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Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 14 October 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Executive's Decisions Relating to Measures to be Taken in Response to the Increased Incidence of the Transmission of COVID-19.

Mr Speaker: Members, having been given notice by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of an oral statement by the First Minister on the Executive's decisions relating to measures to be taken in response to the increased incidence of the transmission of COVID-19.

Before we commence, I thank Members for their patience last night. Ordinarily, I would seek to give Members greater warning of an additional sitting. I was, therefore, keen to keep Whips up to date as much as I could throughout the evening. Members know that, in recent weeks, I have been focused on ensuring that the role of the Assembly is respected and highlighting the expectation that Ministers should bring important matters to the House. Given the seriousness of the situation that we are in, I welcome the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have chosen to bring an update on the latest Executive decisions to the Assembly at this earliest opportunity.

These are exceptional times. We are dealing with serious and complex issues. No matter our individual views, I acknowledge that the Executive and the Assembly have difficult choices and decisions to make in these worrying circumstances. We all need to recognise that. Therefore, it is right and proper that Members have the first opportunity available to raise questions with Ministers this morning on behalf of the communities that we represent.

Members, we all know that these sittings do not happen by themselves. I want to express my gratitude to all the staff who stayed on last

evening at short notice, many of them until almost the midnight hour. I appreciate their complete dedication to the Assembly.

I have received notice from the First Minister that she wishes to make a statement. Members should make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. They can do this by rising in their place, as well as notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I have a number of names on the list to ask a question, and Standing Orders do not permit me to extend the time for questions after the statement beyond one hour. I, therefore, remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate per se, and long introductions will not be accepted.

I stress that a number of Members want to speak. I want to enable every Member in the House who wishes to ask a question and engage with the First Minister to have an opportunity to do so. That depends entirely on the cooperation of all Members, so please be concise. I will not allow Members to make long introductory statements. Please get to your question and let all Members have the opportunity to ask their relevant questions on behalf of their constituents.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Before I make my statement, I wish to associate myself with your comments about the staff and say that we deeply appreciate the work that they did late last night and early this morning to facilitate today's sitting. I just wanted to make that comment.

We wish to provide Members with an update on decisions that the Executive have taken in relation to essential actions needed to reduce COVID-19 transmission rates. There has been much coverage in the press about variations in restrictions, and it is with that in mind, along with the very worrying increase in numbers of cases and hospitalisations, that we have looked at the various levels of restrictions that we need now.

We all have a role to play to break this chain, and it is important that we all understand that. People pass COVID onto each other, and that happens in a variety of settings. Limiting our social contacts will play a role in breaking the chain. We have already asked everyone to assist us with this by not gathering in domestic settings, and that has been taken forward in regulations. We also have local restrictions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

However, the numbers have continued to rise. The doubling rate is of grave concern, and hospitalisations are on the increase. That is deeply troubling, and more steps are now urgently needed. The Executive have discussed this and we have concluded that we must put the following measures in place. The first is maintenance of current household restrictions. This means a continuation of the restriction on meeting indoors and a limit on the number who can meet in a garden. There are existing exemptions for childcare, maintenance and other matters, and they will stay in place. However, as close-contact economy is proposed for closure, it would be consistent with that to prohibit the provision of those services — for example, hairdressing — in a domestic setting.

Bubbling is to be limited to a maximum of 10 people from two households. There should be no overnight stays in a private home unless in a bubble. People should work from home unless they are unable to do so. In guidance, we will advise universities and further education to deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible, with essential face-to-face learning only where that is a necessary and unavoidable part of the course.

There will be a closure of the hospitality sector apart from deliveries and takeaway food, with the existing closing time of 11.00 pm remaining. Other takeaway premises will then be brought in line with hospitality with a closing time of 11.00 pm. Retail will stay open. However, there will be urgent engagement with the sector to ensure that retail is doing everything that it can to help suppress the virus. There will be closure of close-contact services apart from those meeting essential health needs, which will be defined in the regulations to ensure continuation of essential health interventions and therapeutics. That will not include complementary treatments.

There will be no indoor sport of any kind or organised contact sport involving household mixing other than at elite level. There will be no mass events involving more than 15 people,

except for allowed outdoor sporting events, where the relevant number for that will continue to apply. Gyms may remain open but for individual training only, with local enforcement in place. Places of worship are to remain open, with a mandatory requirement to wear face coverings when entering and exiting. That will not apply to parties to a marriage or civil partnership.

Wedding ceremonies and civil partnerships are to be limited to 25 people with no receptions. That will be implemented on Monday 19 October. Venues providing the post-ceremony or partnership celebration may remain open for this purpose this weekend but may not provide other services for people who are not part of the wedding or partnership, and this will be limited to 25. Funerals and committals are to be limited to 25 people, with no pre- or post-funeral gathering. In guidance, no unnecessary travel will be advised. Off-licences and supermarkets will not be permitted to sell alcohol after 8.00 pm.

We believe that the above restrictions should apply for four weeks, and the continuation or amendment of any element will require Executive approval.

In education, the half-term holiday break will be extended from 19 to 30 October, with schools reopening on Monday 2 November. To permit that, the Department of Education will allocate schools two optional days, with the remainder of the additional time being taken through exceptional closure days. As is the case in other jurisdictions, the Executive will keep the issue of schools, along with other considerations, under continuous review in the weeks and months ahead.

We fully appreciate that this will be difficult and worrying news for many people. The Executive have taken this decision because it is necessary, and we discussed the impacts in great detail. We do not take this step lightly.

We want the measures to have two impacts. First, on the COVID transmission rates, which must be turned down now or we will be in a very difficult place very soon indeed. Secondly, we believe that it marks a point at which everyone, each and every one of us, can take stock and go back to the vital social-distancing messaging.

We will, of course, engage with sectors and work on supports as a matter of priority.

We ask all children, young people and their parents to help us in a very particular way

during the next few weeks. Please make sure that your children and young people follow the social-distancing arrangements during this time, limit socialising as much as possible and use the time in as positive a way as you can.

We will need to exit these arrangements most carefully. They will be put in place during Friday of this week and will remain in place for four weeks. Any extension or amendment to them will require a decision by the Executive. We must reach a different place on the numbers and on getting back to the basics of social distancing, and I know that everyone in the Chamber will want to work with us on that. Small acts can make large and important contributions to managing COVID-19. Wash your hands, practise social distancing and wear face coverings. Those are small acts, but they are vital. Thank you.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the First Minister for her statement. Judging by the hundreds of messages that I received overnight, people across the North went to bed last night not knowing if their children would be going to school today, if businesses would open or if they needed to go to work. The confusion over the past 24 hours has certainly not helped. We need to approach the pandemic as equal partners and do the heavy lifting in our communities together. Let this be the moment — the clean break — in which we provide people with the clarity, answers, support and direction that they need.

The statement is welcome, but what is missing is the specific financial detail that is desperately needed by businesses and workers. We know that one furlough scheme is about to end and that another is due to commence soon. In the light of the statement today, will the First Minister tell us what specific and tailored help there will be to prevent people from having to make the impossible choice between their family's health and their family finances?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman for his intervention. There was never going to be a situation in which we would announce overnight that people had to do something the next day. That was never going to happen. That is why the restrictions will come into force on Friday to give people time to plan.

Most schools were planning to take a week off for the Halloween break. Some were taking four days and some were taking six days, but, in the main, they were going to take around a week. The Education Minister has proposed a way forward to minimise the loss of learning for our

young people and that is hugely important. Others wanted to close the schools for a longer period. Fundamentally, the education of our young people is a right and their life chances absolutely need to be protected, and I am content that, with what he has proposed, the Education Minister thought long and hard about how he can help to reduce the incidences of COVID while protecting young people.

Yesterday, the leader of the SDLP told the Executive to get on with putting the restrictions in place. We had a very long and thoughtful Executive meeting last night and very difficult decisions were taken. I do not shy away from that or from the fact that many of the decisions will have a huge impact on people's lives.

Nevertheless, they are for four weeks, and we are very determined that this will be a time-limited intervention. The restrictions will not continue beyond those four weeks and the Executive will have to revisit them at that time.

10.45 am

It is important to say that we will be putting supports in place. Last night's discussion was about the interventions that we need to make. Tomorrow, the Executive will discuss the support systems that will be in place, and I hope that we will be able to sign off on those support systems. The Member is right to say that we need to support our businesses and their employees as they go through this most difficult of times. I hope that Member after Member, when they speak today, will not try to make trite political points. This is not the time for trite political points; this is a time for trying to find solutions for every one of our citizens as we face into this terrible situation together. I hope that we will have that cooperation across the House today.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the First Minister for her statement. On the issue of education and young people's welfare, what evidence did the Executive balance up to come to the decision to close schools for an additional week, given the impact that that will have? What evidence did the Executive weigh up?

Mrs Foster: As I have indicated, the Education Minister was very clear that we did not want to inflict any more damage on our young people. We realise that they were off school for a considerable length of time because of the lockdown in March. We had to look at the impact that that would have on peer socialisation and the whole culture of going to school and having that school experience. Of

course, the loss of learning time is critical as well. Young people need to be able to take their exams at the end of the year so that their life chances are there for them.

Obviously, we had to consider the impact on vulnerable children and children with special educational needs (SEN) to make sure that they were covered as well. That is why we are only taking the route of the Halloween break as was, plus a number of extra days. It is right that we minimise that as much as we possibly can for our young people, recognising that, at the same time, we are trying to get the COVID transmission rate under control. That is why the break is starting now, so that we can have the maximum impact. I hope that we will be able to see that. This is a two-week break: children will return to school on 2 November. It is hugely important that I say that today.

Mr Gildernew: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an chomh-Chéad Aire as an ráiteas seo. I thank the First Minister for coming to make the statement today. While it is beyond doubt that these measures are now absolutely necessary and, indeed, urgently required, it is also the case that they will, as the joint First Minister mentioned, have implications and knock-on impacts. The system that is in place to test and trace has struggled to cope. Will the Executive use this opportunity to reboot and put in place an effective find, test, trace, isolate and support system and ensure that every element of that system is working so that we do not find ourselves back in this place again?

Mrs Foster: The Member raises an important point about the capacity of our health service. That is something that we will have to revisit over the next number of weeks. The health service and the test, trace and protect system are fundamentally, in the first instance, a matter for the Health Minister, and I am sure that he will make his own comments today in relation to all those matters. We know that the health service was under pressure before we came back in January but we need to scale it up in the coming days. It needs to be fit for purpose and it needs to have capacity. It is reforming, although I accept that it is difficult to reform when we are in this crisis situation. If we need to have mutual aid and assistance from the rest of the United Kingdom, we should not stop ourselves from asking for it. At present, we are managing the ICU beds and hospital capacity but we need to make these interventions so that we can continue to deal with ICU capacity and all the other problems.

He is right to mention that there are different elements of test, trace, protect and isolate. It

was good to hear from the Communities Minister last night that, with our discretionary payment system, we were ahead of the game in supporting people who had to isolate.

Tomorrow, when we look at the range of supports that we have in place, we will say more about those issues. We felt that it was important to come to the House today to outline the issues with the restrictions, but we will have much more to say tomorrow about the supports that will be in place to try to assist people, whether they have to self-isolate or whether they are people whose businesses have to close across those four weeks to try to help us to get the COVID virus under control.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed, First Minister, for making the statement to us today. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I pass on our thanks to the Northern Ireland Executive, and all the parties in it, for coming to these particular difficult decisions in the time in which they had to make them and in these challenging circumstances, particularly regarding the impact on our health service.

Bearing in mind the importance of what we need to do to make societal changes, what are we doing to ensure that our Executive, and the parties supporting them, communicate effectively and deal with these issues? We all, collectively, need to work together to ensure that the message goes out to the people of Northern Ireland that we have to make these changes because we do not, and our health service does not, have the time. We have to make these changes.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his commentary. I am sure that Executive colleagues will thank him for his position in relation to our decision last night. The Health Minister has been very clear with us about the capacity of the health service. If we had not taken the interventions last night that I am communicating to you today, our health service would not have been able to deal with what was coming down the line. That was very concerning for all of us.

These are very difficult decisions. As all of us know, we are being asked about elective surgery, cancer care and all those things. People need to understand that, because we have to spend so much time dealing with the rise in COVID, we have to turn off elective surgery and all those things. The two things are intertwined in that way. If we — all of us, personally — do not take action, the rise of COVID will stop all those other things from happening. Sometimes people say that we are not doing enough about surgery, heart disease

and all those other things. That is because of the rise of COVID. It is because people are not taking personal responsibility for their own behaviour.

So, if today amounts to anything, it will be getting out the message that people need to take personal responsibility for their actions. That would be a very positive thing to come out of the Assembly today. I hope that we all want to protect the health service, minimise the number of deaths that occur and protect our economy and the well-being of society here in Northern Ireland. It is about that balance. I have talked all week about trying to take proportionate action and achieve a balanced way forward. That is what we tried to do last evening.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, First Minister, for your statement. You will not find the Alliance Party disagreeing with you when you say that the public health message must be the first message and our first priority. However, there are businesses across Northern Ireland that will be hurting today. There will be businesses that will be making very difficult decisions about not just the support that the Executive will give them but whether there is a future for them. Can you assure businesses across Northern Ireland that urgent action will be taken to set out clear support for them?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I absolutely can. As the Member knows, the Chancellor announced new supports that will kick in on 1 November. It is not as generous as the furlough scheme that was put in place for the lockdown back in March. Of course, we are not in a lockdown situation now; we are putting in interventions for a limited period of time. However, that does not take away the fact that a lot of businesses will be suffering and will be worried. I have said many times that we get bad health outcomes if people are unemployed, if they are in poverty or if they are in a situation in which they see no way out. We have to give them that hope and that determination that there will be better days, but there will be better days if people take personal responsibility for their actions. I know that people think, "It doesn't apply to me because I'm fine, and if I get it, I get it and that is it". The point is that they are impacting upon our hospitals, upon our economy and upon the whole way of life here in Northern Ireland. So, I plead with people today to please take personal responsibility for your actions. Please work with us so that we can, as we did in March and April, get this virus under control. People looked at this part of the world and said that Northern Ireland is doing very well. I want to get back to

that place, but I can only do it if people work with us all. I know that there are many people who are affected by our decisions today, and they will want to see what we have to say tomorrow in relation to specific supports. I very much hope that we can sign off on those tomorrow at the Executive.

Ms P Bradley: First Minister, I want to go back to the issue of education. Can you share with us any of the evidence that the Executive were shown around the risk? Are there any other ways of mitigating that risk? As an MLA, I have received emails from headmasters and headmistresses from various schools wanting to know why they are having to have this extra week. You mentioned SEN. How seriously was the balance taken with special educational needs schools and children, given the fact that many of those of children need that stability and need structure in their lives?

Mrs Foster: I absolutely concur with her about children with special educational needs. During lockdown, it was so difficult for many of those young people and their parents. I recall an email from a lady in Craigavon who told me that her child was in such a way of going to his place of education every day that, despite the fact that the school was not open, she had to drive him to it every day because that was the routine that he was in. These decisions have weighed very heavily on us today, particularly protecting our young people. That is why we have kept the school closures to an absolute minimum. I think that that was the right thing to do. Children would be off for half-term in any event, and we have lengthened that by a couple of days. I know that for some parents that will be a challenge with childcare, but I hope that giving them that extra time to plan over the next couple of days will assist in that.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been doing some work with the Education Department on the incidences of COVID in schools. It has told us that, as of Sunday evening, 485 incidences had been risk-assessed with schools and that many of those incidences involved a single case. Fewer than 10 schools have required support for two or more incidences, and the overall assessment, as advised by the Public Health Agency, not the Department of Education, is that there is limited transmission in school settings. There are other issues around school gates, transport and issues like that, and we are going to work with the Department of Education to look at how we can minimise the risk around some of those issues. In the school setting, there is limited transmission, according to the PHA. I welcome that because it gives us clarity on schools. I

know that a lot of parents are worried about their young people, and they should look at that evidence and take some reassurance from that.

Mr Boylan: Clearly, Minister, the decision to close the schools has been a difficult one for the Executive and, indeed, for all of us, but it is based on medical and scientific advice and is a necessary step. Can the Minister outline the focus of the review in two weeks' time to ensure that we keep taking the right decisions, even if those decisions are very difficult?

Mrs Foster: Thanks to the Member for his question. It has been a very difficult decision not just around schools but around all the different interventions that we are taking. We very firmly are of the opinion that the intervention in schools should be for a short a period as possible.

There were demands for a longer, open-ended lockdown for schools. We believe that a limited intervention is best. We can then assess that to see what the impact is.

11.00 am

As I indicated to the Member, the overall assessment by the Public Health Agency is that there is limited transmission in school settings, but there may be some issues outside school settings that we will need to try to mitigate. That does not just happen. A lot of work has gone into that by staff and teachers in schools and by young people themselves. I really want to acknowledge that. On my way up the road from Fermanagh this morning, I was speaking to a school principal, who said that young people are very resilient and work very well when they know what is expected of them. We should pay tribute to our young people and the way in which they have dealt with what is a strange time. We all remember our school days. Certainly, for me, you did not have to put on a mask before getting on a bus or walking down a corridor, and you did not have to stay in the same classroom whilst your teachers moved around. I want to pay tribute to all our young people as they deal with the strangest of times.

Mrs Cameron: I wish to place on record my condolences to all the families who have lost a loved one through this hateful virus. I appeal to everyone to follow the law and the guidance to the letter to avoid more preventable deaths.

I thank the First Minister for her statement, which is not welcome but is entirely necessary. What advice is now available for those who were previously shielding? Can the First

Minister give an update on the utilisation of the Belfast City Hospital tower block facility? Will there be childcare provision in schools for front-line key workers, in particular healthcare workers?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her questions. On the last point about key workers, because the schools are closed for a limited period and because the half-term holidays are happening in any event, it will be very difficult to have provision in schools for key workers. I regret that. Obviously, had it been for a longer period, we would have had to find a way round that. As she knows, we, unlike the Republic of Ireland Government, kept our schools open for the children of key workers during the March lockdown. Indeed, people availed themselves of that provision, and we are very glad that it was there for the many people who had to go to work as key workers to facilitate the rest of us.

The Nightingale facility is being stood up, but, at the moment, that is only happening on a Belfast Trust basis, not a regional basis. It may well be that we have to stand it up quite quickly on a regional basis. More people are requiring specialist clinical care in intensive care units. That was the case in the Mater Hospital and in the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH), so it was felt that there was a need across the Belfast Trust to expand COVID ICU from the Mater and the RVH and to relocate to the tower block at Belfast City Hospital. We hoped that we would not have to take that step again. If I were a prophet, or the daughter of a prophet, I would probably say that I expect the Nightingale hospital to be in place on a regional basis pretty soon. I regret that that is the case, but I think that we will need to put that in to facilitate demand and to make sure that we have enough ICU beds to deal with the hospitalisations that, unfortunately, are increasing on a daily basis.

Ms Ennis: I want to acknowledge the fact that these decisions today have not been taken lightly. They have been taken with people's best interests and public health at their core, and that should not be forgotten.

I go back to Stewart Dickson's comment about businesses and jobs and the huge challenges being faced by those affected. While the businesses being ordered to close will be able to access the extended job support scheme from the beginning of November when furlough ends, businesses in the supply chain will also be impacted. Will the Executive ask the Economy Minister to look at supporting such businesses that also face a loss of earnings?

Mrs Foster: The Member raises a very pertinent point about the supply chain. The Economy Minister and I have already had conversations about that. Whilst businesses in, for example, the hospitality sector are closed, they can avail themselves of the new supports that are there. Businesses in the supply chain, however, cannot do so, because we are not ordering them to close. As an Executive, we need to be very conscious of that.

It is certainly something that we will want to try and assist with.

We will not be able to mitigate all the losses — it is only right that I am honest and open about that — but it is also important that we try to support those businesses as much as we can. We have extra funding now with the Barnett consequential that the Chancellor announced on Friday, which is in the region of £200 million. I understand that other money is available from the COVID spend that we already had. We have, I think, in the region of £300 million to deal with these issues. However, as the Economy Minister pointed out to us last night, when she intervened with the grants systems — the £10,000 and £25,000 grants — that cost in the region of £340 million. The scale of this is very big. We are not in a similar situation to March because we are not in lockdown. Businesses and work can continue, but for those sectors that we are specifically closing, we have to find mechanisms to help them, and that is the focus moving on from today and tomorrow.

Mr McNulty: The Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Michael McBride, who has been as solid as a rock throughout the pandemic, is on record saying that he would be happy for his guidance to be published. People, individuals, families and businesses are now even more anxious, fearful and confused. Given the severity of the situation and the impact of the proposals being made here today, do you intend to publish the Chief Medical Officer's guidance? We need to break the chains of transmission of this virus, but we need to break the chains of transmission of anxiety, fear, speculation and conspiracy. Can you tell the people that we will defeat this virus if we all play our part and work together?

Mrs Foster: I would love to break the transmission of conspiracies and fake news that emanate from this place on a daily basis. Unfortunately, that is not a matter for me. It is a matter for other people who decide to leak half-truths and half-stories that cause anxiety and concern amongst people, right across Northern Ireland. It is one of the reasons why I wanted to

come to the House today and set out, very clearly, what the Executive have actually agreed, as opposed to what people think that we have agreed.

The Member talks about the medical advice from Dr McBride, who has been a great help and support to the Executive, as has our Chief Scientific Adviser. Very helpfully, somebody leaked the Executive paper on Monday of this week, with all of Dr McBride's advice in it, so that is already out in the public domain. I do not think that that was helpful because, as I have said in the House many, many times, this is a balanced approach that we need to take. It is about health, the economy, society and the family that we all love and want to cherish and care for. So, we have to take things in the round. That is why, yesterday, when we met as an Executive, we had many decisions to take, many assessments to make and many risk assessments to take, and that is what we were doing late into the night. We have come up with a package. Frankly, because we are in a five-party coalition, we have to try to get consensus and move forward together. I make no apology for that. People want us to move forward together. If it was left to one individual party or another, it would probably be a different announcement today. We have come to this Executive decision; we all have to abide by that decision, make it work for all the people of Northern Ireland and cut out the transmission of the virus. That will only happen if people take personal responsibility, listen to what we are saying in guidance and regulations and work together for the good of everybody.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. The PSNI previously categorised the pandemic as a health, rather than a policing, crisis and it is approaching it with a strategy of the four Es — engagement, education, encouragement and, finally, enforcement. First Minister, what discussions have you had with the Minister of Justice to ensure appropriate enforcement of these new measures?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Enforcement is very important. I accept the strategy of the police in trying to inform, educate and encourage people to do the right thing.

At some stage, we must also get to the point where penalties are in place to deal with some of those recalcitrant people who will not do the right thing. As the Member will know, the Justice Minister brought forward new penalties to the Executive, which we ratified last week. As well as that, the Executive have their

enforcement group, which is working not just with the Police Service of Northern Ireland but with local government, environmental health, the Health and Safety Executive, and, I hope, with some in the larger retail sector.

I said in my statement that we would be engaging with the retail sector. We have not closed the retail sector. It is still open, but we want to work with the sector to mitigate some of the compliance issues that are very clearly there at present, and I hope that it will work with us to try to make sure that its staff and customers are safe. We will be doing that over the next couple of days.

Mr Allister: The last 24 hours have been far from confidence building. For weeks we were told, apparently on medical advice, that our homes were the danger spots, pubs were safe and you could see your granny in the pub, so to speak. Now we are told that hospitality has to close, and of course the great losers in that will be some of the lowest paid in our society.

Kids have had 28 days of schooling in seven months, and now schools are to close. What assurance is there that we are not just going into lockdown by stages; that if things are not better in a fortnight, our schools will reopen? Meanwhile, off-licences are open. My specific question is this: during the two weeks, are schools expected to provide facilities for key workers? Some teachers have been diligently in school since March. Does that have to continue? In respect of sporting events, can, for example, Irish League matches continue with the present level of supporters?

Mrs Foster: Irish League matches are assessed as elite sports, and the spectators who have been risk assessed can continue, as I understand it. In terms of key workers, as I indicated to Ms Cameron, because it is such a short closure — it is not actually a closure at all; it is just a lengthening of the holidays — as I understand it, we will not be able to facilitate key workers' children in school, so teachers will be off for those two weeks and will not be in school during that time.

He is right to highlight the fact that off-licences will be closed early. That is an important point. The rationale for that is that if public houses and other hospitality venues are closed, at night-time, there may be a situation where people would seek alcohol and then go to house parties. Of course, the Member is right to say that homes and house parties are still an issue needs to be dealt with, and, indeed, anywhere where social contact is increased. That is why I am asking and pleading with

people around personal responsibility and cutting down on the number of social contacts that you have, and if you are in contact with people, that you social distance, if you are in a retail environment, that you wear a mask and that you do all the things that we are trying to do to cut down on the transmission of the virus.

This is a serious moment for Northern Ireland, and people will either work with us or they will decide that they will go their own way. However, going their own way has consequences — huge consequences for our health service, and they should remember that because everyone uses our health service not just those with COVID-19.

Mr Carroll: I want to categorically say that what happened last night was an absolute shambles. People are scratching their heads asking what is going on up in this Building. Does the First Minister agree with me that a much better approach to tackling the virus would be to adopt a zero-COVID strategy with the necessary financial assistance for the vulnerable, rather than having an endless cycle of circuit breaker and surge, which would undoubtedly cause greater harm to people's health and livelihoods in the long run, especially of low-paid workers?

Mrs Foster: The Member always thinks that there is a magic money tree at the bottom of the road. There is no magic money tree. The money has to come from somewhere.

11.15 am

The UK Government have stepped up to the plate in relation to the furlough scheme and the financial assistance we have received during the pandemic. Again, the Chancellor came forward with a scheme, which I recognise is not as generous as the furlough scheme, but the money has to be paid back sometime. We are now in a huge amount of debt as a nation, and that will have consequences for young people in the future. Young people have suffered enough through this pandemic, to be blunt, and we need to find a way to deal with that.

We will be putting in supports for businesses. The Executive will meet tomorrow. The Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy are working on these issues, and we will discuss them in detail at the Executive tomorrow.

Ms Sugden: I thank the First Minister for her statement. I also acknowledge the fact that the Health Minister is in the Chamber. Sadly, the Northern Ireland Executive have treated the

House with contempt over the past number of days, so I appreciate you being here and, finally, giving the House the respect that it deserves.

First Minister, will there be guidance in the next 24 hours to add meat to the bones of some of the announcements that you have made? Already, I am being bombarded with questions, and will do my best to answer them, but I am struggling to do that on the basis of what is here. I appreciate the fact that the regulations will, perhaps, go into that detail, but if there was a piece of work to be done, it would be about giving clarity to the audience, the people who need the information.

When you are developing a financial package for the businesses that will have to close through government instruction, will you be mindful of those that will be directly impacted by closures in hotels, for example — so, musicians and other businesses that work with hotels, whose business will, literally, go to zero from Friday, or even Monday? How are we going to support them? Sadly, some of those businesses have not been supported up until now, and this will only compound the issue, not least for them but for the wider economy.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question, although I do not accept that we are treating the House with contempt. As you know, Mr Speaker, I was in front of you on a number of occasions last week, and this week. The Minister of Health considers this Chamber to be his second home, so it is wrong to say that we treat this place with contempt — very, very wrong.

In terms of help for artists, we are very much aware of that issue. As I understand it, the Minister for Communities has put together a scheme that she will be rolling out soon. A lot of the artists, event organisers and what have you who the Member speaks about have not been able to find work or been able to work for a considerable time. The Minister for Communities is very much aware of that issue, and will be dealing with it.

In terms of questions and answers, yes, the regulations will bring more clarity to the issues that we decided on last night. There will also be, as I understand it — and I am sure that she will keep me to this — a question and answer digest on nirect, which will be published as soon as we can do that. I absolutely accept that many questions will be asked by our constituents across Northern Ireland, so it is important that we try to get that information out to Members.

Ms Bunting: The World Health Organization states that it does not support draconian restrictions or lockdowns, and that they should be used only to buy time to prepare. It also says that poverty will double, as will mental ill health cases, in the next year if this continues.

As the First Minister said, the debt is rising, and there are going to be fewer and fewer people in work to repay it. So, what is being done to protect jobs? More specifically, will the First Minister clarify whether the Executive is looking at help for those who have received none to date, and what is meant by "essential health needs"?

Mrs Foster: "Essential health needs" will be defined in the question and answer document that we will put out. I accept that my essential health needs might not be somebody else's essential health needs, so there is a need for clarification on that. We will get that out as soon as we possibly can.

I accept what the Member said about the World Health Organization saying that lockdown should be only a last resort and a time to prepare and to get capacity dealt with. Clearly, this is not a lockdown. Work continues. People will be working from home where possible, and other work will continue. Retail and manufacturing remain open.

I accept the points about the supply chain in the hospitality sector. That is something that we need to look at.

This is a difficult time, and we will need to bring forward supports for the parts of the economy that are being impacted on by the decision that we made last night. As I say, we will have those discussions tomorrow, hopefully with announcements thereafter.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar maidin. I thank the First Minister for her statement this morning. I listened to her say in response to another Member's question that the clear message coming from the Executive is that people have to take responsibility: of course, that is absolutely true. However, people are also asking how we, as political leaders and as the Executive, are doing our part to deal with the virus. Some countries have been much more successful in dealing with it. They have used much more nuanced methods and tools to fight it than we have. Despite the First Minister's assertion that the measures will last for only four weeks, if we do not get our act together, we will have to impose more restrictions. The fact is that the imposition

of such restrictions and the first lockdown were a blunt instrument. Does the First Minister agree that, if we do not start to put in place a proper system of rigorous testing, tracing, isolating and supporting, we will face more and more restrictions in the future?

Mrs Foster: Personal responsibility is a huge part of it. I say to the Member that, whilst we can put in place all the restrictions that we desire as a Government, if they are not complied with, the virus will continue to spread. Therefore, people need to take personal responsibility for their actions, and they need to understand why that is important. I accept that we have a role in that in laying out why it is important that they take those decisions. I look across Europe and other parts of the world, and I see the targeted interventions that they are making. I think that, last night, the Netherlands made an intervention similar to what we have been talking about today.

It is a time-limited intervention. It is one that, we hope, will bring the R number below 1. At the minute, the R number is about 1.4 or 1.5. We need to get it below 1, because that takes away the transmission of the virus doubling and what have you. It is important that we get the R number below 1, and that is what the intervention is about. When that happens, we can come out of the intervention. That does not mean that we then go around as though everything is normal again. We will still have to do the basics: social distancing and washing our hands. That is the problem: in the summer, we became quite lax and relaxed. We thought that things had gone back to normal. Unfortunately, however, the virus was still there. As a result, we are now in a situation where we have to make these interventions. I very much regret that that is the case.

Nothing about this is inevitable. If people now take personal responsibility for themselves and start to do the right things, we can ensure that this intervention will be the one that made the difference and stopped the transmission of the virus.

Mr Lyttle: Our health, our economy, our education and our well-being rely on everyone in our community complying with the guidance. It is a stark wake-up call to everyone in the community that we must comply with the guidance to protect life and livelihood.

Will formal childcare and school-based childcare remain open? What evidence led to a ban on youth sports rather than on spectators gathering at youth sports?

Mrs Foster: Childcare continues as is; there is no change in respect of childcare. We think that that is very important, because we know the pressure that parents were under during the March lockdown. By "school-based childcare", I think, the Member means after-school clubs and such things. Obviously, they will not happen because the children will be on a holiday and there will be nobody at the schools.

With regard to youth-based contact sports, obviously, contact sports are not now happening for anyone apart from at elite level. We hope that that will stop transmission of the virus. The Member's reference to spectators is well made, because there have been some bad examples.

We have seen them over this past number of weeks. Unfortunately, we have seen the consequences as well. We have seen clusters and spikes in various places, and that is no accident.

Spectators will continue to be able to attend Irish league games, rugby and other elite sports but they will be very much socially distanced and regulated. We will work with the different sporting codes to make sure that that is the case, and, of course, all these things will be looked at again in the round.

Mr Speaker: A further six Members wish to speak. If all Members take a shortcut to their question, we might just get them all in. Please, keep your questions concise.

Mr Stalford: I will try not to take that as a hint.

Mr Speaker: Do not take it personally.

Mr Stalford: First, I thank my Rt Hon friend for her statement. It is important that the health messaging was not undermined by my Rt Hon friend at any point. She has striven valiantly to do her best throughout this crisis. Others, including a signatory to the statement, had a hand in undermining public confidence in the health messaging. The measures that have been announced will impact on the lowest paid, particularly in the hospitality sector. Can she give me further information about that?

Further, yesterday's 'News Letter' editorial stated:

"It is incredible that school closures could even be back on the table, especially as the idea was rejected by ministers in the Republic."

Will my Rt Hon friend resist, absolutely, any attempt by the Executive to extend the closure of our schools? It is crucial that our children and young people have access to their education.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. We are all very conscious of hospitality workers and the fact that many of them are on zero-hours contracts and the minimum wage. When I say that the new job support scheme is not as generous as the furlough scheme, I am thinking about those people. The new job support scheme gives two-thirds of payment, and, of course, that is only if you are not on a zero-hours contract, have not been made redundant or you are a flexible worker. We fully accept that, and there is a need for us to be aware of that. I hope that, later today, I will meet with representatives of Hospitality Ulster, and we will discuss some of these very important issues.

The Member is right to point out that, at the highest level of their tiers in the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, in England, there is no suggestion that education will close. Let me be clear: education is not closing in Northern Ireland. We are just taking an extended holiday break to facilitate the R number being pushed down. We are not closing schools. It is very important that we say that. Schools will come back on 2 November. I want to say that very loudly. I know that there has been some commentary this morning from very worried parents who think, "This is the start of it. Now, we are going to be in a situation where our children are not going to be at school. We are going to be back in a March/April situation where children are not getting the learning that they need to move ahead with their lives". To be very clear: children will return to school on 2 November. I think that that is absolutely the right thing to do.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, First Minister, for your statement here today. This has been a very difficult decision for all members of the Executive, and we have to get it right. It is really difficult to get the balance right between lives and livelihoods. I have a very close friend who is fighting this virus in the hospital. So I am very cognisant of the public health messaging and welcome it here today.

I am going to ask you a question that is not my question: I got it from a business leader in Derry. Bearing in mind that the city is already nine days into these restrictions, he said, this morning, "These restrictions are a further disaster for Derry, the lowest paid and hospitality. Most hairdressers and barbers rent a chair. The city centre is a scary place right

now. Foyleside is 77% down in footfall. Taxis and small retailers are on their knees. Never mind poverty, many will be plunged into destitution. Supporting these restrictions without support going directly to these individuals is enormously dangerous and unforgivable." What would you say, First Minister, to that business leader?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I am very sorry to hear that she has a friend suffering from COVID in hospital and I send my good wishes to her.

11.30 am

The Member asked a direct question. I recognise that her local government area has been in these restrictions for a period. Hopefully, we will see, in the next couple of days, whether they have had an impact on the transmission of the virus. As Members know, a lag time is required for there to be any impact on transmission. I hear what she says about the lowest paid. We will have a discussion tomorrow to try to give clarity around all of that.

Retail remains open, as she knows, but I accept that footfall is down. When we first introduced household restrictions in such places as Ballymena and Belfast, we saw footfall go down dramatically. Retail is still open. You can still travel in a taxi, with the appropriate safeguards, but I accept that some people will hear this announcement and not want to be out and about. It is OK to be out and about, so long as you take the appropriate safeguards. That is important, because we need to get the balance of keeping the economy going — at a lesser level than we would like, I accept — and making sure that we keep people safe. She will know that, given that her friend is in hospital suffering from COVID, and her great passion for the economy of the north-west. I understand that.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for attending this morning. I join Pam Cameron in paying tribute to the families who have lost loved ones this week due to COVID. I am sure that the First Minister will join me in that. I also pay tribute to the many teachers who have been on their knees for a number of weeks and have done their best in our schools.

Schools are facing ongoing pressures. Will the First Minister give a commitment that the Executive will support the Finance Minister and the Education Minister in providing what is required for the development of blended learning and online facilities that may be

required for further school omissions? Will she also give a commitment that all evidence taken in respect of further school closures will be from the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer?

Mrs Foster: I send my sympathy and empathy to those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19, or to any other disease, over the past period. It was remiss of me not to do that when Mrs Cameron raised the issue.

I think that I have been clear that the last thing that we want to do is to get to a situation in which we are in blended learning — that awful phrase — again. I do not think that it helps children, and it is a huge pressure and strain on teachers. I pay tribute to our teachers for having taken up that strain earlier this year. I have pointed out that, from the PHA's point of view, there are low transmission rates in schools, but I accept that there are issues around schools for which we may need to put in more mitigations.

As a policy objective, we should always try to ensure that our children have an education and are at school. That is what I want to ensure, and I hope that I will be joined in that by other Executive members. I hear what the Member said about taking interventions in school, and blended learning, but we also have to take into account the impact that being at home and not integrating with their peers will have on children's future life chances and mental health. I have seen that across the piece when children — maybe lone children or only children — have been at home on their own, without any interaction with other younger people. It is not good for children not to be together. Therefore, my point of view is that education should be our number one priority. I hope that that is the view of all Members.

Mr Catney: Thank you, First Minister. Given that the restrictions come into effect on Friday, it is crucial that businesses have clarity. Will you commit to publishing the full guidance to businesses by the end of the day and outline the support that will be put in place?

Mrs Foster: I accept that businesses need clarity and guidance, and that they need to see the regulations. That is why the restrictions are coming into place on Friday as opposed to today. That will give time to deal with the issues so that people will have clarity. As I have said many times, I hope that the support package will be signed off tomorrow as well.

Miss Woods: I thank the First Minister and Health Minister for coming to the House. I note that the closure of some of our sectors, while having others open, was surely, on the face of it, a purely political decision, without seeing the evidence of transmission in certain settings. It was also, surely, a political decision not to have adequate support in place before today's announcement, but I am glad to learn that information is due tomorrow.

There remain so many questions. What is unnecessary travel? Is it enforceable? What is a "mass event"? What happens to hotels and B&Bs? What about those who were shielding before? What do they do? Will there be information for them? For the hospitality industry, the majority of whom have gone above and beyond to keep their staff and customers safe in exceptionally difficult circumstances, is the new furlough scheme it?

Finally, First Minister, a specific question: when exactly do these changes come in? Will you clarify when closures come in for the hospitality sector? Are last orders in pubs and restaurants tomorrow night or Friday?

Mrs Foster: The Member covers a lot of ground in a short time. Shielding is an issue that Mrs Cameron raised, and I did not get a chance to answer her. Shielding is being looked at by the Chief Medical Officers across the four nations. During the lockdown, the Member will recall, we took a huge, blanket approach to shielding. The Chief Medical Officer told me this week that nearly 280,000 people were shielding, which is incredible. When we started, we thought it would be about 80,000 people. We need to take a more nuanced approach to that. There are a lot of people who are vulnerable, or perhaps older, who are very worried at present, and we must recognise that. We should not use terms like "lockdown", because those people will hear those terms and feel that they should not be going out anywhere, should just be in the house and they will be afraid and worried about that. Shielding advice will come forward, but it will be more nuanced and targeted than in the past.

I recognise the Member's frustration that she does not have all the answers. I will share something with her: I do not have all the answers. We are dealing at speed with a pandemic. A man sitting in front of her will tell her what it is like to work at speed. We are trying to work through all the answers, and the reason that I came to the Chamber was to give Members a heads-up that this is the direction of travel. We will have the guidance, regulations

and, hopefully, all the answers in place before Friday.

In answer to the Member's specific question, six o'clock on Friday is the target for when these regulations will take effect.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the First Minister for giving us this update. No one is in any doubt about the extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in and the fact that the Executive are having to work at pace. The statement does not make the purpose clear: will the First Minister make it clear? Although I welcome the action that is being taken today — it is absolutely essential given the skyrocketing incidence of the virus — the purpose of today's actions and the further restrictions is not to beat the virus in the short term, because it will not do that. It is important that people do not think that, in four weeks' time, the virus will go away and it will be OK by Christmas. The blunt truth is that this is about buying time for our health service, in order for it not to be overwhelmed. Will the First Minister confirm that? Will she also agree that it would help to assure the public of the purpose of the action if the full, detailed guidance from the CMO and the Chief Scientific Adviser were published?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. What we are trying to do, as we have always tried to do, is push down transmission of the virus and get the R number below 1. At the minute, it is about 1.5. That is what this targeted intervention is designed to do. It is also designed to make sure that the capacity of our hospitals is able to cope with what comes in. We are also trying to minimise deaths. We set out those priorities in March, and those three priorities were to the fore.

When, in four weeks' time, we come back to the situation, ideally we want to see that the R number is below 1. Then we can lift the restrictions and then we will continue to have to do all the basic things — social distancing and handwashing — to keep the virus under control in that fashion. We have to take these interventions now because the virus has gone out of control in some places. I very much regret having to do this. I come to the House to do it with no joy at all. We are interfering with people's lives, their ability to make money so that they can live, and we then have to try to support those people. That is what we have to focus on in the coming days.

Ms S Bradley: The statement relies heavily on calls for responsible behaviour from all. I wholeheartedly support that, but further to Mr

Nesbitt's question earlier, will extra resources or support be provided to all those who are assisted and charged with carrying out enforcement duties?

Mrs Foster: We will continue to work with those people who want to help us on compliance and enforcement of the regulations. We are working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, with local government environmental health officers and with the Health and Safety Executive on other issues.

To go back to the Member's first point, personal responsibility is a wonderful thing. We have all been given free will, but I hope that people listening today will realise that if they do what we are asking them to do then it has a consequence and will help us get the virus under control. I can make all the restrictions I want, but if people are not prepared to comply with them we are going to have a really serious problem in a couple of weeks' time. I do not want to be in that place. I urge all Members to work with us so that we can deal with this terrible situation that we find ourselves in.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the First Minister for her answers. There are still concerns around schools, First Minister. In the event that pupils have to be educated at home, will the two-week timeframe be used constructively by the Education Minister and others to ensure support for children and young people from more deprived communities who do not have access to technology and to printing of papers etc? Will additional support measures be given to those families, in a very targeted way?

Mrs Foster: The Member makes a very relevant point. When our schools are closed it is the children whom she referred to who suffer. It is those children who do not have access to the internet, who do not have Wi-Fi and who, perhaps, have parents who are not that interested in education. The usual line is, "If it was good enough for me, it's good enough for you", which, frankly, is not good enough.

We need to make sure that our young people are in schools, because then they get the attention that they need from their teachers and peers. I really appeal to people to think about this. We need our young people in school, especially our vulnerable young people. It is a terrible thing to say, but for some of our vulnerable young people the safest place for them is school — it is not in their homes. Therefore, to me, this is an absolute priority and we have to ensure that our young people have schools and safe places to go to and can then

develop as the young people we want them to be.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes questions on the statement. Thank you to all who contributed this morning and I thank the First Minister and the Minister of Health for attending.

Adjourned at 11.43 am.

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