The final issue was the lack of ambition in Northern Ireland to get to the point at which it could be a leader not only on these islands but globally when it comes to renewable energy. Thanks to our geography, we have an abundance of wind energy. We have the ability to have an abundance of offshore wind energy. We have the ability, because we have suitable scale, to be a gateway between the Republic of Ireland and the rest of our nation, the United Kingdom. In the wider energy field, we have the ability to connect to the new developments that are going on in Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands, and to the very large offshore wind energy fields in the North Sea. All of those things point to how Northern Ireland could be more ambitious.

I thank Dr Archibald very much for the report. My issue is that it talks about 2050. Our Prime Minister is talking about electric vehicles (EVs) being rolled out and being the only vehicles allowed on the road by 2030. That is much more ambitious. That is what we should be aiming for. To decarbonise energy, we need to get to the point where we send a signal to everybody in Northern Ireland who wants to invest in green energy that we are the place in which to do so. How can we do that? One example is biogas and the move towards hydrogen. We have a surplus of biogas. We have heard on numerous occasions about the problems that we have with anaerobic digestion and the waste that comes from our dairy and poultry businesses. We have a real opportunity to strip out that biogas and transform it so that we become a hydrogen economy. We can do that because we have the scale to make it work effectively in Northern Ireland, but there must be a signal to the market to make that happen. That ambition must be part of a strategy to try to make it happen.

The issue with the grid is significant. Many of us will have had many constituents complaining that, when they tried to connect low-energy wind or anaerobic digestion to the grid, they

discovered that they were being charged three or four times the rate that they would be charged in the south of Scotland. It is even more galling that the exact same contractors who do this in the south of Scotland are charging three or four times as much in Northern Ireland.

There are also issues with planning. How can it be that, after this length of time, we do not have a planning process that is fit for purpose? I say to the Committee Chairman and the Minister: let us have some ambition in Northern Ireland and set ourselves a target not of 2050 but of 2035. It is ambitious, but it is doable. Let us do it.

4.00 pm

Ms Armstrong: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome this special report and its contribution to the debate on our energy future. I thank Dr Archibald, the Committee and all its staff for the work they have put in on this. It is a really informative document on the choices and issues that we face in energy policy.

When it comes to energy policy, we must always pursue an evidence-based approach. This is a huge issue that affects our everyday lives. We face a climate crisis right now, and we must act to reduce emissions, protect the natural environment and make our ways of living more sustainable for future generations. Northern Ireland has done well in the past in increasing our energy efficiency and, especially, our renewable electricity generation, but we must not consider this to be mission accomplished. We can, and should, be out front, as others have mentioned, leading not only in the UK and Ireland, but in the world, and we have the potential for this. I echo Dr Aiken's point: I see the Department setting an ambitious target for renewable energy generation. Ultimately, we want 100% of our electricity to come from renewables. I note that Scotland is aiming for 100% by the end of this year, so this is clearly doable.

Time is short, so I want to highlight some of the key points made by respondents, if I may. They highlighted the need for energy issues to be interconnected through partnership across government. Departmental silos will harm our ambitions for a better future. Departments, especially Finance, Economy, DAERA, Communities and Infrastructure, must ensure that close and functional working relationships are the norm. Many have already pointed towards a green new deal. The transition to a greener economy must also be clearly interconnected with the relevant skills training. We must not leave people behind as the

deindustrialisation of the 1970s and 1980s did, causing massive ongoing impacts on our community today.

One particular area that the report and respondents noted in the decarbonisation of heat was the issue of fuel poverty. That has been a persuasive issue for this part of the world, and must always be a key priority for policymakers. We must make sure that, as we invest in the future of green energy, the costs do not fall on the vulnerable. So much more could be done in home insulation. As communities spokesperson for the Alliance Party, I know that our housing stock does not perform particularly badly, but many of the poorest live in poorly insulated private rental homes. Our entire housing stock will need to be looked at, and serious amounts of easy-to-access funding provided to people to live them to adequately heat and light their homes.

Our public buildings, too, will need improvement. That is why the Departments of Education and Health, which own a huge portion of the public buildings of Northern Ireland, need to be brought in. Let us not forget the roles of the Department for Communities and Department of Finance with the number of publicly owned homes. There are many opportunities in the decarbonisation of heat already, and more needs to be done in integrating these into plans and planning regulations for the future. This will require investment in our energy infrastructure and breaking down barriers that prevent necessary and eco-friendly projects from progressing.

Energy storage will also be key. In particular, as the report highlights, we should be looking at our mix and at whether offshore wind and other marine technologies could play a considerable part in this.

Finally, there is transport. As has been mentioned, we are a heavily car-dependent society. Until COVID, private transport was having a renaissance, more out of necessity, but, when things start to return to normal, major investments in transport will be needed. That needs to be taken into electric vehicles and a hydrogen infrastructure for cars. It should absolutely mean that public transport runs on electricity or clean energies, certainly not petrol or diesel. With the Department for Infrastructure and Northern Ireland Water, we have an opportunity in Northern Ireland to consider whether there are options to develop hydrogen production. As we know, that needs a steady volume of water and, given that Northern Ireland Water is one of the highest users of electricity, it is in their interests to be part of that

process. We may even be able to resolve the ongoing issue of the cost of running a water system and keeping it at the required standard by bringing energy production options into consideration through Northern Ireland Water.

Energy policy affects us all, so we have to get this right and ensure that everyone in our society is invested in this. Northern Ireland deserves clean and healthy air, a protected environment and a sustainable and secure energy supply. I look forward to the Department's consultation on an energy strategy, taking into consideration this report in order to secure it.

Mr Frew: I welcome the micro report and thank the Committee for its work. Energy will always be a massive piece of the economy portfolio. I also pay tribute to the Minister, who has met me on the issue.

Let us face it: energy is a massive issue for any devolved jurisdiction, simply because we all pay for it. The problem that we have in Northern Ireland is that our heavy industrial users pay more for energy because of the network charges and everything that goes with them. That has been a massive problem over the years and has led to job losses not only in my constituency but across Northern Ireland. Energy costs have been ranked in the top five reasons that businesses have left these shores. They are therefore a massive issue, and I thank the Committee for keeping it on the boil.

I must speak about my constituency and Wrightbus's work with hydrogen. There are massive energy issues, but carbon is not necessarily the issue, as a good bit of that has been resolved through the use of renewable energy. Where the use of carbon has to be fought is in the areas of transport and heat. By bringing in hydrogen and producing hydrogen buses, two birds can be killed with one stone. Growth can be created in the transport sector that reduces carbon, but wind is also being utilised, and that cannot currently be done, as it cannot be put into the grid because of the inertia issue. We can produce as much wind as we like, but, unless there is a system to back it up and the inertia to keep the energy stable, it cannot be used. There are many ways to do that. Battery storage can be used to contain the energy produced, or that energy can be converted into hydrogen. That hydrogen can then be put into our bus stock and heavy goods vehicles, I suggest. I suspect that batteries are the way to go for small cars, but hydrogen is most definitely the way to go for buses and heavy goods vehicles.

There are times in the energy sector that you stay still and watch and monitor what happens across the world. With hydrogen, I suggest to the Committee and the Minister that now is not one of those times to stop and look. We should go for it, as we have the tools and wherewithal available, and Wrightbus is in the lap of Northern Ireland.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the outcomes of producing hydrogen is oxygen, and there is a world shortage of oxygen. Northern Ireland not only could be one of the higher producers of hydrogen but could resolve an oxygen problem. Does the Member think that there should be investment in hydrogen production on a massive scale?

Mr Frew: I entirely agree with the Member, I really do.

You can have all the energy strategies and plans in the world, but, unless you have a system operator that is fit for purpose, you will fail. What do I mean by that? The system operator here is the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI), and it has massive issues with independence and governance. That hurts Northern Ireland and will hurt Northern Ireland in the future. SONI has been before the Economy Committee only once. I must applaud my colleague Christopher Stalford, who tore them to pieces over the problems in SONI.

I will pick one example, as I know my time is short. SONI's owner is EirGrid. I have no problem with who owns SONI or with who owns the owners; it is the transparency issue that I have a real problem with. Since EirGrid has owned SONI, there has been a sifting of £12 million out of SONI to EirGrid for cross-charging. EirGrid will not tell us what it is for, what it was charged on or what it paid for, and it hides behind its statement of accounts to Companies House. EirGrid uses a model, FRS 101, to justify that secrecy and lack of transparency. If we do not have a system operator that functions properly, is fit for purpose, is at full capacity and is truly and properly independent, we will fail, no matter what strategy we put in place. No matter what plan we have for the future, if we do not have a fit-for-purpose and fixed SONI, we will fail. We will all pay, every one of us, but mostly our businesses and heavy industry users. That will be catastrophic for jobs, business and the economy.

Mr McGuigan: As other Members have done, I thank my party colleague the Chair of the Economy Committee for bringing the inquiry report to the Assembly for debate. Any energy strategy must be placed firmly in the context of the global climate and biodiversity crisis, and, therefore, for us in the North, the strategy must be an ambitious exercise in decarbonisation and radical climate action. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has reported that two thirds of all fossil fuels that we know to exist must remain in the ground if we are to avoid irreversible climate change. Therefore, it is madness that we would even allow exploration for further fuel reserves in the North. Ireland's fossil fuels must remain in the ground. That is the view of the Assembly, as expressed clearly and loudly in a recent debate on fracking and petroleum licensing. It is a view that must direct the action, strategies and policies of the Economy Minister.

The Climate Change Committee requires at least a 35% reduction by 2030 to contribute to the fifth carbon budget, and we have modelled for a reduction of up to 45%. That 45% reduction should be the lower limit of our ambition; in fact, given our abundance of renewable resources, it is decidedly unambitious. As other Members have pointed out, the Scottish Government, for example, have committed to 75% reduction against the 1990 baseline by 2030 in their Climate Change Act; in fact, we in the North still do not have a climate Act and are the only jurisdiction in these islands with that dubious claim. That is, again, recognition that we need to catch up. A bespoke climate change Act must be devised and implemented as a matter of urgency to codify targets and lay out clear emission reduction milestones. It should also codify sectoral sub-targets for emission reduction.

To decarbonise rapidly, we must also tackle the issue of demand. The energy strategy should lay out clear sectoral energy-efficiency targets bound by an overall efficiency target, and it must do so in a way that is consistent with just transition principles. Any move to decarbonise cannot disenfranchise workers or their families or make their lives more difficult; otherwise the policy will be resisted and fail. If planned properly, though, a just transition could, in fact, positively transform the lives of people, rapidly reducing emissions while creating high-quality and secure green-collar jobs and warmer homes for all through retrofitting and other measures. It could develop more efficient ways of moving around through investment in active travel and public transport, helping to create a healthier lifestyle. It can produce a world-class digital and physical infrastructure, with an

abundance of renewable and more affordable electricity from our common wind and tidal resources.

The Kilroot coal-fired power station, for example, must be closed by 2025 at the latest. However, in line with just transition principles, that should be done only with the necessary employment supports and retraining offers in place for workers and in full cooperation with trades unions. The closure of Kilroot should not leave any worker unemployed or any family worse off.

For both moral and practical reasons, we need an energy strategy based on the principles of just transition. The requirement to urgently transform our society and our economy away from fossil-fuel dependency and wastefulness presents an opportunity to tackle the economic status quo that caused the climate crisis in the first place. As we confront the climate crisis, we must also reshape our economy to create a more democratic, equal and sustainable society. That must be the guiding principle at the heart of any energy strategy.

An energy strategy should, as others have said, be rural-proofed and must take account of the specific issues facing rural areas that result in more carbon-intensive lifestyles, such as sparse connections to the gas grid, poor investment in renewable infrastructure and extremely limited public transport.

We must grow the economy through a green new deal. By 2016, more than 50 renewable energy companies were active in the North; as of March 2020, that figure stands at just five. Less than 1% of the private-sector workforce is employed in the green economy, which is accountable for 1.6% of the total turnover. Given the vast economic potential of our renewable resources and the opportunities for high-skilled jobs, high-value research and innovation, retrofitting and construction of green infrastructure that stem from them, that is a stark policy failure. Prioritising the green economy should guide energy strategy policy. An 80% target for renewable electricity by 2030 could result in £1.1 billion of new investment in the North. Climate change does not recognise borders. To be effective, the island of Ireland must operate together where possible to ensure maximum efficiency gains —

Mr Speaker: The Member needs to wind up on his remarks, please.

4.15 pm

Mr McGuigan: — and most appropriate use of resources. I welcome this strategy and the shift in policy that it represents.

Mr Middleton: Like other Members, I welcome the motion. As an Economy Committee member I thank all of the members who played their role in bringing the report to the House, and I thank the Clerk and the Assembly staff for the way in which they conducted themselves on this and all of the matters. As Members have said, energy has a huge part to play in a very significant and large Economy Department. I thank them for that.

The micro inquiry received a large range of responses from across energy and business organisations, consumers, individuals and academics. There was a lot of good engagement, and it brought together this important report, though, of course, the report is just the beginning of a discussion of the ideas that were brought forward. We know that, as that report has been provided to the Department for the Economy, the energy strategy itself will determine future priorities and the potential changes needed to achieve the targets in it. Whilst we want to see progress as soon as possible, we recognise that there are time frames to be met, and we hope that the energy strategy can be put out to consultation early in 2021.

There is no time to stand still, and we need to continue to make progress. I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that this is one of her priorities. She has, of course, announced the 2030 renewable electricity target as being at least 70%. I, like many other Members, have met many people across the sectors who have welcomed that. There will, of course, be those who say that we need to be more ambitious, but it is welcome that we have that target in place.

We got a range of views on what would or should be the key elements of the energy strategy. It is clear that there is strong support for the principal focus of the energy strategy to be the 2050 net zero carbon emissions target that the UK has adopted. All of the actions in the strategy should, at the very least, promote and be very consistent with the aim of meeting the 2050 target. It was highlighted that this should require cross-departmental working. We all acknowledge and reflect on the fact that all we do in the Assembly requires a certain level of that.

As has been highlighted by other Members, consumers and affordability are key issues. I welcome the fact that the responses brought that very much to the fore, because all of us

who represent constituents want to ensure that whatever comes out will tackle fuel poverty and benefit the consumer and businesses.

The infrastructure element is important. There was a strong recognition that we need to see more investment in public transport systems as a way to reduce energy consumption. There was also an important view, which I share, that we need to see more investment in the electricity grid and the realisation of strategic infrastructure in a timely manner. That is crucial as well.

On a final note, promoting the energy strategy and increasing public awareness were important points to come out of the micro inquiry as well. We want to encourage stakeholders to be fully aware of the energy strategy and of the draft energy strategy and of how their role as businesses and consumers is important to its success. It is important as well that we see the involvement in this of communities at every level in our constituencies and Northern Ireland, because this will impact all of us. We all have a role to play.

I look forward to seeing the outcome of the debate on the energy strategy. We look forward to seeing the consultation. There will be many more discussions to be had in the Chamber around all of the details, but this is an important discussion that we are having today. As I said, I very much welcome the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: I apologise to the Chair and to Members who have spoken thus far on the report for not being in the Chamber for most of the debate. It is important work. The Committee Clerk and staff are to be congratulated on the work that has been done on what is proving to be a more important issue each time that we debate it. Of course, we have to move beyond debate to action and to seeing change in how we produce, manage and invest in our energy and, in turn, ensure that that investment is for the benefit of all the people whom we serve.

With the ongoing economic crisis caused by COVID-19 not only here but across the island, these islands and globally, eyes are turning to how we will come out the other side of the economic disaster. Over the weekend — perhaps, over a longer period — we heard talk of higher taxes. I do not object to higher taxes, but I want to know whom they will tax at a higher rate, because experience tells us that it is not always those who can afford to pay most. We hear talk of public-sector pay freezes and cuts to public-sector spending. They are issues of great concern, particularly to those in lower income brackets. When they hear politicians

and Assemblies talk about climate action, climate change and new energy strategies, they are quietly concerned and ask themselves, "Who is going to pay for that?". Will the new energy cost those people, as consumers who are trying to run a family home, a small business or even a large business, more? Will they or their family have to do without other things as a result of a new energy strategy?

That does not have to be the case; in fact, green energy and tackling climate change can be an economic driver, if used properly. If we can invest in programmes that create green energy, jobs and sustainability, why would we not do that? That is the factor and the prism through which all of this has to be looked at. A number of Members have said that the consumer is concerned. Let us allay that concern by saying that we see this as an economic driver and a way forward for change. We, as a society, could be energy providers across these islands, if we invest properly. We could lead the way in how we retrofit our homes. Recently, the Minister for Communities announced a programme of building new social houses. Those houses can and should be built to the highest standards in energy efficiency. I know that the Housing Executive does not build the social housing currently, but those involved in building social housing are fitting out their properties to high standards, which means that there is less cost in heating them, but improvements could be made.

I cannot speak on energy without plugging my Bill, which I propose to bring forward in the near future. It is out to public consultation. That Bill looks at how we allow for the microgeneration of green energy, where we allow farmers, individuals and communities to produce energy and then sell it back to the major producers, and calls on the producers to have a fixed price for it and to ensure that they purchase at least 5% of their energy from those producers. That allows for the production of energy to be brought down into communities.

Last week, we had a well-intentioned debate on how certain elements of agriculture produce harmful greenhouse gases. It is an important area to focus on, but, rather than simply focusing on how agriculture produces harmful gases, we should look at how we can support agriculture to produce energy. If we can get our farming community involved in the production of energy, as many are, along with others, they will not see this as an attack on them. They will see it as an opportunity. Many small businesses and individuals could also produce energy. Hopefully, we will hear more about the Bill during the consultation.

I welcome the report. It is another example of how Committees in this place do important work. They do not always attract the headlines, but they do important work behind the scenes. A lot of work is done in our Committees. I congratulate everyone involved in formulating the Committee report.

Mr Beggs: I find this to be a useful report, although I have to say that it tends to gather information rather than make clear recommendations. I would prefer to have seen clearer recommendations. The motion mentions a wish for ambitious targets. I did not get that in the report. I will illustrate what I am talking about. On the available options, the report mentions that some want 70% renewable energy by 2030, some want 80% by 2030, some want 100% by 2035, some want net zero by 2040, and others want 100% renewable as soon as possible. I do not know what the Committee is recommending. It just reports a series of figures. It would be better if the policy could be further developed with clearer targets. I recognise that this is a cross-cutting issue, so it is not just for the Economy Committee.

There are two sides to reducing our hydrocarbons. Yes, it is about replacing hydrocarbons with renewable energy, but it should also be about reducing energy demand in the first place. I would like to have seen more references to the green new deal scheme. Interestingly, on Friday, I visited a new development that is destined for social housing. It has triple glazing — not double glazing — and a heat ventilation recovery system. All that is built to a high standard. I suspect that the energy loads for those new tenants will be very low. By designing our houses in that way from the start, we can considerably reduce our energy demands.

Members mentioned retrofitting. We need to look at building control standards for our new buildings. Do we need to increase those? It is most efficient to build in that way from the beginning rather than having to come back in five or 10 years' time and add further insulation. I urge that we look at our new builds to see whether we need to increase that efficiency from the start. It is difficult to retrofit some houses, and it can certainly be expensive. However, we need to look at retrofitting insulation to bring about improvements.

Like others, I welcome the change in the Housing Executive. That may enable more houses to be built in a much more efficient way and to a higher standard, for the benefit of tenants. We have to recognise that there may be a slightly higher rent in the new houses

because they are built to a higher standard, but look at the total cost. What will the energy bill be? Look at the quality of the environment in which individuals will live. Damp should be a thing of the past. There are thermostats to regulate heat to reduce bills further, so it is possible to improve heating standards.

Bespoke schemes have also been mentioned. I am conscious that Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom — I dare say that it also applies if you take in the Republic of Ireland — with some of the lowest levels of government support to market new energy schemes. I suspect that that is a sad reflection of our past in terms of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme and other forms of renewable energy; indeed, the Northern Ireland Audit Office reported recently that some turbine owners were being paid up to £100,000 a year above what they needed. It is important that we learn lessons and that we deviate from schemes that are applicable elsewhere with great caution. We must make sure that we build in contingency plans from the start in primary legislation, so that any rates that are set can be quickly adapted if that is needed.

Transport is another important area. Yes, the number of electric cars is increasing, as the Prime Minister has just indicated. However, equally, as others said, we need to get into hydrogen. A hydrogen hub needs to be created for Northern Ireland to support our buses and HGVs. For heavy goods vehicles that travel longer distances, hydrogen seems to be the only way to go.

Already, many other countries are taking a step ahead of us. China, in particular, is investing heavily in that, and I urge Northern Ireland to catch up and create its own energy hub for hydrogen.

4.30 pm

Ms Bailey: The Green Party also very much welcomes the motion. We are encouraged by the vast range of views and positive suggestions given by organisations to the energy strategy micro inquiry. We would now like to see those carefully analysed in order to extract the enormous amount of value and level of expertise that has been given to us in the report. Whilst we are hearing the strong common theme of interconnectivity from Members, we feel that there is a gap in the responses, because most are about energy. We heard in the debate that energy is only half of what we should be thinking about. Rather than the focus being singularly on energy, it,

rightly, needs to extend to the green economy and to how all the things that are suggested in the micro inquiry can be used to generate more and better jobs, more savings and better and healthier lifestyles while giving us the tools to begin to combat and redress the damage that we allowed to happen to our environment before we reach the point of no return.

We know through previous motions and debates that the House has recognised that we are in a climate crisis and that decarbonising is urgent and essential. If the primary role of a Government is to work for the betterment of its people, one of the primary purposes of an energy strategy should be to provide a healthy, robust and sustainable economy in which all people can thrive.

The Green Party sees that future through a climate change Act, transforming and growing Northern Ireland from a fossil-fuelled driven economy to a green energy economy. With the level of renewable electricity that is being produced and managed, Northern Ireland will become a world leader in the technologies of renewable electricity and smart grid.

A green economy provides for a range of really transformative policies that will help us to rebuild society in a sustainable and ethical way, including, but not limited to, decarbonising our energy systems in order to prevent the worst of climate change and the immense monetary costs that global warming would bring to the people of Northern Ireland. It would also include opening a new range of quality jobs and economic opportunities for the people of Northern Ireland; providing a solid base for our economy to grow and compete on the European and world stage; preserving the biodiversity on which our planet and we depend for our existence; and providing a Northern Ireland that will sustain and nourish our children and their children, physically and economically. However, we really need to focus on the priorities. The proposed energy strategy process of which this micro inquiry report and debate are part, will take another year to be enacted. Only then will the required actions begin to be planned and deployed, which is likely to take another two years post-November 2021. We simply cannot wait another three years, particularly as the existing strategy is 11 years old.

The Economy Minister acknowledged that in her presentation at the energy forum on 29 September. In her responses to my questions for written answer, she said that she would not wait on the energy strategy to take urgent action. I ask the Minister to clarify what exactly

those actions are and when she will be carrying them out.

Whilst the Green Party is not in the Executive, nor do we have members on the Economy Committee, I am confident that, as a party, we can offer some very valuable advice on the priorities and actions that should be taken. I am delighted to have the opportunity, through the motion, to put some of them on record. My party's view is that those actions should be based around four key themes. The first is electric vehicle-charging infrastructure. It is obvious that we in Northern Ireland are being left behind GB and ROI in the uptake of electric cars, with the main issue being the absence of adequate charging infrastructure.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: I certainly will.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that the reluctance to buy electric cars may be more to do with the initial funding that is required to buy them but that there is emerging evidence that the running costs over a number of years can be cheaper? However, with a 300-mile radius, that is perhaps more than adequate for most people in their daily commute.

Ms Bailey: I accept those points, but I have had conversations with electric vehicle owners who have given them up because of bad infrastructure, so that issue needs to be tackled. The existing charging network is outdated, not reliable and needs to be urgently upgraded and extended. We suggest that the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Infrastructure work together with the owners and operators of the existing network to find a way to get more investment and unlock the potential of electric vehicles in Northern Ireland, because, if we do not build it, they will not come.

Another key area is building regulations, and that has been mentioned. Today, we still build homes that are not adequately insulated and which use fossil-fuel boilers for heating, and we heard a little about that during Question Time. We suggest that we need to move quickly to change the building regulations so that we design and build for the future zero-carbon world. We urge the Minister of Finance to produce immediately the technical documentation on the requirement for any new buildings being erected to be nearly zero-energy buildings. We need this as soon as is physically possible so that the regulations work seamlessly with the Communities Minister's announcement about the Housing Executive

and the proposals to build more homes where they are needed. Let us not be content with another issue that we know needs addressed failing to be delivered on time. We are already behind. Until these measures are made and mandated, all we will continue to do is stack up more problems for the future.

Another key area, as has been mentioned, is the grid investment.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up

Ms Bailey: Another one is connecting to the grid, and Mr Aiken made a point about costs. We support the motion and thank the Committee very much for bringing it to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Economy Minister, Mrs Diane Dodds. The Minister will have 15 minutes.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):
Thank you, Mr Speaker. Apologies for my coughing fit earlier. Rather than anything more sinister, it was because I have a dry throat and, possibly, if a politician can say this, because I was talking too much.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion, and I congratulate the Economy Committee on producing the report. It is an exceptionally important issue. I also thank the individuals, academics, organisations and businesses that helped to provide the broad scope of views contained in the report. My Department has engaged with many hundreds of stakeholders in the development of the energy strategy to date, and it is encouraging to see consistency in the themes being raised in the report. I am struck by the positivity and ambition that come through from our stakeholders, and I would like to use today to discuss how the energy strategy can help to take advantage of the opportunities that are open to us.

Many in the Chamber have spoken of the importance of the energy strategy. I agree. Developing a new energy strategy is one of my top priorities. The strategy will set out the vision for our energy system to 2050, and a major programme of work is ongoing to deliver that. It is important to highlight that our strategy will be a living, breathing document. Once published, it will be regularly monitored, reviewed and updated to ensure that it is future-proof and able to respond to developments. Our future success will be built on many people working

together, and a collaborative approach has been taken to developing the strategy.

My Department's call for evidence received over 160 responses from a wide range of organisations and individuals. There were also a number of stakeholder events across Northern Ireland. Five working groups comprising more than 70 individuals from over 30 organisations have been established and are working on developing policy options. That is being supplemented by additional research and inputs from academics and international experts. In developing the strategy, my Department is therefore drawing on an extensive network from across government, the energy sector and a wide range of stakeholders. The report presented today by the Committee will be considered alongside the evidence that has been gathered to date. That will contribute towards the policy options and future scenarios being developed, which will form the basis of the public consultation in March 2021.

The report correctly highlights the need for a joined-up approach across government. I completely support that view, and I am delighted that the energy strategy is now providing that leadership. The energy strategy government stakeholders group brings together central government, local government and the Utility Regulator to ensure that the policies and programmes being taken forward at this time across government are aligned and joined up. There is also significant membership across the five working groups from central and local government, alongside industry and stakeholders, to ensure that the development of policy involves all those who have a role in delivering it from the outset. I welcome the fact that the Department for Infrastructure is leading on the transport theme in the energy strategy, which demonstrates that a cross-departmental approach is being taken. I want this to be a true, Executive-wide energy strategy, and that is reflected in our approach.

I agree and recognise that there is a need for clear and ambitious targets. We continue to work within the context of net zero emissions by 2050. That will guide the focus of the strategy. I am also working closely with the Environment Minister to ensure that any future targets on emissions reductions will be reflected in the energy strategy. The Committee Chair referred to the need for measurable targets. That is a key part of the ongoing work. I have already made a strong statement on my ambition for the strategy to contain a target of at least 70% of our electricity consumption to come from renewable sources by 2030, which is one of

those immediate actions that the Green Party leader referred to in her contribution. That provides a clear signal to the industry and wider stakeholders to allow them to begin to plan investment now in advance of the strategy being published.

However, if we are going to meet ambitious targets that will be in an energy strategy, the Executive will need to reflect it as one of their top priorities. I expect to see a prominent role for the energy strategy in addressing climate change and growing a green economy in a new Programme for Government. We will also need to ensure that the ambition within a new energy strategy is backed up by funding to reflect its importance for society, the economy and consumers. There are many steps that we will need to take to decarbonise energy, but our first priority has to be energy efficiency. I welcome the fact that this has been identified as a priority in the report. Energy efficiency can play a vital role in driving down emissions, helping to tackle fuel poverty and providing positive health outcomes. Energy efficiency and retrofitting are also widely being recognised as an important policy lever for green economic recovery, with significant potential for job creation going forward. It reassures me to see that many of the report's findings align closely with the work currently being taken forward to develop policy options in that area.

We will need to look at ways to decarbonise heat, power and transport. Our success at achieving and exceeding 40% renewable electricity targets demonstrates what we can achieve with a clear target and supporting policies. Our renewables base is a fantastic asset to have, particularly as the electrification of heat and transport will feature in our future energy mix. I see a clean, indigenous renewables base being key to our future energy mix. Every kilowatt-hour of energy that we generate from indigenous renewables is a kilowatt-hour that we are not importing fossil fuels. However, I am also clear that there is no single solution, and we will need to deploy a range of technologies and approaches and make use of our other assets, such as our agriculture base and modern gas infrastructure. The options consultation in March 2021 will outline short-term, low-regret options, as well as the long-term potential scenarios that we can achieve our aims.

I want to specifically highlight the crucial role of consumers in this energy transition. Consumers are at the heart of the strategy and will be involved in its development and implementation. We need to enable those consumers who want to be active in generating

and trading energy while also protecting others, particularly the most vulnerable.

We need to rethink our relationship with consumers and make that a two-way engagement with the energy sector that brings citizens on the journey with us. The provision of a one-stop shop to provide information, advice and support to consumers came through strongly in our call for evidence. My officials are looking into options for a single delivery body as part of the strategy development.

4.45 pm

Costs are, of course, key for consumers. A long-term energy system based around clean, indigenous renewables that makes use of our abundant natural resources can be cheaper, but there will be investments, with associated costs, along the way. That is why an evidence-based approach is being taken to the development of an energy strategy, to identify the most cost-effective options for domestic and business consumers.

I also want to use the energy strategy to grow a green economy. When I published the medium-term plan for rebuilding a stronger economy in June 2020, which has been referred to in the Chamber today, I identified clean energy as a priority for future investment. We currently have a low-carbon, renewable energy economy made up of 3,500 businesses, around 5,400 jobs and £270 million of exports. It could be so much larger. In the context of our response to COVID, there are real opportunities for economic recovery through decarbonising energy as part of growing the green economy across Northern Ireland. I see those opportunities to lead the way in green hydrogen production and to have a world-class manufacturing base contributing to supply chains for, for example, offshore wind, hydrogen buses and electrolyzers; innovative pilot projects in new energy technologies that can be scaled up and deployed across the world; and significant capital investment in buildings and the new infrastructure needed to generate and distribute low-carbon energy. I also see opportunities for energy entrepreneurs and business start-ups to develop skills in green energy technologies, low-carbon buildings and transport.

I am excited by the developments in the hydrogen economy to date. There is a range of potential projects that can showcase our ability to develop cutting-edge hydrogen technology in Northern Ireland. That was mentioned by Kellie Armstrong and Paul Frew in particular. I am

delighted to have been able to provide funding to Northern Ireland Water to trial an innovative commercial-sized electrolyser as part of its waste water treatment works.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: Yes.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her remarks. She will be aware, as will anybody who has visited one of Northern Ireland Water's waste water treatment plants in particular, that many of them were built with or provided with anaerobic digesters that, owing to Northern Ireland Water's contracting arrangements, they have never been able to use and have never been able to use for renewable energy.

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of a number of problems that are associated with the energy sector. What I want us to focus on, however, is the potential going forward. This is an exciting new development in the field of hydrogen energy, and, if we can make it work, not only will we save for Northern Ireland Water but we will be at the cutting edge of how to take the sector forward.

The Northern Ireland Water trial could be part of a portfolio of projects that leads to a real stimulus to grow a local, world-leading hydrogen economy. There has also been reference made in the Chamber today to the work of Wrightbus and the need for that hydrogen hub at Ballymena. I have met colleagues there on a number of occasions. I assure the House that we are exploring the issue. I am also exploring the potential for further funding from central government for that.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way and for the interest that she has shown in that issue. Wrightbus is in my constituency of North Antrim. Can she assure the House that she is aware of the concerns raised by the general manager, Buta Atwal, and Jo Bamford, who presented to the Infrastructure Committee a couple of weeks ago, and their frustration over the lack of progress? They are businessmen. They work in a business environment. They do not, thankfully, work at the pace worked at in this Building or in any other bureaucracy. Can you assure us that there is a degree of haste in trying to bring forward some of those schemes?

Mrs Dodds: I would, of course, like to see the schemes come forward at pace. I received the latest submission from Wrightbus just last week, and I have asked Invest Northern Ireland to look at it with Wrightbus. These are exciting

opportunities for Northern Ireland. We have also done some work with the local council to see whether we can have a hydrogen academy on the site, as we believe that that will grow the skills base for Northern Ireland to become a leading-edge contributor in that sector of the economy.

To conclude, I welcome the report by the Economy Committee and the opportunity afforded to me to respond to today's motion. I am excited by the opportunities that will come through a new energy strategy. The report is a welcome addition to the evidence that has already been gathered. I look forward to the publication of the options and the consultation next March, so that we can take this forward and lay down a road map for Northern Ireland's energy needs into the future.

Ms McLaughlin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I am delighted to wind up on behalf of the Economy Committee today's extremely important debate. As the Chair and other Committee members have indicated, we are keen to engage with the Minister to ensure that Members' and stakeholders' views on the shape of the new energy strategy are acted on. I thank the Minister and all the Members who contributed for their participation today. I also thank the many stakeholders who contributed their views to the Committee's special report, as well as the Committee team for its work behind the scenes.

The forthcoming energy strategy is a key part of our interlocking network of policies. It will help us to bring our economy into recovery and to build it back better than before. The energy strategy will take us decades into the future and will be a key determinant of how we respond to the climate emergency, as well as creating thousands of new jobs in related sectors.

As my party's economy and energy spokesperson, I will now speak on behalf of the SDLP. Today, my party launched an energy policy that is radical, exciting and forward-looking. Northern Ireland can be a world leader in restructuring the energy market to eliminate carbon emissions. We have the right weather conditions and geography to take advantage of the necessity to reform the energy market through wind, geothermal and tidal power, as well as having a role for solar and hydro. Not only can we be self-sufficient in electricity production, but we can use the surplus energy to become global leaders in the essential new technologies of battery storage and green hydrogen.

Northern Ireland has academic researchers and businesses engaged in developing those technologies, promising jobs and wealth for our society. Although we are still blighted by the COVID-19 crisis, it is essential that we consider our economic and social recovery. Investing in green infrastructure provides the basis for future economic growth and jobs in the near term. That is why we want to fast-track investment in electricity and broadband.

We have to move and move quickly. Northern Ireland, particularly my city of Derry, has a serious problem with air pollution that is literally killing hundreds of people prematurely every year. Air pollution is recognised as a major factor in COVID-19 mortality. As well as moving ahead with electric cars and hydrogen-powered buses and trucks, we must act against the burning of coal and wood, promoting instead clean energy sources. Those can also combat fuel poverty, given that coal is an inefficient and expensive means of home heating. We must make progress on the green new deal to bring our housing stock up to the highest standards of energy efficiency and decentralised renewable energy generation. Those policies would create substantial numbers of new jobs, as well as cutting our carbon emissions.

The motion is timely, and I am delighted at the level of debate and the contributions made by Members across the House. There were high levels of synergy around key areas, and I will now reflect the contributions.

Gordon Dunne rightly stressed the importance of energy affordability and security of supply. As well as those key themes, he highlighted the challenges related to weak infrastructure. He said that the gas networks need to be expanded and spoke of a need for a mix of energy sources. He highlighted the opportunities in hydrogen energy and the importance of ensuring that there is a fit-for-purpose energy strategy.

Pat Catney welcomed the cross-party support for bringing together an ambitious energy strategy. The growth of renewables in Northern Ireland is to be applauded, and that success augurs well for the future. He said that targets must be followed by good incentive schemes to support consumer engagement. Pat also mentioned that a lot will be reliant on behavioural changes in communities, and that shift will be important.

Steve Aiken talked about his previous role in the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, in which he outlined the barriers for Northern Ireland in relation to energy. He spoke about

monopolies the role of the electricity regulator and whether the Department for the Economy is fit for purpose, on the basis of previous renewables schemes. He also spoke about lack of ambition. We need to stretch ourselves and be more ambitious. He emphasised that we should be recognised as leaders in the energy sector. He spoke in depth about biogas and our biogas surplus but said that we have planning challenges. I agree with him that about that and that we need to be more ambitious. He said that we should look to realising some of our ambitions by 2035.

Kellie Armstrong welcomed the report and called for an evidence-based approach. She said that we could and should become world leaders, and that was a common theme among Members. She endorsed the points made by Mr Aiken. She warned against departmental silos, and that was another theme that many Members raised. She said that the green new deal needs to be interconnected and that there is a need to develop a skills base, which, I know, the Minister is supporting and championing in order to deliver for our economy. She talked about the important part played by the housing stock and the need to look at whether there is adequate investment in heat and light for homes, particularly in the rental sector. Our social housing stock is very good, but our rental sector can have poor energy usage and high energy costs. Kellie also talked about high private car dependency in Northern Ireland, the need to transition to public transport and how we have fallen back on that a little because of COVID-19.

Paul Frew welcomed the report. He said that the big issue facing us is the high cost, particularly for industrial users. That is close to my heart. We are not competitive when it comes to energy costs for our manufacturing sector, so any energy strategy must address that. He spoke of his constituency, Wrightbus and hydrogen development. Close to Mr Frew's heart, as always, was the system operator, and he talked in depth about that and the transparency required in the relationship between SONI and EirGrid. He said that, no matter what we do, if we do not get that right, there will be poor outcomes. He said that we needed to be sure that the system operator functions properly and is fit for purpose. I hope he is happy that I have reflected exactly what he said.

Philip McGuigan discussed the energy strategy in a global context and spoke of the need for radical climate action.

He also pointed out that Northern Ireland does not have a climate Act, unlike the other three nations in the United Kingdom, and that we needed to act on that very quickly. He spoke in depth about a just transition — it was the key theme of his address — and outlined the health benefits of decarbonisation. He was also very much aware of the need to rural proof any kind of energy strategy that comes along and to make sure that there is an all-island approach to energy within this small island.

5.00 pm

Gary Middleton welcomed the wide engagement in bringing together the report. He said that it was an important discussion and talked about there being no time to stand still. He also emphasised the need for cross-departmental working — again, no silos. Fuel poverty was highlighted in his address, as well, as was the fact that the benefit to consumers was very important for business and domestic consumers.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is nearly up.

Ms McLaughlin: Right.

He said that more investment was required in the electricity grid.

John O'Dowd said that the importance of energy is growing each time that the issue is discussed. He discussed the cost of energy transition and the fact that tackling climate change should be an enormous economic driver.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: I say sorry to the Members whose comments I have not reflected. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the special report of the Committee for the Economy on considerations for the forthcoming energy strategy; supports the development of an ambitious, target-driven energy strategy that will decarbonise the energy sector by 2050 while minimising the cost to the consumer; and recognises the strategy's potential to boost our

economic, health and social well-being into the future.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two, please.

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

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Order 10(3A)

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 23 November 2020 be extended to no later than 7:30pm. — [Mr O'Dowd.]

Committee Business

Health: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Health and Social Care (HSC) services, staff and patients; further recognises the impact on the physical and mental well-being of staff, patients and the public; acknowledges that restrictions are a consequence of the inability to suppress transmission rates; urges and encourages every member of the public to exercise individual responsibility by adhering to guidance, washing hands thoroughly and regularly, maintaining social distance and wearing face coverings; further acknowledges recent progress and commitments from the Minister of Health to increase testing and contact-tracing capacity; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a robust, scaled-up find, test, trace, isolate and support (FTTIS) strategy based on international best practice as part of a wider Executive strategy to help avoid a cycle of lockdowns and the particular negative impacts on mental health and well-being.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow two and a half

hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Gildernew: The Committee for Health tabled this motion for a number of reasons. It is to mark and acknowledge the loss suffered by so many and the extraordinary dedication and service of our Health and Social Care staff; to encourage each of us to recommit, on a personal level, to do our utmost to bring down transmission; to acknowledge the progress made since February; and, importantly, to create a vehicle for constructive discussion on how best we can now move forward, given the difficult situation in which we find ourselves once again in terms of cases, hospital capacity and the resulting socio-economic restrictions that are impacting so heavily on so many.

Since the early days of the pandemic, the Committee has dedicated most of its meeting time to considering and responding to issues connected with this health crisis and, particularly, hearing from and about the most vulnerable groups in our community.

Some of our first sessions focused on care homes and their urgent efforts to cope, the fear and confusion around an early lack of PPE, staff shortages and new and changing advice. The Committee heard about the significant impact on children, particularly those on the at-risk register or in care, as visiting became more difficult and children were out of sight of those adults who normally helped to teach and to care for them. In recent months, while hearing positive news about progress, we have also heard about staff exhaustion and stress across the system, particularly given pre-existing workforce shortages. What has also clearly come across is staff dedication and their continuing readiness to go beyond what we should reasonably ask of them.

The Committee has welcomed regular engagement with the Minister and senior officials, and would readily acknowledge that we are in a totally different place now compared with February. Testing has increased considerably, and contact tracing has been established, is public health-led and supported by an app with international and cross-border interoperability. The workforce appeal has brought significant interest and staff back to the front line, and, for that, we will always be grateful.

Given the high numbers of asymptomatic cases identified through regular staff testing in care

homes, we had asked about scaling up wider testing of all Health and Social Care staff. I am sure that Members will welcome the Minister's recent announcement to introduce mass testing.

While the focus of the motion is on scaling up the initiatives that will reduce the need for lockdown measures, it, rightly, reminds us of the role that each and every one of us can play and the impact that our decisions and behaviour can have on transmission. I urge everyone, once again, to wash hands regularly and well, wear a face covering, observe the 2-metre social-distancing rule and cooperate fully with the contact tracers.

Having acknowledged that progress and recognised the role and responsibility of individuals, it is necessary and important to ask this: given our circumstances, how do we still differ from the countries that have had the most success in containing this highly infectious virus? What more can we do to avert or mitigate the need for restrictions in advance of a vaccine? I emphasise that the Committee is putting forward those questions for consideration rather than providing definitive answers on those matters. While differences in testing and tracing might primarily be questions of degree, when it comes to isolation and support, wider differences can be seen. The issues with testing remain the scale and timeliness of getting a result, given what we are seeing internationally in mass and rapid testing, which I know that the Minister is looking into. Mass testing will be particularly important for Health and Social Care and key workers, such as public transport staff, on a regular and ongoing basis.

There are differences of scale in and approach to contact tracing that we could explore. Back in May, Germany had a target of five contact tracers for every 20,000 people, which equates to around 450 here in the North. Other sources indicate that even higher levels may be desirable or necessary in that context. However, by late October, we had only 88 full-time equivalent staff, with more being recruitment. That demonstrates that we still have some way to go. The World Health Organization and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control have tools for advising on workforce requirements, depending on a range of variables. It would be useful to hear from the Minister whether or how such tools have been used, to what effect and whether or when we will reach those recommended levels.

Effective self-isolation is, clearly, key to stopping transmission. Committee members

have been contacted by individuals who were unable to isolate effectively in their home due to sharing bathroom and bedroom facilities. Given the infectiousness of the disease, sending a COVID-19-positive person home to isolate in such circumstances creates a very high risk of onward transmission in the home. Again, while no support was expressed for any type of mandatory use of dedicated isolation facilities, it is clear that domestic transmission in households remains an issue. Could isolation facilities be explored as a means of addressing that, particularly for larger households and those in multigenerational families or high multiple-occupancy housing or for those with vulnerable family members? Other countries, including New Zealand, requisitioned hotel facilities for isolation purposes or made available dedicated health facilities to support that.

Although the support payments that were introduced here are very welcome, we must consider the level of payments and support versus the loss to individuals due to self-isolation. We know that those in low-paid work are less likely to be able to work from home, more likely to contract the virus and more likely to lose out financially if they have to self-isolate. It is crucial that we address that and communicate clearly as well as deliver effective support to those who need it most.

In terms of the wider Executive, the Committee appreciates that no single element of the motion can defeat COVID-19. It is true to state that the strategy and response to COVID-19 is only as strong as its weakest component. Chains of transmission of COVID-19 can be effectively disrupted only with properly planned, resourced and functioning chains of suppression. We cannot rely on restrictions indefinitely, nor can individuals stop transmission on their own. However, with individuals playing their part on hands, face and space, an effective and well-resourced find, test, trace, isolate and support strategy still holds out the best hope for us to escape or reduce a cycle of lockdowns and ease the pressure on the health and social care system in the context of the wider Executive strategy to support those who are impacted across society.

I acknowledge the collegiate work that has been undertaken by the Committee, including in drafting the motion. It remains committed to providing constructive input based on continuous engagement with constituents and stakeholders. I also acknowledge the frequent engagement with the Minister. He carries a heavy burden on our behalf with integrity and dedication. I trust that he views our scrutiny and

advice in the spirit in which they are offered, and I wish him and his Executive colleagues well as they lead us through the days and weeks ahead.

5.15 pm

With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will make a few remarks in my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. This motion was agreed at the Health Committee through consensus, and I thank each and every member for that. The benefits of an agreed message, strategy and approach go a long way in effectively tackling the spread and damage of this virus. It helps to protect lives, jobs and our fragile health service.

A new strategy from the Department of Health, which is central to a wider Executive strategy, must place public health as a driving force to avoid further lockdowns and all the negatives that are associated with that. We cannot get sidetracked by attempting to make a pitch that is perfect. We do not have time for that, frankly, but we need to demonstrate and deliver the doable. This means breaking the chains of transmission by finding the virus even where it does not show signs or symptoms. It means increasing testing capacity and increasing the speed at which we get results to people. It means increasing the capacity and effectiveness of contact tracing and ensuring that those who have to self-isolate do so and are fully supported in that.

The current departmental strategy, test, trace, protect, dates from 27 May. It talks about needing an effective strategy to suppress the virus until an effective vaccine arrives. However, in elements, it falls short of a full FTTIS strategy. We are now, for example, on to our twenty-second amendment to international travel restrictions, yet travel restrictions are not mentioned in the overall strategy. I recognise that there are parts of a wider strategy that we need other Departments to deliver and lead on, but it needs to be a public health-focused strategy to protect health services and the economy. This is how health and social care staff are supported, with childcare or adequate PPE, so that they can carry out vital services. It is also how they rely on health and social care services. It is vital, in my view, that any strategy or response from the Executive takes account of how their actions and inactions impact on everyday lives.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry. The Member's time is up.

Mr Gildernew: More importantly, I support the motion because it is the best way to tackle this deadly virus.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Looking around the Chamber, I see many more Members than I have on my list. I will read the names that are on my list. If you want to participate and are not on the list, please rise in your place. I have Mr Buckley, Mr McGrath, Mr Chambers, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Flynn, Mr Sheehan, Mr McNulty, Mrs Kelly, Ms Bailey and Mr Carroll. Pam Cameron is to make the winding-up speech. If anyone is not on that list but wishes to participate, please stand in your place. I see that Mr Nesbitt is standing in his place.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Committee for agreeing this motion, and I am happy to add my support to it.

Plenty of accusations have been made in the House of political point-scoring, from whatever side of the argument or debate, on how best to approach COVID. Let us approach this in the spirit of the Chamber being a safe place, as I believe it should be, to debate legitimately held views and alternative ways of approaching COVID. This is not a political issue, but it is personal. I imagine that it is personal for every single Member. Much focus has been directed at the economic effects, but the Principal Deputy Speaker knows my sincerely held beliefs about the effects of lockdown not only on the economy but on the health service.

Earlier, the Health Minister's statement referred to COVID as the one common enemy. I am sorry to say that that is not true. The common enemies affecting the health service still exist: cancer, cardiac illness, poverty, children at risk, domestic violence and suicide; and I could go on. There is a plethora of issues, and the Committee is all too aware of the effects that the current restrictions and lockdown have on these specific sectors.

Earlier, I mentioned a letter that I received from a GP operating in the north Antrim area. A part of it merits quotation:

"What I am most concerned about is the fact that our beloved NHS is becoming nothing more than a national COVID service. We are turning away other patients and not treating them because of COVID. Our red-flag waiting times for the most common cancer diagnoses in Northern Ireland in the Northern Trust are now in excess of six months."

That is six months before people with a potential cancer diagnosis are being seen by a specialist.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way on that point. It is interesting to note that he refers to a GP from north Antrim. Regardless of where the GP is from, recent reports in the media suggest that some GPs and hospital doctors are concerned about coming forward and giving their opinion because of a fear of being disciplined.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his point. There is no doubt that there are differences of opinion among our health professionals. Staff on the front line are worried about the damaging impacts that some lockdown situations have caused. The impact of lockdown measures on health and social care services has had a profound and serious impact on the detection and treatment of routine illnesses.

Between 1 March and 12 September, the number of patients found to have cancer was 23% lower than the average for the previous two years. Urgent suspected cancer referrals dropped by more than 50%. It is a particular concern that people with suspected lung cancer symptoms delayed going to their GPs because the symptoms are so similar to those of COVID. There is a fear there. An extra 10,000 people were waiting for a diagnostic test in June in comparison to the same month last year. Research by the British Heart Foundation found that 41% had a planned test, surgery or procedure postponed during the UK lockdown. Between March and October, almost 13,000 elective appointments throughout the trusts were cancelled.

The tragic reality is that, so far in 2020, cancer deaths are increasing. Sadly, the number of suicides is increasing as well. COVID and non-COVID patients alike deserve a continuity of care, and they need certainty about their pathways to treatment or surgery. There is a genuine concern about the impact that reallocating some staff to fight COVID will have on routine services, including elective care and red-flag surgery, long after this crisis has subsided.

We approach these difficult decisions with the caveat that we know there is no easy answer. However, there needs to be a strategic assessment of the impact this will have on other health services. We are immensely grateful for

the efforts being made by our NHS and care staff in the most difficult of circumstances. Many staff are personally aggrieved at having to down tools to redirect their time to COVID pressures. We owe it to them, collectively as a House — and, indeed, to the Minister — to urgently work on workforce planning and give them the additional support and resource that is needed to reduce in-work pressures and maximise the capacity of our health service. I truly believe that we need to learn to coexist with the virus, and increasing the capacity in our health service and ramping up the test-and-trace service is vital for that. We need to build resilience and health service capacity and roll out the mass testing for NHS and care staff. We know that, while the restrictions can help reduce the R rate, the virus is still getting through.

In closing, Minister Swann, I want you to succeed in your job. I want this country to succeed in its approach and fight against COVID, but it will not succeed if we continue on a path that prioritises COVID over other illnesses. We only need to look at cancer, heart disease, strokes, mental health and children at risk.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buckley: We want you to succeed, but we do not want you to be the Minister who is responsible for excess deaths —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buckley: — because of failed treatment on other issues.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure it was not the Member's intention to offend or malign the Minister. However, I was uncomfortable with the words "that is not true" being directed at the Minister. I suspect the Member had no intention of implying that the Minister was being untruthful, but I suggest that he takes this opportunity to say that he was mistaken, or some other form of words. I did not feel comfortable with that.

Mr Buckley: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I will apologise if that is how that sounded, but it certainly was not the intention. I meant that, in the general thrust of the debate, we have to look at other serious illnesses, not just COVID. I know that the Minister has concerns about that as well, as he has said at meetings of the Health Committee.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. There can be no doubt that our healthcare system has been rocked as a result of COVID-19, and I pay tribute to the countless numbers of healthcare staff who have gone above and beyond the call of duty in their work. In these past months, our healthcare staff have worked from morning to night and have often had to put family to the side in their service of caring. They have been pushed to their breaking point, however, and the message that I am hearing loud and clear is that we do not know how much left they have to give.

A good start for a debate on another day would perhaps be how we remunerate our healthcare staff for what they have done and what they continue to do in their work. Another might be to ask the management of various trusts to give consideration to the conditions that our staff are having to work in. As one nurse articulated to me, they have to go out to their car to get a cup of tea, because they are not allowed one anywhere within the hospital. I know of a member of staff who has to get changed at the side of the road in a car park because she has nowhere else to don her PPE. Those are the very real stories of life in the healthcare sector during COVID.

Furthermore, significant stress and pressure is being felt by our local businesses. Those family-run institutions are the lifeblood of our local economy, and we saw at the start of the pandemic that local businesses were able to avail themselves of grants to keep afloat. As time has progressed, however, the cracks have begun to show in the way in which we do things, and we have only to reflect on what we are hearing in our constituency offices, where businesses and individuals are seeking clarity on the restrictions and the guidelines, to understand that the message is not getting across.

The public are asking why. Why is it that our hospitalisation figures continue to rise, no matter what we seem to do? Where is the flaw in the plan? Where is the weak link? We are about to enter a fortnight of intense and enhanced restrictions, and this is all being done to flatten the curve to protect our healthcare system from being overwhelmed and to save lives. At this point, however, we should have been halfway through those restrictions, were it not for the display of division that we witnessed two weeks ago. Where previously this House spoke as one, with a sense of unity and cohesion of purpose, there is now division.

That division is not one that has its roots in a five-party Executive. Rather, it is a division within the DUP: a deep-seated division that has existed longer than COVID. What does it say about the party that, in the middle of a worldwide pandemic, when the Executive met to discuss new restrictions and to listen to our Health Minister and expert scientific and medical advice, it chose to deploy a cross-community vote and veto such advice? If we are looking for a full range of the negative impacts of COVID, the disgraceful behaviour of some on our Executive and the impact of that on our health service, together with the reputational damage done to MLAs in this place, should surely be added to that list. Less than a week later, a bit of a U-turn was pulled, and suddenly the party wanted enhanced measures to be brought in again for a fortnight, but only after a week of restrictions being relaxed. That led directly to the scenes that we saw in Belfast city centre yesterday afternoon, which were beamed all around these islands and served as an embarrassment.

An issue that I want to talk about as being a negative impact of COVID is that of mental health. Mental health figures in the North are absolutely shocking at present, and the stories that I and, I am sure, many others have heard of members of the public being passed from service to service and from one waiting list to another would break your heart. What about our young people, who have suffered as a result of COVID, not just in their education but in their sense of social interaction? Representatives of other parties and I met the Youth Forum last Thursday night. All the parties were represented except one, and I urge the Members opposite to send a representative to be part of the political champions' panel and to listen to the voices of young people, because they can articulate very clearly to us how COVID is impacting on them, and it would be good to hear from them. The Youth Forum told us that three quarters of the 2,500 people surveyed said that they have no faith in the leadership shown by our Government; three quarters said that their mental health has got worse during the pandemic; and nearly 90% said that they feel that they are not being listened to.

5.30 pm

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes, please.

Mr Clarke: If nothing else, it will give you the benefit of an extra minute. Whilst you are on

your feet bashing this party, would you like to bash your own party in relation to the lack of funding that Belfast International Airport has got from your party? Five thousand people are employed there, and I am sure that for many of them their mental health is affected greatly by knowing that that airport is the only one that has had to have closures over the COVID-19 period. Ask your Minister what she has done to support them and their mental health.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McGrath: I am sure that our Minister will help, and she will not take as long as many other Ministers have to get programmes out through the door to help people. I believe that part B is still waiting to be delivered, some five weeks after businesses were asked to close, so let us help everybody and let us all work together.

Let this be our wake-up call. The voices from the past have had their say; it is the voices of the present and the future that are crying out for action and demand genuine leadership. We will find a way through this if we take stock of where we are and see what we have got wrong, if we speak as one with a real sense of unity and find again that cohesion of purpose so that, when a vaccine appears, we will emerge from the shadow of COVID-19 as one.

Mr Chambers: The motion calls on the Assembly to recognise the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on many sections of society. It is an easy call to acknowledge. The number of deaths from this dreadful virus is creeping towards the 1,000 figure, and thousands of our fellow citizens have fallen victim to the serious illness that the virus produces. Many recover quickly, but some require hospitalisation and others need intensive ICU care as their illness becomes life-threatening. A worrying aspect for those who contract the virus is that the debilitating symptoms can persist and affect their quality of life. If we did not have the committed body of people that we have working in our NHS and social care sector, the death count would be much higher.

The other victims of the pandemic are those who have either lost their job or those on furlough who are worrying whether they will still have a job at the end of all this. The self-employed and the small and large entrepreneurs who create and provide employment have also suffered. Many will have put every penny that they have into their

business, and many will have handed over the deeds of their family home to secure borrowing from their bank.

Just as the Minister of Health is battling round the clock, along with the entire staff of the NHS and social care sectors to protect and save lives, there is a responsibility on the Economy Minister to devise schemes that can be deployed in a timely fashion to help those who stare financial ruin in the face. Promises and media announcements do not cut it for those people. We hear too many stories of people being left behind. Many have not received a penny of support from the Executive to date. The Economy Minister needs to address that at once: promises do not pay bills.

The motion promotes the importance of adhering to current advice and guidance in relation to personal hygiene and the wearing of face coverings. Regrettably, those simple measures have been undermined on occasion, among the most prominent being the many breaches at the funeral of Mr Bobby Storey. Newspaper revelations that broke over the weekend of emails that allegedly went out from Sinn Féin in regard to that funeral have added to the sense of outrage of those who have had to bury loved ones in accordance with the regulations.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Would he agree that, while we can debate all night what might be the best set of actions or policies, there is no debate that, sometimes, some actions are simply wrong.

Mr Chambers: I entirely agree with that statement.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Chambers: Thank you. Elected MPs who should know better have openly rubbished the concept of face coverings. A member of the Executive responsible for making collective decisions has broken ranks on more than one occasion to undermine the vital messages that the Executive are trying to promote. That, regrettably, does nothing to instil public confidence in that message.

The motion also acknowledges recent progress on test, trace and protect measures. From regularly speaking to the Minister about the issue, I am aware that the targets for index cases and close contact are both being widely surpassed. The motion also

"calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a robust, scaled-up find, test, trace, isolate and support (FTTIS) strategy, based on international best practice."

Recent announcements and innovative programmes should give us all confidence that the Minister will deliver and, indeed, is delivering on a scaled-up scheme. However, it is also important to realise that no TTP service can successfully suppress transmission when community transmission is at a high level. For example, I remember hearing, a few weeks ago, that the system in Germany, which is widely considered to be the best in Europe, was unable to cope due to infection levels that were far lower than those that we were experiencing. Therefore, while it is the easiest thing in the world to grab a headline by blaming testing or contact tracing, the reality is that the experts and scientists are clear that TTP is not a silver bullet to suppress high levels of community transmission.

The suggestion that not enough work was done in the health service to prepare for the second wave is an insult to the clinicians and staff across the trusts who worked so hard on the surge plans. It is also clear that some of the people criticising the surge planning are not aware of the surge plans or, if they are, have not read them. The limiting factor is staffing, but the serious staff shortages in our health service existed long before COVID, and it is an issue with which a series of previous Ministers failed to get to grips. That is the main reason that there are almost 2,000 vacancies across nursing and midwifery alone.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Chambers: No.

Those who ask for increased staffing do not realise that it takes years to train a specialist nurse or doctor. Equally, the insinuation from some political quarters that all non-COVID care is being sacrificed is simply not true. The reality is that we have a limited pool of HSC capacity. When looking at the dashboard, one could be led to think that there are around 3,500 general hospital beds across Northern Ireland, but the reality is that many are dedicated to specialities such as stroke, cardiology and maternity. Those beds will be required, pandemic or no pandemic. There are, therefore, approximately 1,600 general medical beds, which means that, suddenly, 450 COVID inpatients become a significant pressure on our medical beds. Whilst I applaud the Minister for committing to maintaining as many non-COVID services as possible, we must realise that the best way to

protect non-COVID care is to reduce the spread of the virus and the pressure that it subsequently places on our already overstretched health service.

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to support the motion, naturally. I start by thanking those who work in the contact-tracing service and the Public Health Agency for all of their efforts to this point in the pandemic. I also place on record my sympathies to the families who have been bereaved by this horrendous virus.

While the motion rightly refers to some advances that have been made in the contact-tracing services over the current close-down period, I remain concerned that they are still not sufficiently resourcing the system to do all that it promises to do. There are significant gaps in what we are doing in each of the find, test, trace, isolate and support elements, and they need to be filled urgently.

One purpose of contact tracing — the one that is simplest to explain clearly, perhaps — is that it traces the contacts of those who are affected and asks them to remain at home. The aim is to ensure that people who may have been infected by others restrict their movements so as to break chains of infection and, thus, slow and reduce the spread of the virus. However, it has two other purposes. One is to find people and ensure that they receive treatment early. That remains a flaw in our testing system, because it remains too heavily biased towards people with symptoms, when peak infectiousness is usually before symptoms appear. Another purpose of contact tracing, which is highly relevant, is that it is supposed to help us with epidemiology. However, we can see from the lack of information, including in response to some of my questions for written answer, that contact tracing has not told us enough about the behaviour of the virus in the context of Northern Ireland. We need to do more, particularly with regard to the latter purpose, so that we can target restrictions and drive down transmission much more efficiently, which is precisely what the motion says, and help limit the impact on health service workers and users.

Earlier today, the Health Minister provided information around the restrictions that have been imposed in relation to churches and gyms. I welcome that. Contact tracing needs to be more effective in identifying the actual source of infections and the risk associated with certain types of venue and behaviour. We must remember that most people who are infected do not affect anyone else, but a small minority of infected people infect a huge majority of those

who end up infected. They are the so-called superspreaders. Contact tracing needs to be able to tell us much more about them.

Let us make one thing clear: the health service does not close down because of lockdown; it closes down because transmission levels rise far too quickly. We need to get those transmission levels down. That means avoiding crowds, limiting contact and wearing face coverings appropriately. However, another reason transmission levels grew is that the "isolate" in test, trace and isolate was clearly not happening. We do not have figures in Northern Ireland for how many people actually self-isolated when they were asked to; there is no way to measure that compliance. However, the suggestion from King's College London and NHS research is that perhaps 80% of those asked to isolate after showing symptoms or having a positive test did not do so for the required time and close to 90% of contacts did not do so at all. Part of that was because the rules around how long people should isolate for and exactly what isolation means were unclear. Part of it was because of a lack of support for those who were isolating, as is mentioned in the motion. However, it has to be said that part of it was because not enough people were reached.

I wish to touch quickly on support. We often hear discussion of payments available to those who are self-isolating. Those are, of course, important, but money is not the only reason for someone not to self-isolate when they are asked to. Lack of social contact, fear of falling behind at work, lack of leisure activities or simply lack of clarity about why and how to self-isolate all play a role. Support has to go beyond finance, therefore. This is an area in which I am unconvinced that digital tracing, most obviously contacting people in the first instance by text rather than phone, really works. Contact tracing is about speaking to people and even building a relationship with them to ensure that they are adequately supported. That simply cannot be done on a relatively low budget with a relatively small staff team.

There is a clear need to reform all five aspects of find, test, trace, isolate and support. We have, in effect, just bought ourselves another two or three weeks in which to do that. I look forward to hearing some clear details on what reforms have been implemented and what reforms will now be implemented to ensure, as best we can, that the circuit remains broken from mid-December.

Ms Flynn: I support the motion. I will focus my remarks on a few important areas: one, the negative impact of the restrictions; two, the

need for an effective response in isolating; and, last but by no means least, the need to support people who have been affected by COVID and the restrictions. We have heard examples of the various ways in which people have been affected. It should act as a chilling reminder that many if not all of us who speak here tonight will know someone who has contracted COVID-19. I am sure that we all know someone who has been hospitalised with COVID-19. Sadly, many of us will know of someone who passed away as a result of COVID-19. That is just a microcosm of how the infection is spreading among the wider population outside this Building.

The virus is a threat to us all, but, as other Members have said, the restrictions can also have a serious negative impact through, for example, the loss of support networks or the closure of services, whether that be counselling support to help someone with their mental health or a long-awaited screening appointment for a physical health condition. I also cannot help think of the turmoil felt by those who are unable to see a loved one in a care home due to visiting restrictions. These are extremely emotional, personal and invasive issues that we are dealing with. At the same time, logical decisions must be made in an attempt to save lives. Therefore, the questions and scrutiny must focus on what strategy is in place to avoid the need for further restrictions and weeks of lockdown. It is better to fix a problem when it is small than to wait. Could we have had proposals and measures sooner to avoid lockdowns or stronger, more robust public health systems in place to give greater warning?

The key is to break the chains of transmission. That means reducing social contacts, and enabling and encouraging more people to stay at home and to self-isolate. I note the efforts of the Department for Communities on discretionary grants and the advice helpline for those self-isolating, and also the work of the Public Health Agency, the contact-tracing team and the mobile app. I got a notification to self-isolate due to being a close contact of someone who had tested positive. Thankfully, my results came back negative. However, throughout that period, all I received was a text message. No one called me to see how I was or to make sure that I was self-isolating, which is important for compliance.

5.45 pm

There is pressure on those who, financially, are living week to week or month to month. Their

worry is not entirely about catching the virus but about receiving the alert and what comes with that, and having to self-isolate for two weeks and the consequences of that for someone with children, who is in a low-paid job and may be struggling to put food on the table. I do not think that statutory sick pay goes far enough to encourage anyone to self-isolate and to help to break the chains in transmission, yet the lack of follow-up calls offering healthcare or financial support or enforcement does little to help.

My concern is not so much about increasing fines but about providing the means and reasons for the public to self-isolate, and for them to feel equipped to do so safely for themselves, their community and their future livelihoods. We need a new strategy that is health-led but that involves everyone and every Department in the Executive. It needs to recognise that the rampant spread of COVID-19 is still damaging, even with the emerging and hopeful news that a vaccine is close to being developed.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Unfortunately, the narrative around the pandemic has degenerated into a binary choice between those who favour restrictions and those who want to open up.

I am leaving aside the tinfoil hat brigade, the science deniers, the conspiracy theorists and the crackpots, who, unfortunately, seem to be given equal validity when debating this issue. The fact is that there is clear evidence that there is another option. Some countries have been able to keep their economies open and suppress the virus at the same time. That is what we should be aspiring to: the gold standard, not the bargain basement. That is how we should be thinking. There should be ambition and lateral thinking. Some people say, "These countries had previous experience of MERS and SARS", as if that is a negative. However, it is exactly that: they had experience. The experience is there, so let us learn from it. I am very disappointed that, when I question officials in the Committee and ask them if anyone in the Department had been in contact with any of the countries that have been able to keep their economy open and suppress the virus at the same time, the answer is, "No, we have not".

We have a number of weapons in our armoury to fight the virus. We cannot defeat it, but, hopefully, when the vaccine comes, we will be able to do that. In the meantime, we need to look to non-pharmaceutical options. Find, test, trace, isolate and support is the gold standard.

Why do we need to find? Depending on the research that you look at, between 50% and 66% of those who get the virus are asymptomatic. They are the most dangerous ones. They are out and about in society, unwittingly spreading the virus, so we need to trace them.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He has previously mentioned the need for test, trace and isolate. There have been reports that, in Scotland, a target of 2,000 contact tracers has been set, yet, for Northern Ireland, the last figure that we got was around 200. Does the Member agree that there needs to be a plan to scale up the service in Northern Ireland?

Mr Sheehan: Absolutely. I was going to come on to my experience of dealing with the PHA, which is responsible for the contact tracing. On 16 April, the chief executive told the Committee that 500 people were being trained to carry out contact tracing. She appeared at the Committee three weeks later, and when she was asked how that training was going, she tried to avoid the question, but when she was confronted with her own words from Hansard, she had to admit that she had spoken "out of turn".

She appeared again at the Committee on 15 October and said that there were 151 contact tracers. When she was asked to quantify that in full-time equivalents, she either could not or would not. She did not have the answer. It now transpires that there are, apparently, 88. At that time, we were getting nearly 1,000 positive cases a day. The ECDC says that, outside of a lockdown situation, each positive coronavirus case will produce between seven and 20 contacts. That amounts to between 7,000 and 20,000 contacts. How could 88 people do that? They could not. It is impossible. There is a lack of transparency and openness on this, because the PHA was out again saying that there are now 250 contact tracers. What does that mean in full-time equivalents? Somebody could be working part-time for six hours a week.

It was mentioned that Germany has a target for tracers per capita that equates to us having 250. If we benchmark with Wuhan in China, we will need 1,000. We certainly do not need 88. We need a high number of contact tracers to get out and find the people who are positive. They can then isolate, and we will not have to lock down the whole of society. It is that lack of ambition that frustrates and exasperates people, and it frustrates and exasperates people like me in the Committee when I am asking simple questions of the chief executive of the PHA, who is a highly paid official, and she cannot or will not answer them.

Let me say this, Minister: when it comes to rolling out the vaccine, I would like to see at least a skeleton strategy here within the next few weeks, because if it is left to the PHA, somebody will need to put a rocket up its backside or we will be talking here this time next year about a strategy to roll out a vaccine that could not be done because we did not have enough people to do it or we had this problem or that problem.

Those are the issues that we face. As the Minister said, rapid testing will not lead to a reduction in the short term if community transmission is high, and I agree with that. That is why we need to beef up substantially the number of contact tracers that we have, because if we can do rapid testing, it will throw up more positive cases, and we need more contact tracers to trace the people they have been in contact with.

A Cheann Comhairle, I got quite excited here today about this, but it exasperates me when there is a lack of ambition in the way that we are approaching it, and that needs to change.

Mr McNulty: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, as we all continue to endeavour to navigate a way through the uncharted waters that the pandemic presents and as we seek to get the virus under control.

The public are being asked to make significant and very difficult sacrifices. For the most part, they are complying, and they deserve enormous credit for their efforts. Whilst COVID-19 and the restrictions have undoubtedly impacted every aspect of our daily life, the toll on mental health is a huge concern. The increased number of constituents I am coming into contact with on a daily basis from every walk of life who are beside themselves with worry and fear as a result of the enormous challenges presented by the pandemic is scary.

We are now nearly nine months into living with, dealing with and trying to cope with the pandemic. COVID-19 has disrupted almost every aspect of life as we knew it. I welcome the Health Minister's statement on the ambition to give people hope. We do not know how long it will be until vaccines are available and deployed or until life returns to something approaching a semblance of normality, but, without hope, we have nothing.

Small physical, mental and emotional things, such as getting to the gym, offered an avenue of escape. Sadly, that has been removed, causing immense distress to many. I understand the steps that the Minister has

taken. They all focus on saving and protecting lives. However, I encourage the Minister to ensure that he explains the rationale behind every decision on each sector so that people and sectors clearly understand them.

We must be mindful that the restrictions of recent weeks, and those in the weeks to come, take place in the midst of the winter months, with longer and darker evenings. The isolation, loneliness, fear and worry that many have been experiencing, and will continue to experience, as a result of the lockdown restrictions on their way of life will be very painful and, potentially, detrimental to their mental health.

I feel particularly for those who are the most vulnerable. I feel for the elderly, people living alone and those already suffering from poor mental health. I feel for those who have lost their jobs or whose jobs are at risk. I feel for the elderly in nursing homes who have not seen family for so long. I feel for the business owners and the self-employed. I feel for the families and parents of children with special educational needs or complex needs. I feel for families who are coping with grief. This has been the most difficult year for them all.

I am concerned not only about the pandemic's current impact on the well-being of families, businesses and communities but about its longer-term consequences for mental health. Sadly, I believe that we will continue to see those consequences long after the pandemic has passed. We must all work to ensure that everything that can be done is done so that the mental health crisis that we have been experiencing here in the North since long before the pandemic even arrived does not escalate. In the months and years ahead, our mental health services, from counselling and therapy to crisis intervention, will be under immense pressure — greater pressure than ever. Therefore, I call on the Minister of Health to commit to ensuring that a world-class mental health service is provided here and to commit to providing for its funding. It will be needed more than ever in the coming months.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the inspirational NHS front-line staff, including those on the front line of mental health services, who work day after day under the most challenging of circumstances, often putting the health and well-being of others ahead of their own and, indeed, that of their families. I salute them all. Where would we be without them? We must do everything that we can to ensure that staff feel valued and to ensure that their mental health is protected at such a stressful time. I very much welcome the

steps that have been taken by the health and social care trusts and partners in recent months, including the development of a framework for leaders and managers to support staff well-being and the psychology helplines that are open to staff.

Despite all the present difficulties, we recognise that the restrictions and sacrifices are an unfortunate necessity if we are to get the virus under control. Whilst the recent news about vaccinations has given us all some hope, we still have some way to go, and I call on the public to dig deep and, as the Minister said earlier, to dig in and continue to adhere to the restrictions and guidelines. Only by acting together will we be able to beat the virus and return to life as we knew it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up, I am afraid.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I tried to wait for a nice juncture, a nice full stop, before I cut you off.

Mr Nesbitt: Who knew, at the start of the year, that we would need 20/20 vision to figure out the best way through this pandemic? Who knew, on 11 January, when we gathered in the Chamber to reform the Assembly and Executive that, come late November, we would be looking at a second lockdown? Who knew how difficult this would be? COVID-19 has given us a very sharp and unwelcome reminder of just how challenging it is to run a five-party coalition Government, but that, of course, is where we are.

6.00 pm

It has challenged all of us. With personal regret, I must acknowledge that some of us have come up short on occasion. It has challenged us and confused us. I welcome the Minister's reporting earlier that he and the First Minister and deputy First Minister are involved in talks about what we might call an "all-islands approach" to COVID over Christmas. That would be most welcome. The fact that the various jurisdictions are adopting multiple approaches surely goes to underline the fact that there are no right answers as such. What we have are options, many of which have significant upsides but all of which probably have downsides as well, so we follow the medical and scientific evidence. I thank Dr Michael McBride, Professor Ian Young and the Minister for so doing.

I acknowledge Mr Buckley's concern that the health service is turning into a COVID service at a cost to those with needs that relate to mental health, cancer and heart disease. However, I declare an interest here: in August, I had a procedure for heart disease. I do not believe that it was delayed by one hour, never mind a day, because of the focus on COVID-19 — nor, by the way, do I believe that I was fast-tracked because I am an MLA. The last that I heard about special treatment for MLAs was yesterday, when I was told that there is a restaurant chain that, when it finally reopens, will be open to everybody but Members of the Legislative Assembly, who, to quote a famous elected politician, can go and eat "where the sun don't shine".

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I am glad to see that he is back in the Chamber and in good health following that procedure. However, research by the British Heart Foundation has found that 41% of heart patients throughout the United Kingdom had a planned test or surgery postponed because of lockdown. Will the Member accept that, while it may have been the case that he got an appointment, for many others, sadly, that has not been the case?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Yes. I am not saying that there are not issues. However, I have been in the Chamber for eight and a half years. We have debated consistently that there is a problem of underfunding in the National Health Service in this country and that we need to transform care and implement Bengoa. It comes round again and again. The Minister is entirely aware of the need to do things differently and, therefore, better. I accept that there are issues and that some of the issues may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, but I am also saying that it is not all bleak. Some services have continued, and I am a lucky recipient of one of them.

The Member will know that I have campaigned on mental health since I arrived in the Chamber eight and a half years ago. Therefore, I know that the Minister has done more than most of his predecessors in that area. There has been the appointment already of an interim mental health champion. I have been on many a Zoom and virtual meeting with Professor Siobhan O'Neill, who keeps saying, "Do not judge me until you see what I have achieved at the end of

my term". I tell her that I have already judged her, because she has already brought something really useful to the table: positive energy. That is something that people who suffer from poor mental health really appreciate from somebody in a position of leadership, like Siobhan O'Neill.

I also welcome the fact that it appears that, in the spending review on Wednesday, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, will announce another £500 million of funding for mental health in England. If my rough maths is right, that means anything up to £15 million of a Barnett consequential. I hope that the Executive will ring-fence that for mental health services in Northern Ireland. The Chancellor apparently thinks that the additional money is needed particularly for young people in schools and for staff in the National Health Service, who are under the most unbelievable pressure. I do not know whether any other Members have spent a night in the emergency department of an acute hospital. The night that I did was a revelation. It was relentless demand met by unfailing professionalism and courtesy.

Mr Sheehan talked about a gold standard, and I agree with him. I also heard a colleague of his who is on the Executive say that we need to react to the pandemic by being agile and flexible, but sometimes I do not think that we have been agile and flexible enough, particularly on the economy.

I finish by wishing the Minister and health service staff well as we continue the fight against this deadly disease.

Mrs D Kelly: I listened carefully to the Committee Chair's appeal as he set out the agenda for the debate. He talked about being collaborative and about people working together, particularly on contact, trace and isolate. It seems to me from listening to other Members and, indeed, the news today that the biggest problem around contact is contacting the Sinn Féin leadership to answer the police investigation of why it did not follow the restrictions and the regulations that the Executive introduced to suppress the virus. Why it chose to disregard that message remains a question that only that party can answer. We on this side of the House lost two colleagues, yet we complied with the restrictions and regulations because we had a public responsibility to do so. I hope that my colleagues gave leadership to the wider public in that regard.

It is a huge issue. Let us not underestimate the loss of public confidence in the messaging on

dealing with the pandemic. Minister, you have my sincere sympathy and empathy as you seek to turn that around. There are not many on the Executive whom you can rely on to comply on an ongoing basis, and you are often let down by some of your ministerial colleagues and others.

The pandemic has put the spotlight on where the shortages in the health service have been for many years. There has been repeated underfunding and a failure by previous Executives to take tough decisions on the delivery of health and social care. In the past few days, the Royal College of Nursing has launched another campaign for fair pay for nurses and other healthcare workers. I, for one, very much support that campaign. We know how much money has been spent on agency nurses over many years. We know that, in the surge plans, we are reliant on agency nurses to help fill the gaps on wards when health service staff are moved across to the respiratory and COVID wards. That tells me that, if there is a proper salary and recompense in place, people are prepared to put in the extra hours. Nurses ask me, "Why can't they give some of that money to the people who are on the front line permanently, rather than it going repeatedly to agencies, which take their cut out of that?".

This is not the first time that I have raised the issue of workforce planning in the Department of Health. Of course, that cuts across to the Department for the Economy, which has responsibility for higher education. Earlier today, Minister, you talked about there being 300 additional nursing posts. That will not look at it. Have you given any thought to or considered discussing with the universities and the royal college whether there is a way in which the time taken to train nurses can be compressed into a shorter time than is currently the case? There is a need to look at how universities manage courses and provide training. As I have said before, there are higher education courses in the South of Ireland that enable people who perhaps do not have the academic qualifications that they need to get one of the highly sought after places at university to get there by another route. There is other work that can and should be done on that.

I will touch on mental health. I know that many people who use mental health services are not getting their face-to-face contact. I wonder about the management and supervision of some of those services. I know that staff have had to call with clients and that some clients, because they have, for example, a psychotic illness, have had to go to a clinic to get an injection. If, however, a client does not appear,

just how dedicated are some of the staff in going after them? Concerns have been expressed to me about the use of agencies. Agency workers do a great job, but there is a lack of continuity, and, therefore, a lack of accountability in following through on the service. From a service-user perspective, there are questions to be answered. Some older people are being asked to make contact via Zoom.

I know, Minister, that you like to get out on the ground, but I appeal to you to give people at the coalface an opportunity to talk to you or to someone on your team in a real way without fear of retribution —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mrs D Kelly: — for whatever they want to tell you.

Ms Bailey: We need to have a good look at ourselves. The five-party Executive system is not designed to manage crisis; it was a means to create a sense of stability and bring an end to violence. It was never meant to be a long-term solution, and we have lost sight of that. We see each party playing to its base and doing duck and cover to blame somebody when delivery fails. At the outset, we wrote civic society out of the process, and we are feeling that now. We are in a triple crisis, and I cannot see how our governance system will be able to manage a way through it. This is a health crisis and an economic crisis, and we have the climate crisis, with Brexit as the cherry on top. Now is the time when we need to engage with people, with business, with sectors, with ourselves across these islands north, south, east and west to begin to navigate our way through this and to build a stable system from which we can steer a path to the future.

We had a mental health crisis before COVID-19: we did not address it. We had a crisis in the NHS: we did not address it. Our high streets were in crisis before COVID-19: we did not address it. We had poverty before COVID-19, and we did not address it. As for economic crises, how many do you want? We had many before COVID-19, and we did not address them. The COVID-19 crisis is about much more than health. It is about all of the above rolled into one, and, after last week, with the stand-offs and U-turns, people have lost confidence and the advice coming to them is no longer making sense. They are not buying into it any more, so we need to do an awful lot to reach

out to people again, because people know that we are not all in this together.

When the Chief Medical Officer gives advice to the Health Minister, the Health Minister creates a set of recommendations and they are then blocked by a single party using a cross-community veto — an abuse of power and privilege during a pandemic — to stop that advice being carried out, we need to have a look at ourselves. Regulations are being announced to the media before they are announced to the Assembly, despite our setting up an Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response to deal with such situations. Moreover, they are being announced before the financial package is put in place to give people the assurances that this will be OK.

Wind turbine owners and Sinn Féin offices are receiving tens of thousands of pounds in payments while businesses have received nothing. People are broken and on their knees. Workers put on furlough, taken off furlough, made redundant, kept on zero-hour contracts. Low-paid workers, some valued as key or essential workers, cannot afford to stay at home and self-isolate if needs be. Sure, nobody is checking anyway. Care home deaths and infection rates are akin to what they were during the first lockdown, so what have we been doing since March? Payments to student nurses who are putting themselves at risk to step in and step up have been stopped while they are still being asked to do that. Why? Vital care staff are not being tested routinely, and those are some of the low-paid, essential staff. There is no plan. We are just stumbling from one point to the next in an attempt to crisis-manage, from a five-party Executive that have no track record in getting to grips with crises.

The motion calls for a plan. I noted the words of the Chair of the Committee when he asked each of us to recommit to do all that we can to address this. Well, let us start by wearing a mask. Let us start by not getting into a lift with somebody else in it in this Building where you cannot socially distance. Let us start by washing our hands and sanitising before coming into the Chamber.

We are not all in this together, so if there is any confidence to be regained, let us start acting on our own advice and start setting an example.

6.15 pm

Mr Carroll: As the motion sets out, it is important to recognise the essential work that is being done by our healthcare workers in the middle of a dangerous and deadly pandemic.

Without the sacrifice, skills and gritty determination of these healthcare workers — many of whom were forced to live away from their families for weeks on end — what kind of an unthinkable situation would we be in?

It would be remiss of me not to mention that today is the first ever Royal College of Nursing (RCN) nursing support workers' day. On this day, I thank all of those RCN workers and healthcare workers for their roles and work over the last year. It is worth noting how many of these workers now feel as a result of working through this pandemic, working hard and sacrificing so much for the health and well-being of us all. I have spoken to many over the last few weeks, and they have told me that they not only feel exhausted but underappreciated and underpaid. Many of them are disgusted, to be frank, at the fact that they were promised by the Health and Finance Ministers that they would not lose out on pay for taking strike action earlier this year to stand up for safe staffing levels, yet they are still waiting as the issue is ping-ponged by Ministers across the Executive.

ICU nurses are predominantly on a band-5 pay grade despite the fact that a lot of them are doing the work of a band-6 or a higher-banded worker. We need to respect our nurses and medical staff by not only paying them the money that they were promised and are owed, but, in recognition of the essential work that they have done, the Health Minister and the Executive need to urgently begin work to ensure that they are given a significant and worthwhile pay increase, as is in line with their unions' demands. This would not only begin to acknowledge the work that these workers have done in the last year, through a pandemic that none of them signed up for or expected, but it would go some way to encourage these workers to stay here after this pandemic rather than go somewhere else where they are paid a higher wage.

I think that it is also important to mention student nurses, as has briefly been mentioned by some, and to recognise their role during the pandemic. They have worked through the pandemic; they still have to pay their bills, they have no sick pay if they are forced to isolate, and they have a bursary that effectively amounts to being paid £1 an hour for the work that they do. Who here would work for £1 an hour? Who else out there would work for £1 an hour? It is totally unfair, and that issue needs to be addressed to support student nurses and student midwives.

When you compare the role of student nurses and healthcare workers, generally, to the actions of the Executive, then it really is like comparing night and day. While health workers have gone above and beyond, putting the lives and safety of all of us and the community first, the Executive have committed themselves to a dangerous strategy of living with COVID, which, by definition — if it has a definition — means repeatedly going in and out of lockdown without committing to eliminating the virus. The result is, sadly, that we have one of the highest infection and death rates per population across the world.

The motion tonight talks about individual responsibility, and I suppose that that is important in a general sense. However, I hope that the same applies to Ministers, especially when many of them blatantly ignore the glaring and stark medical advice right in front of them. Shame on all of those parties and Ministers who are willing to threaten — and maybe still want to — the health of so many in our communities by adopting a laissez-faire approach to this virus. Many of them feign concern about low-paid workers while doing nothing to help and to protect them, except to implement a strategy of further impoverishing them and throwing them to the COVID wolves.

The motion also talks about the negative impacts of lockdown on mental health, and there is no doubt that this has been a very tough and difficult period for people's mental health, illness and issues. However, we should also avoid believing that simply opening up the doors of the economy again, forcing people back into unsafe or dangerous working conditions before a safe vaccine is rolled out, will do wonders for people's mental health. It will not. It is likely to create more problems in the short and long term. The Executive have the opportunity to now implement plans to ensure that everything is done to avoid a deeper mental health crisis in our communities after the pandemic is over. Therefore, we now need to ensure that people do not wait for months for treatment from counsellors, therapists and so on.

Finally, while we absolutely need to have a robust and improved test, trace and isolate system, it will be pretty ineffective, in the grand scheme of things, if the Executive jump in and out of restrictions based on the fluctuation of the R number, or by putting their finger to the wind. Even a world-class test and trace system, which is what we should have, is pretty useless if the Executive repeat the same mistakes of the past, time and time again.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry; the Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: OK. Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, to respond to the comments that were made in the debate. I remind the Minister that he has 20 minutes, should he choose to use them.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): No pressure. Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, I thank the members of the Health Committee for proposing the motion. It provides us with the valuable opportunity to consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our health care system, the staff who work across that system, and the patients and public whom we serve as we continue to manage and mitigate the impacts of the current pandemic. I have listened very closely to those Members who have spoken in support of this issue today, and I can confirm that I am happy to support the motion. I thank the Chair for the tone and tenure of his opening comments on how he wished the debate to proceed.

In what are, clearly, unprecedented circumstances, our fantastic health and social care service has remained steadfast in its dedication to patients and those in need of care and treatment. All that work, including the continuing efforts of many to maintain services where and when possible while tackling the largest pandemic of the modern world, is testament to the dedication and expertise of our staff across the system.

Following the decision by the Executive last week, we now face a challenging, but totally necessary, period of extended restrictions. I fully appreciate the huge impact that those restrictions will have across so many sectors in Northern Ireland and the many sacrifices that people are making, but it is my job to protect our health service and to save lives. I will not and have not shied away from that. Without this circuit breaker, we would, most certainly, continue on an upward trajectory that would cripple our health service. That is why the additional measures, which were agreed by the Executive last Thursday, are needed and were covered in my statement to the Assembly this morning. I am hopeful that we will come out the other end of this period in a better place and, in particular, that we will be able to reflect more positively on the R number at the end of the two weeks, in order that we can all enjoy some sort of normality, over a short period during Christmas.

I will turn to some specific issues highlighted in the motion. You will recall that our Chief Medical Officer recently spoke about the impact that the current situation is having on mental health right across society. That was raised by a number of Members today. Specifically, Mr Mike Nesbitt talked about mental health awareness in this place before it was seen to be the right thing to do in many other places. Mr Nesbitt has been championing mental health since long before many took up that cause. Thankfully, it is now firmly on the agenda not just of this place but of political discussions across these islands. Since taking up post as Minister of Health, I have been very clear that mental health is a priority for me. To underline that commitment, I appointed Professor Siobhan O'Neill as the interim mental health champion in Northern Ireland. I fully recognise the additional challenges that COVID-19 has presented for mental health, not least for our young people. I will ensure that this area remains front and centre in our response to the pandemic.

There is no doubt that the pandemic is having a devastating impact on our hospital services, particularly in elective care and increasing difficulties in our emergency departments. I take exception when people accuse me or my health service of turning into a COVID-19 service. The assessment and medical support that are given to patients, as they present, are assessed and delivered by clinical need, by extremely experienced and professional health service professionals who have been doing this day and daily.

I am committed to reforming the services that we provide so that we can truly have a health service that delivers for all the people whom it serves. We have made real progress on a number of fronts. Members will be fully aware of the detail, including creating Northern Ireland's first regional day procedure centre at Lagan Valley Hospital, which provides a regional resource for less complex planned day surgeries and procedures.

The health service has rapidly introduced new ways of working, including the regular use of technologies such as virtual clinics, telephone appointments and videoconferencing to deliver services in new and innovative ways. In terms of the tools that we have at our disposal to address the challenges of COVID-19, our testing programme and contact-tracing systems are key. I totally agree that robust systems for testing and contact tracing are critical if we are to try to limit the impact of COVID-19 on our lives, our livelihoods and, importantly, our health and care services. However, I urge

caution: neither testing nor contact tracing alone can ever be expected to provide the full answer. They are an essential part of the equation, but no more so than the need for all the people of Northern Ireland to continue to follow the public health advice, which is vital.

I am pleased to advise Members that we are now commencing the implementation of a number of new testing interventions (NTIs). In Northern Ireland, those NTIs are part of the UK-wide population testing programme. As we progress to implement those, we will evaluate the new technologies that are used for testing and realise their benefits for our citizens, services and wider economy. The testing of asymptomatic healthcare workers is due to begin this week. That NTI will enable the early identification of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in healthcare staff who do not have symptoms. That will ensure that those front-line staff self-isolate early, which will reduce the risk of onward transmission of infection. That testing will take place, in the first instance, with staff working in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in acute services such as oncology, haematology and nephrology. As I said, testing will commence this week, and roll-out to other trusts will follow in a planned manner.

The testing of asymptomatic students started today at Queen's University using our lateral flow devices. The learning arising from that NTI will be important to help us to better understand how asymptomatic testing can be implemented and extended more widely in the future to other parts of Northern Ireland. It is through undertaking those NTIs that we can develop fully informed plans for the future to everyone's benefit. Plans are progressing to offer testing to the wider population of students who attend Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University and a number of other colleges. In that context, asymptomatic testing will form part of a wider strategy to support and enable students to travel home for Christmas. That will require swift and agile planning and roll-out over the coming weeks, working closely across a number of Departments and other delivery partners.

The testing technologies in those NTIs are based on saliva testing and swabs tested outside of laboratory settings. They use our lateral flow devices, which can produce results for the person tested within 60 to 90 minutes. As I mentioned, those new interventions test asymptomatic individuals — people with no symptoms — with the aim of improving our ability to detect the virus, find positive cases earlier and reduce the risk of onward transmission of infection. I am keen to offer new

testing interventions at a larger population level in Northern Ireland as soon as is possible and practicable. Such a programme to test larger populations in Northern Ireland — for example, testing in a local government area — would, no doubt, pose many logistical and implementation challenges. Its success would rely heavily on cross-departmental and multi-agency joint working. However, I believe that it would assist us in further reducing infection and, by extension, protecting our health service and saving lives.

6.30 pm

However, it is important that I highlight that those new testing interventions, which involve new approaches to testing and the deployment of new technologies, are additional to the COVID-19 testing programme that we have established and operate across Northern Ireland. It is also important to highlight that our current testing programme continues. That uses laboratory-based PCR testing and has to date focused mainly on the testing of symptomatic people. It will continue, and my Department will continue to work to further expand both pillars of that programme in the coming weeks and months.

Aligned to our testing programme, I am determined that our contact-tracing system will continue to offer us the best opportunity to identify cases and their close contacts as swiftly as possible and to disrupt chains of transmission between cases and their contacts. It is important to acknowledge the work of our Public Health Agency in establishing the service, which is the first of its kind to be established in the United Kingdom.

There is no doubt that our contact-tracing service has faced many challenges, not least the threefold increase in the numbers of positive cases that were notified to the service over a short period in October. That rapid increase in cases undoubtedly strained our contact-tracing system. It is clear that contact-tracing services in many other countries have experienced similar strains in recent months. Large numbers of positive cases have been notified for tracing as a consequence of increased transmission and disease activity. A number of digitally enhanced solutions have been introduced to our contact-tracing service, including a new digital self-trace platform.

The positive impact of those developments can be seen in the performance of our current service. For example, in the six-day period up to 16 November, 90% of indexed cases were contacted within 24 hours of notification to the

service, while in the three days from 13 to 15 November, 92% of those contacts were successfully reached within 48 hours. However, we continue to use any benefit that the current period of restrictions affords us in order to strengthen the contact-tracing service.

The service continues to look for ways to improve and find new solutions to assist in the delivery of its functions. Increased understanding of the service and further developing the public's trust in the service model will continue to be essential to its success over the coming months. Our Public Health Agency is driving forward a mass media campaign to optimise the public's awareness and understanding of the components of the contact-tracing system and, in particular, to increase the public's awareness of the benefits of using the digital self-trace platform that is offered by the service. The PHA is progressing significant work through social media and other media channels in order to encourage our public to stay vigilant in the fight against coronavirus and to ensure that everyone who has symptoms comes forward for a test. It explains the vital role of the contact-tracing system, how it operates in practice and its crucial role in preventing the daily spread of the virus.

In parallel with those developments, the agency has also commenced enhanced tracing for all new cases notified to the contact-tracing service from 16 to November. In association with conventional contact tracing, which aims to identify a case's close contacts and then reach them to advise them of the actions that they must take, enhanced contact tracing ensures that there is a strong focus on identifying the likely source of a case's infection and the potential common exposures that can lead to clusters and outbreaks. That was the issue that Ms Bradshaw specifically raised.

That combination of conventional and enhanced contact tracing will increase the contribution of the contact-tracing service to the control of community transmissions across Northern Ireland and to detecting the source of clusters in community settings. Using that enhanced tracing approach, PHA's contact tracers are working with indexed cases to capture information for seven days prior to the date of their symptom onset or the date of testing if the case has no symptoms.

It is important to highlight that the approach to contact tracing in the future will be based on that hybrid model of service provision. That model will focus on innovative digital solutions to reach and deliver early messages to cases

and their close contacts while enabling targeted input from expert, professional healthcare staff who will risk-assess and deal with the more complex cases, clusters and outbreaks. Work to develop and refine this hybrid service model is being taken forward, at pace, through the Public Health Agency, and it is being overseen by my Department.

There is no doubt that more hard work and difficult times lie ahead, but it is important to know that there is hope. You will know that, although still early days, exciting progress is being made on COVID-19 vaccines. They are not yet approved for use in the United Kingdom. However, there is now a very real prospect that we will be in a different place next spring and summer as we deliver our vaccination programme. I acknowledge the enormous work currently in progress to ensure that we are ready to commence our programme as soon as the vaccine is made available to us in Northern Ireland. I hope that that will allay some of Mr Sheehan's concerns about the ongoing work.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: I will.

Mr Sheehan: I take the Minister at his word, and I always have. However, I want to see some outline of the plan for how it will be rolled out and who will be responsible for doing the vaccination. To have confidence, we need to see the plan. I know that I got a bit passionate about the PHA but, after its contact-tracing performance, I have absolutely no confidence in it.

Mr Swann: I am sure that a presentation can be provided for members of the Committee, who have been supportive of the work that we have been doing at a departmental level and of me as Minister. I am appreciative of the multiple engagements that I have had with the Health Committee and the proactive stance that it takes. However, I encourage Mr Sheehan to be challenging but not to get personal when dealing with the departmental professionals who come to present to the Committee. As I said, the vaccination programme will begin as soon as possible after it is made available to us in Northern Ireland.

In supporting the motion, I thank all Members who made contributions. It remains essential that we address the impact of the virus on the population of Northern Ireland and that we protect our healthcare system, the people who work in it and, importantly, the people whom we serve who require care and treatment within it.

It is clear from what I outlined here today that much progress has been made to date as we collectively find, test, trace, isolate and support those throughout society who have been impacted on by COVID-19.

Earlier, I said that COVID-19 was our common enemy. I firmly believe that it is our common enemy. It is not just the health service's common enemy, it is the common enemy of our economy and of our education service because, day and daily, we must tackle it not only at an institutional level, an Executive level and an Assembly level but at a personal level.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Minister, for giving way. If this is our common enemy, why do we not have a common response? Last week, I stood on the street where a friend's young daughter had taken her life. I watched the funeral cortege make its way to an open-air ceremony before an open-air burial that only 25 people were allowed to attend. The very next day, our First Minister gets into a taxi and, with 1,000 others, heads to a football match in an outdoor venue. How is that "common"? How does that show that everyone is in this together?

Mr Swann: I know the point that the Member is making, and I respect the point that the Member is making. However, the common message coming out of this place must be one of encouragement to the people of Northern Ireland that there is hope, if we challenge COVID-19 as a collective. If it is done politically, that saddens and challenges me as the Minister of Health. What I do not want is some of the political commentary that has developed over the past number of weeks and months.

We were able to get Northern Ireland into a very good place during the first wave of COVID-19. We did that because we stood side by side. We did that because we stood shoulder to shoulder with our healthcare professionals, with those who had tested positive for COVID-19 and with those who needed support. In my comments this morning, I appealed for that united approach once again. So I say to the Member, to every Member and to anybody who is listening to this: let us put those differences, those political challenges and those political point-scoring opportunities behind us for the next number of days, weeks and months until we get this virus under control.

I support the motion. In concluding, I again remind all present, and those listening to this debate, about the important responsibility that we all have to ensure that we follow the public health advice to drive down infections. I appeal to everyone: reduce your contacts, keep your

distance, wash your hands, wear a face covering and download the StopCOVID NI app. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you for your indulgence.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is OK. I call Mrs Pam Cameron to wind up on the motion.

Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Thank you. From now on, I am just going to refer to you as "Mr Speaker", because that will save some time.

I support the motion, and I am winding up on it as Deputy Chair of the Health Committee. First, I put on record my sympathy to all of the families who have been bereaved in recent months, whether through COVID-19 or not. We are all very well aware of how difficult it is living with the restrictions, and how much more so it is for those who are living in grief right now. I wish to declare that I have family members working in the health service at this time.

I will move to quickly summarise some of the remarks made by Members. The Chair of the Health Committee outlined the interdependent elements of the motion and the evidence taken by the Committee on the impact of vulnerable groups. All Members who spoke paid warm tributes to health and social care staff, recognising the risks taken, the stress and exhaustion felt and the dedication shown. The Chair acknowledged progress in testing and tracing and put forward suggestions for consideration around increasing the find, test, trace, isolate and support systems. A move to mass and rapid testing was endorsed by many contributors. Colm Gildernew emphasised the need to increase the capacity of the FTTIS system, especially around isolation and support, and he talked about the connection with wider policy such as travel and childcare.

Paula Bradshaw also expressed concern about the adequacy of resources in the FTTIS system, particularly around asymptomatic testing and the capacity to learn more about the origin of infections and the risks associated with certain types of behaviour. Órlaithí Flynn asked if more could be done to build up our public health approach to reduce the need for restrictions, and Mr Sheehan emphasised the need for learning from international experience, expressing concern about local capacity.

Justin McNulty accepted that restrictions were necessary due to the current figures, and Jonathan Buckley raised concerns about the impact on patients awaiting treatment for cancer and other conditions. Alan Chambers

countered that much non-COVID work had been maintained in the second surge. The legacy of underfunding of the system was raised by Dolores Kelly, who called for progress on workforce planning and fair pay for nurses, and by Mike Nesbitt, who also recognised progress made under the Minister's leadership.

Having joined in the tributes to staff, Mr McGrath raised concerns about staff exhaustion and practical challenges facing workers, such as time and facilities to have meal breaks. Dolores Kelly called for better channels for front-line workers to feed through issues to the Minister and senior figures. Turning to restrictions, Colin McGrath expressed disappointment around progress on bringing down transmission.

The wide-ranging impact of the pandemic was acknowledged by all contributors, from mental health, which was raised by Mr McGrath, Mr McNulty, Mrs Kelly and Mr Carroll, to the economic impacts and knock-on effects on well-being described by Mr Chambers and Mr Clarke. Órlaithí Flynn referred also to the loss of social connections and the impact of visiting restrictions and missed appointments.

Several contributors, including Mr Buckley, Mr McGrath, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Kelly and Ms Bailey, referred to the political divisions and mixed messaging of recent weeks and months, and many called for a constructive and collaborative approach.

Mike Nesbitt referred to the challenge of having a five-party coalition but pointed to the ongoing work to develop a cross-island approach. Dolores Kelly called for the recognition of the importance of consistent political leadership for public confidence. Alan Chambers challenged the suggestion that not enough work was done in preparation for the second surge and flagged the time required to train additional staff.

Compliance with self-isolation was raised by Órlaithí Flynn and Paula Bradshaw, who also called for additional support to be made available to affected individuals. Making the point that financial support is not enough, Órlaithí suggested that follow-up calls should encourage compliance. She also underscored the need for wider cross-departmental cooperation to tackle the pandemic.

Clare Bailey put the debate in the wider context of the climate crisis, the high-street crisis, long-standing issues of poverty and low pay, and political difficulties. She asked why payments to nursing students have been stopped. Gerry Carroll called attention to the current figures

and the particular impact on low-paid workers, and he criticised what he feels is an Executive policy of living with the virus.

The Minister responded and acknowledged the impact of the restrictions and the sacrifices that people would have to make. He outlined the rationale for them and his hopes for progress in two weeks. The Minister restated his commitment to mental health, saying that he would keep it front and centre going forward, and acknowledged the work of Health and Social Care staff throughout.

Members expressed support for the motion, acknowledged public efforts to date and urged everyone to take individual responsibility and to adhere to all the hands, face, space guidance. The Minister also outlined the next steps in mass-testing initiatives and in public messaging, as well as new initiatives for enhanced contact tracing.

In closing, I put on record my thanks to the Clerk and the Committee staff for their tremendous work and support given throughout 2020 to date, and I thank the Committee membership for their contributions on the motion this evening.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will say a few words of my own as a DUP MLA. First and foremost, it is important to pay tribute to our staff on the front line. Although we may feel that the past eight or nine months have been challenging for this place, it is nothing compared with the challenges and the physical, mental and emotional strain faced by our nurses and doctors. We owe them a great debt of gratitude. It is a debt that should be repaid, in part, by a pay rise, as advocated by the RCN, amongst others. I urge the Health Minister to work with the Health Secretary to deliver that across the UK.

Furthermore, let us not underestimate or ignore the mental health strain on our staff. This has been a hugely difficult time of emotional strain and for having to do things that no nurse has been trained to do. Adequate support structures must be in place. I have heard of nurses who have been working on COVID wards who are now looking for jobs in supermarkets. What a terrible indictment of the lack of support for those professionals and heroes.

This House and the Executive cannot be deaf to the public anger about, and disillusionment with, what they have witnessed from this place in recent weeks. We now face two weeks, at least, of sweeping restrictions, and although the time for asking searching questions and for

accountability will no doubt come, it is the job of this place to do better, by coming up with solutions quicker and for those to be more effective, and to avoid the cycle of lockdowns that we all say that we want to avoid but about which we seem to do too little, too late to avoid. That is failing local business, failing workers and failing families. It is simply not good enough.

What we have, outside of this place, is a health crisis, a mental health crisis and an economic crisis. The health crisis is dominated by COVID-19 but goes far beyond that. It is heart disease, undiagnosed diabetes, suicide and undiagnosed cancer. It is the lack of early intervention that will lead to more health misery. Last week, we marked Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Day. How many today are living with that awful cancer and do not know it? How many cannot and will not get treatment in time to help them?

What are we going to do, Mr Speaker? An immediate priority must be to improve our track-and-trace system. Put frankly, it is not up to the job. The mantra has been that it works best with lower numbers. That is a logical assumption, but we have not had low numbers in weeks. As a net, the holes are too big, and too much is slipping through. I am sure that we all know of examples of someone who has been in close contact but no notification was received of any description, and that is helping the virus spread.

I pay tribute to the staff who are working on contact tracing. They are doing great work, but there are not enough of them. The service needs additional resource, and that resource should be available by now. We need innovative thinking on ways to improve how we track and trace to make it even more effective. We have known about the issue for a long time, but here we are talking about it.

We also know about the lack of awareness of the rules on self-isolating. I was told three times whilst having a COVID-19 test that I could go about my business if I received a negative test. That was after being notified by the StopCOVID NI app of a close contact and being told to isolate for 14 days. Just last week, I heard the same story of several other individuals who were given the same wrong advice. I appreciate an emailed apology received from the PHA over the completely wrong information that was given, but it is not good enough. At this stage in a pandemic, we are still being given dangerous, incorrect information on isolation. I question, therefore, whether the PR campaign has been ramped up enough to deal with that, because I do not see it.

If we become a pilot for mass testing, will the test, trace, isolate and protect programme be able to cope? That is the question. The groundwork needs to be put in place now. If the contact tracing is not fit for purpose, mass testing will not be as effective as we need it to be.

It goes without saying that our care homes need a focus, which, to date, has not been here. Over 140 care homes with outbreaks is a damning indictment on the Department's protection of the most vulnerable. We clearly did not act on what we learned from the first wave, if we learned anything, because, sadly, our care homes are under attack from the virus, once again.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Mrs Cameron: We need staff testing to be as frequent as possible.

I do not enough have time to finish all my remarks, but I want to say that, recently, I have spoken to people who cannot sleep for fear of not being able to provide for their children at Christmas. I welcome that all Members agree with the motion. Thank you for your time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Health and Social Care services, staff and patients; further recognises the impact on the physical and mental well-being of staff, patients and the public; acknowledges that restrictions are a consequence of the inability to suppress transmission rates; urges and encourages every member of the public to exercise individual responsibility by adhering to guidance, washing hands thoroughly and regularly, maintaining social distance and wearing face coverings; further acknowledges recent progress and commitments from the Minister of Health to increase testing and contact-tracing capacity; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a robust, scaled-up find, test, trace, isolate and support (FTTIS) strategy based on international best practice as part of a wider Executive strategy to help avoid a cycle of lockdowns and the particular negative impacts on mental health and well-being.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is the Adjournment. Please

clean your surfaces before you leave the Chamber.

Adjourned at 6.52 pm.

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