



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic by the  
Executive and the Executive Office:  
Mrs Arlene Foster MLA, First Minister; and  
Mrs Michelle O'Neill MLA, deputy First Minister

20 May 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for The Executive Office

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic by the Executive and the Executive Office:  
Mrs Arlene Foster MLA, First Minister; and Mrs Michelle O'Neill MLA,  
deputy First Minister

20 May 2020

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)

Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Martina Anderson

Mr Trevor Clarke

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr George Robinson

Mr Pat Sheehan

Ms Emma Sheerin

Mr Christopher Stalford

**Witnesses:**

Mrs O'Neill

deputy First Minister

Mrs Foster

First Minister

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Ministers, thank you very much for coming along today. The purpose of your visit is to give the Committee an update on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Executive Office and the Executive. Some members of this Committee are also members of the Health Committee and other Committees that have various elements of their work directed towards the COVID-19 response, but the overall responsibility lies with you as the joint First Ministers in the Executive. I will now pass over to you for an update on how you are getting on and where you are. We will take questions after that.

**Mrs Foster (The First Minister):** Thank you very much, Chair. I welcome the opportunity to give the Committee an overview of the current state of play on COVID-19 and the Executive's response to it.

Throughout the pandemic, the management of COVID-19 has been the Executive's number-one priority, as, I am sure, you will all appreciate. Our objective has been to save lives, protect the public by reducing the spread of the virus and avoid the NHS becoming overwhelmed.

I acknowledge the contribution that the Assembly has made to our response. The decision to halt temporarily Assembly questions and the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response have allowed the Executive to maintain our focus on directing our response, while ensuring that MLAs still have the appropriate oversight of what we do. Ministers have lived up to the commitment that there would be regular updates to MLAs, with 19 statements having been made either in plenary sittings or to the Ad Hoc Committee, with further statements planned for this week

and next. I believe that the current arrangements have worked well for everyone and show the joined-up and, frankly, mature approach that we need to take when dealing with a crisis of this magnitude.

The Executive have been meeting regularly throughout the crisis. Initially, we met daily as an Executive COVID-19 crisis management committee, in recognition of the fluid and fast-moving nature of the situation that we all faced. We then moved to a pattern of meeting three times a week as an Executive and, more recently, to twice a week, with the majority of business conducted still related to COVID-19.

The scale of the challenge posed by COVID-19 is so great that we have enacted our civil contingency arrangements. That is in line with the approach taken in other devolved Administrations and in Whitehall. The operational response to the pandemic has been coordinated by the Northern Ireland hub. The hub structure ensures a coordinated and joined-up situational awareness of issues across Departments and helps to promote a whole-of-government response to the key issues.

We put in place measures such as the lockdown and social distancing to try to control the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives, as I said. Taking the decisions to implement those measures was not easy, but I have no doubt — we all have no doubt — that that action saved lives.

We have been working closely with the UK Government and, indeed, the Irish Government on the response. The deputy First Minister, the Health Minister and I regularly attend COBRA meetings with the UK Government, and the appropriate Executive Ministers attend the UK Government ministerial implementation groups. That close engagement has led to good outcomes for us. For example, through engagement on the ministerial implementation group, we were able to secure specific support for our airports and ferries and to maintain supply chains between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We cannot be complacent. We have managed to slow the transmission of the virus and bring the R value down, but there is still a job of work to do. I know that the Committee is taking a close look at how we protect those in our care homes, who are often the most vulnerable in our society, and the Health Minister is looking specifically at what actions he can take on that issue. You will be aware that he recently announced that testing would be rolled out to all care home staff and residents, and we very much welcome that.

We have recognised that everyone has a part to play in tackling the virus. We have asked people to take difficult steps such as social isolation and staying at home, where possible. To enable them to do that, we have put in place various support measures. Some have been implemented on a UK-wide basis, such as the job retention scheme, while others have been developed and implemented by us to address the specific needs of Northern Ireland, including schemes such as the rate relief scheme, on which there was an update yesterday.

We constantly review the supports available. We have agreed to extend the rate relief scheme, as well as providing support to councils and charities. We have put in place specific measures where people face particular hardships. For example, the Department for Communities has been working with councils to provide food packages to some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Last week, we published the document explaining our approach to our decision-making. We emphasised that the pathway would not be influenced by dates — I know that that may be something that members will want to discuss today — but rather be informed by science, with progression towards more relaxation happening only when we have the evidence that it is safe to do so. That may mean delay in reducing relaxations. Members will already be aware that we have eased restrictions in a number of areas, in particular allowing outdoor gatherings of up to six people; allowing places of worship to open for individual prayer; and allowing some other outdoor activities that do not involve shared services and where social distancing can be maintained. We have, of course, been taking account of the advice from our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser, and we feel that the easements that we have made so far are proportionate. Of course, we would like to go further. We are very conscious of the impact that lockdown has, including, particularly in the week that is in it, its impact on mental health. We have to recognise, however, that COVID-19 is still with us and therefore have to take a balanced approach. We will continue to engage with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser; indeed, the deputy First Minister and I have a further meeting with them both this afternoon.

While our top priority will remain our focus on COVID-19 until such times as it has sufficiently diminished, our next priority is to mitigate the impacts on our economy and to do all that we can to aid

recovery. As I indicated last week, the Minister for the Economy will bring forward a road map for recovery for the economy, and that will come to the Executive very shortly.

I also recognise that our education sector has been particularly affected, with school closures and the alternative arrangements that have had to be put in place around exams. The Minister of Education will bring a paper to the Executive on next steps for that sector, also in the near future.

To support a safe return to work when the time is right, the Economy Minister has asked the engagement forum, which was set up, as you know, a couple of weeks ago and is chaired by the Labour Relations Agency (LRA), to consider the guidance recently published by the UK Government to assess whether we can improve on the workplace guidance that we already have in place. That should not be viewed as a trade-off between people's health and economic development: I take the view that the two are inextricably linked and that one cannot happen without the other.

Going forward, we will remain focused on the health and well-being of our people, our society and our economic renewal and recovery, driven by science, and we will emerge from the current arrangements in the safest way we can.

I will hand over to the deputy First Minister.

**Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister):** Thanks, Chair, and thanks for inviting us to speak to you today. I thank the Committee for all the work that has been done over what are probably the most challenging times that any of us have been through. For the Executive, this is the largest task that we have ever faced, and we have to work our way through it to deliver as comprehensive a response as we can to try to protect people. How we handle COVID-19 is literally a matter of life and death.

While COVID-19 is primarily a public health issue, it has implications across the Executive. We have therefore approached the challenges caused by COVID-19 methodically, taking a whole-of-government approach and being led all the while by the science and the medical advice. We are also conscious of the need to maintain public support for what we do, and we need to be open and transparent in all of this. The press conference that we have every day, hosted by Ministers from across the Executive, has played a key part in the communication of this work. To support the whole-of-government approach, we put in place a strategy that has helped to guide us in our response. The strategy identified three key priorities: the health and well-being of our citizens; our economic well-being; and societal and community well-being. Everything that we have done has been aimed at delivering the best outcomes and is measured against those priorities. We have worked consistently across departmental boundaries throughout our response. Our Departments are focused on delivering support where it is needed and where it will have most impact. The work done by the Minister for Infrastructure to support NHS workers using public transport and the work done by the Minister of Health and the Minister for Communities to support people who are shielding are excellent examples of cross-departmental working.

We have had to take some difficult decisions as an Executive. We have had to take decisions to restrict the movements of our citizens and to direct certain premises to close. Those, by any means, are not easy decisions — they are the sorts of tough decisions that no Government would ever want to have to take — but they have been necessary to protect public health. Unfortunately, as we speak today, by and large, those restrictions remain in place. As we advised the Ad Hoc Committee, however, we are keeping the restrictions under review, and, as soon as the evidence allows, we will take steps to relax measures, recognising all the time that, if the situation deteriorates, we may have to tighten measures again.

COVID-19 has impacted on the whole of society. As an Executive, we have worked to put in place measures to provide support to those who face hardship. We are supporting our businesses through grant schemes and rate relief, and we have supported our ferry companies and airports to keep critical goods moving. We have discussed the potential for further expanding the rate relief, and we agreed yesterday the support package for the rate relief scheme and for those who face hardship. We are also helping the most vulnerable in our society, who face additional pressures; for example, we are making direct payments to those who are in receipt of free school meals and delivering food packages to all the people who are shielding. Those measures have built on other available supports, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme and the supports that are available to the self-employed.

We recognise that we cannot work in isolation to address the pandemic and that coordinated action is required across these islands. We are engaging with London and Dublin to ensure that our response is as joined-up as possible. A key example of our commitment to ensuring a coordinated response

was the signing by both Health Ministers on the island of the memorandum of understanding to facilitate greater cooperation on public health matters that have an all-island element, as is clearly the case with COVID-19.

We are also working hard to ensure that our care homes are properly supported and that residents are protected. We know that older people are particularly susceptible to the virus, so we must ensure that measures are in place to protect them. The testing of residents and staff has been significantly expanded through the Ambulance Service, which has already started to provide a mobile testing service for care homes. Homes have also been asked to check staff and residents twice a day for symptoms, including a temperature. As an Executive, we are committed to ensuring that residents in our care homes are as safe as they can be.

Testing is also key to tackling the crisis. As well as the work that is being done in care homes to support front-line workers, the Minister of Health has rolled out targeted testing in some areas where there have been clusters of outbreaks, such as in some food processing plants. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has been offering guidance to employers to ensure that the appropriate steps have been taken to protect workers and ensure their safety. That is building on the work that the stakeholders' forum has done.

While COVID-19 has been our priority, we have not forgotten that people still suffer from other illnesses and need treatment. We know that some non-urgent treatments have been postponed. As far as possible, however, treatments have continued. We are conscious of the need to ensure that people can access healthcare when they need it, and the Minister of Health is working hard to ensure that that is the case.

We recognise that we need to look forward in the middle of the crisis. We have published information on how we approach coronavirus decision-making and have set out our five-stage plan for slowly easing restrictions. We have been clear that we will not be guided by the calendar; rather, we will be guided down this pathway by considering three key criteria: the most up-to-date science that we have; the ability of the health service to cope; and the wider impact that the restrictions have on health, society and the economy. We have already moved on some elements. We will move on others as soon as it is safe to do so.

One element that plays an important role in limiting the impact of a second wave and helping to break the transmission of the virus, is testing, tracing and isolating. The Executive are currently considering a support strategy. The test, trace and isolate support strategy will need to sit alongside current advice on good hand hygiene and social distancing, however, because, as we all know, COVID-19 will be with us for some time to come. As an Executive, we will continue to work together to deliver the best response to COVID-19 that we can.

I will finish there, Chair, so that we can take questions and hear views.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** OK. Thank you very much.

Ministers, I begin by thanking you both and all the Executive Ministers for the work that you have undertaken in the past number of months. I am sure that it has meant very long hours for you, and I know that it will have meant sacrificing family time and personal time. At the beginning, everybody was scared and fearful, but people had to step up and do their work. We put on record our thanks to the Executive for the work that has been done.

In some respects, the speed of the response has been quite impressive. Things have been achieved that we would not have expected to be achieved in ordinary times, and it has been good to see that. It has also been good to see the five-party response. Moving towards that is something that we all aspired to in the agreement back in January.

There is always a "however" or a "but" [*Laughter.*] I hope that the questions that Committee members and I ask are taken in the spirit of accountability and transparency. I know from my questions that there is no doubting everything that has been said at this stage.

Moving on to questions, I will take you back to the very beginning, because, at the beginning, it was a bit unstable. Relationships did not appear to be good, and I fear that that may have caused a little delay in some of the responses. That delay potentially led to some people catching the virus who did not need to. Do you feel that lessons were learned from that? Do you feel that the Executive Office, which is often two separate wings, is fully functioning and together?

**Mrs Foster:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for your good wishes. When the deputy First Minister and I came back into government with all the other Ministers on 11 January, we knew that there would be challenges ahead and things that we would have to work our way through. Little did we think that we would have to deal with a global pandemic, frankly.

What might have been perceived as differences, at times, we have worked through. I am not sure what decisions you are referring to that might have been taken faster, but, if you have examples, you can give them to us. I certainly feel that we have worked our way through those things, because, despite our different backgrounds and different political philosophies, we had a desire to protect the people of Northern Ireland and a desire to make sure that our National Health Service was protected and would be able to cope with whatever was coming towards it. I know that there will be a lot of looking back over the next number of months and years on how we dealt with all of that. All that I can say to you is that, as we were faced with the challenge, we were determined to do right by the people who had elected us, who had put us here and who wanted us to act on their behalf.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you for your complimentary words. There will be plenty of time for reflection after all of this. The priority now is the fight that we are still in. We are still in a battle with COVID-19, and we all need to remain focused on that. Arlene is right: we had three years of trying to get the Assembly established, and I, for one, am very thankful that we are in our positions of political leadership to chart our way through this period.

We are five parties working together in the Executive. That will always be challenging, even in the most normal of times. These are not normal times; this is very abnormal. It is alien to all of us. It is only natural that, at different times, we have a different emphasis and approach. That is just life, but we have been able to agree well and even disagree well and work our way through things. I hope that the Executive have been able to demonstrate that to the public, who elected us to come here, to look after them, to take the right decisions and to show leadership. I hope that the public can see that the Executive have value in our society and that we have been able to lead and take our own decisions, decisions that suit our population. I hope that people can see that. In the aftermath, there will be a time for reflection — I absolutely support that happening, because you have to learn from everything that you do — but, for now, we need to continue to work together to work our way through this. COVID-19 is still spreading, and we want to mitigate any further waves coming down the line.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** The Executive Office is two parties, but the Executive is five parties. Feedback from people on the ground is that they prefer it when they see their Executive working together and pulling in one direction. That gives faith, courage and hope to people out there, so it is good to hear that that will continue, as it is in people's best interests.

On the subject of the five-party approach, I was just looking at the communication on the various initiatives that have been progressed. I mention this because it might knock Christopher off his chair. We know well that there are 44 Executive press officers, so when we look at the —

**Mr Stalford:** It will hardly knock me off my chair. It was me who raised it. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** There are plenty there. Yet, we get announcements at 11.00 pm on the TV. Sometimes, when announcements are made, the inbox lights up afterwards. You get a deluge of people asking, "Does this mean we can do that?", "Does this mean the other?", "Are we allowed to go here?" and "Can we hug our grandchildren?". It seems, sometimes, that there could just be a bit more detail in the information. That is number one.

My second suggestion is that there might be a single point of entry, be it an email address or a telephone number, that MLAs can contact with very specific questions. It might mean that, the day after you make an announcement, that inbox might get 100 emails, and then it will be quiet until the next one. People come to us for information, but we are not experts on what the rules do or do not permit. If there is not clarity in the statement, it would be good to have somebody named in the Executive Office whom we could go to and ask, "Does this mean that that sport can happen?" or "Can this activity can take place?". Is that a possibility?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The portal already exists, Colin. You can feed questions into it. As I have said in the Chamber, I encourage Members to submit questions. We encourage you, if you cannot find the information on the portal to assist a constituent or someone who has been in touch with you, to feed questions into the system, so that the hub, which is at the centre of our response, is able to populate the information onto the system. People have a great desire for information, because this is coming

thick and fast. There are that many schemes and things being rolled out, and there are a lot of unanswered questions. As an elected representative, I certainly got them, as an elected representative; everybody did. We wanted to provide answers, but I do not think there were always answers straight away, just like that, the way people wanted them. Of course, there is always learning in these things. We have an information service that we tried to populate as best we could. I will certainly not sit here and maintain that all the information was always there when people needed it. We will have to improve that as we go on.

**Mrs Foster:** Just today, we have written to the Speaker in response to a letter from him on information points. We have provided him with central contact points for MLA and party queries for each Department. That will probably go out to everybody from now on. We have sent that in, and it contains an email address and a telephone number. If there are specific issues around a Department, you can send them in to a central point in that Department.

We have tried to move as fast as we can. Sometimes, that means that we are laying regulations — I think that the first regulations were laid on a Saturday evening. We were trying to get them in place to protect people and, as a result, people asked, "Why are you laying regulations at 5.00 pm?". I remember the press conference that Michelle and I held the day before. The press were asking, "Where are the regulations? Why have you not laid them?". We laid them as fast as we could, and that was on the evening of the Saturday, which did not suit some people either. We are learning as we go along, I think it is fair to say, with all these things. Michelle has been quoted as saying, "There is no rule book", and there is not, in any of this. You said at the beginning that some things had happened in a way that you never thought the Civil Service could deliver: for us, too, that is exactly the case. Things that normally take a month or far longer happen overnight. We will look back at all this and see what we can learn and what positives we can take out of it, as well as, obviously, what mistakes were made.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We said that, as we move through the easements and are able to lift some of the restrictions, once we decide that we can do it, we want to get it out as quickly as possible. However, there has to be a bit of a plan around the communication of that. We heard this week that, when we made an announcement about the outdoors, some people were not ready to open up things. We listen to all that, and we will try to communicate better to allow people to have the information.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** That Saturday night was definitely a good example of where the phone lit up afterwards. I think it kept going until about 2.00 am with all of those, but it has to be done and it has to be responded to.

This morning, I attended the Health Committee, and we were looking at decisions that the Health Minister has made about tracing and the use of the app. There are two elements of that that worry me. Number one: is it definitely being considered and pursued that the apps in the North and South can communicate? I do not wish to open up a whole UK/Ireland issue, but we are on an island, which is different from another island, where they have an app that is relevant to there. If we simply feed into that system but miss the one where we have cross-border workers and other people travelling back and forward across the border, it is imperative, if it is a tracing app, that they communicate with each other so that we know. Have you been getting assurances on that? Also, both of you have made the point that the virus will be here for quite a number of years. Given the Brexit situation, is it likely that some sort of special arrangement will be needed in order to share that information? Data will be held in the South and in the North: will we be allowed to communicate that data back and forward? We could be in a different place by 31 December.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We had a North/South meeting of Ministers — was that yesterday? We are all losing track of the days, but I think that it was yesterday. That is one of the issues that we discussed. Remember that the app itself will only bring some added value to a proper, traditional tracing system; it is not the one solution to how we contact-trace. That being said, it has benefits, so it will be really important to develop it. I know that the Health Department is looking at options, but the development of the app will only be of value if it operates so that we can share data across the island. It needs to have North/South and east-west.

My personal view is that I do not support the centralisation of data. That is a problem from a human rights point of view. I have a personal view that, whatever is developed in the here and now, the movements will, in the main, be North/South and not east-west. That is not a political issue; it is about the usefulness and effectiveness of the app. We will continue to have that conversation at the Executive, and I do not believe that there is a settled position on it yet. There are obviously options

that can be explored, including building our own app that has connectivity so that we can talk to each other on the island, as well as east-west.

**Mrs Foster:** Michelle is absolutely right to say that the app is only part of the contact tracing system. For some people, the app is the be-all and end-all, but it is not. We have heard from the Health Minister that a number of people have been trained to get "boots on the ground", as Simon Harris, the Minister in the Republic, described it, to deal with contact tracing. That has already started, so we are pleased about that. We are the first in the UK to be involved in that sort of scheme.

I understand that the NHSX app is more or less ready to go and will be available for people to download, if not next week, then the following week. The important thing to understand is that, as Robin has already indicated, contact tracing will happen for a year. That being the case, we need to be able to have east-west and North/South connectivity, because, obviously, people will be travelling in the rest of the United Kingdom. We are having a lot of conversations about how we can get the technology so that they can speak to each other. We need to make sure that all of that happens in a timely fashion, because it will be with us for some time. It is important that we have all of the information so that we can trace people in the community, particularly where there are clusters.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** My final question follows on from some of that. I will preface it by saying that, politics and perspective on the EU aside, coronavirus will have a horrendous impact on our economy. It will shatter our tourism and a lot of our business sectors. If an extension of and a delay to the Brexit transition would deliver a better economic outcome for our businesses, would it not be a good thing to ask for?

**Mrs Foster:** That is quite a pejorative question, Chair, because you are saying "if". Of course, we do not know the costs that would be associated with an extension to transition and all of those matters. You will know that a command paper has been issued today in relation to the UK Government's approach to the implementation of the protocol. We have not been able to look at all of the detail of that thus far, but it certainly looks as if there is a desire to minimise disruption in relation to Northern Ireland. There are four foundational principles for how they will move forward, and we welcome that. We very much want to see as little disruption of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland as possible. There is a commitment to unfettered access for Northern Ireland into Great Britain, and we welcome that as well. It is important that we look at that approach to the protocol and move forward to make sure that we get a good outcome for businesses in Northern Ireland.

**Mrs O'Neill:** There is no agreed Executive position on the extension. Perhaps we will get there, but we are certainly not there at the moment. Sinn Féin has said publicly and on the record that it would support an extension, just from the point of view that businesses are already dealing with the shock of COVID-19 and would then have Brexit on top of that. Clearly, a lot of progress has not been made in the negotiations, so I think that an extension is wise. That is my personal view, obviously, but there is no collective Executive position yet.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Obviously, you will get information that we, as a Committee, will not necessarily be privy to, so you are in a better position to make that call on whether an extension would be of benefit. Is that something that you can discuss?

**Mrs Foster:** As you know, we had a Brexit subcommittee set up. That has now merged into the Executive, so we have a standing item on the Executive to discuss Brexit once a week. We will discuss it again at the Monday meeting, as I understand it, so I am sure that we will discuss the information that is in front of us then.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** As a Committee, we are keen to get you back the next time to look at Brexit, given the time. If that is three or four weeks down the line, we might all be in a better position to explore that. Thank you for answering my questions.

**Mr Beattie:** Ministers, thank you for taking the time to come and speak to us. It really is enlightening. I will just echo what the Chair said: cohesion in a crisis is really what you need to beat a crisis. I will be honest, and it is not popular to say this: I have seen cohesion. That is positive, and people want to see that. That is partly through your leadership and, clearly, partly through the leadership of the other Ministers. Of course, there will be differences of opinion; we know that. We will have differences of opinion, no doubt, here today. I just want to put it on record that cohesion is really important.

I want to expand something, if I can, please. This is an all-government approach to dealing with COVID-19 — I get that, and it needs to be — but, in doing that, we have primary and secondary effects. The primary effects are clear to see: we are stopping people from being able to go out and socialise, and there are issues with regard to healthcare and other things. What about the secondary effects? Other things around how government works are being knocked out of kilter. Can you give a general view of how government is working at the moment, with all of the other things that might have been pushed off because of COVID-19 — not using COVID-19 as an excuse, but just on the realities of how government and the Executive Office are working?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Because we have had to have so many meetings, we are working in a very joined-up way now. We were initially meeting three times a week, and then we were very conscious that the Assembly should not lose its role. We were able to adjust to create the Ad Hoc Committee to allow statements and allow Ministers to come in. That is all important, because we all deserve to be scrutinised, as well as supported, through this phase. Because the Assembly had only been established again for a number of weeks before COVID-19 hit, everything focused on COVID-19 but, as we progress through the response to COVID-19, we now have to get back to doing other things that we had promised, for example, in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) deal. We want to get back there, and we are moving gradually into that space again. Government has to keep functioning; we still have to keep doing the day-to-day as much as we can. Clearly, for a while there, everything was parked because everything was COVID-19-related. We are now quickly moving back to the space where we want to get back into the Assembly. Let us talk about building for the future; let us talk about delivery on the commitments that we made and that we all, from our own perspectives, fought for throughout the three years that the Assembly was down. Let us get back to getting those things back on the agenda. That is where we should get to very quickly.

**Mrs Foster:** We have shown that, when there is a necessity, we can be flexible, and that is true of politicians as well as the Civil Service. There were things that, we had been told, could not be done. If the Finance Minister were here, he would talk about procurement and the fact that a lot of the procurement rules have had to be — I will not say "dismissed", but certainly we have had to be very flexible around some of those issues. That is something to look at in the future, because we want to be able to support our businesses, moving forward, and make sure that we work with them. There has been flexibility in how we were able to respond.

As Michelle said, some things that we committed to doing in 'New Decade, New Approach' have gone past their time frame. Therefore, we will have to revisit some of those to make sure that we pick them up when we are out of crisis management and moving on to recovery and renewal.

I am not, of course, minimising the impact that this has had on our society, on the general health of the population — the non-COVID health issues — and, of course, the economy. People were shocked by the unemployment figures yesterday. If we did not have the furloughing scheme, they would be much worse. My real concern is what happens to some of those jobs when that furloughing scheme tapers off and comes to an end. How can we support those people? What mechanisms do we need? We are in the response phase. When we move to recovery and renewal, there will be huge challenges for us, Doug.

**Mr Beattie:** Thanks, Ministers. You are right, and you are absolutely clear. May I be a little more pointed about something that I am trying to get to the bottom of? First Minister, you said that there were some things in 'New Decade, New Approach' that we had bypassed and would have to revisit. A couple of weeks ago, the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) was talking to us about its fantastic work. In ten days' time, the victims' pension scheme is supposed to kick in. Have we nominated an administrator for that yet? Have we found out who will fund the scheme? Is there still a united approach in the Executive, or has the victims' payment scheme become a casualty of COVID-19?

**Mrs Foster:** I do not think that it has become a casualty. It certainly has not happened as fast as we would have liked, in keeping with the commitments that were made. Some of those, of course, were made in Westminster, not in this place, and we are fulfilling them.

We still do not have clarity on funding. It is our view that it should, because it is a Westminster initiative, come from Her Majesty's Treasury. We certainly do not have the wherewithal in the block grant to deal with it. Through the Finance Minister, we have been taking it up with the Treasury. We need to continue to do that. Officials are working in the background, but it is difficult to form a way forward until we know, in particular, where the funding is coming from, Doug.

I am committed to this and want to see it happen. We have raised a legitimate expectation with a range of individuals across Northern Ireland, and we need to fulfil that expectation for them. That is my view.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, we stand over all the commitments that were made in previous agreements, including 'New Decade, New Approach', and that includes the victims' payment scheme. We know that people are very anxious while waiting for this. We have to be sensitive to those who were injured and have been eagerly waiting for this for some time. Funding and guidance issues need to be clarified. Certainly, we want to get to the point where we are able to progress the provision of a pension because that was part of the Stormont House Agreement.

I have met representatives from WAVE and many of those who were injured. We need to make sure that the payment is made to all victims and that it is made in a way that allows people to have a better quality of life. That is what it is about.

**Mr Beattie:** OK, thank you. I do not want to labour this. A pointed answer would be really useful. You mentioned, Michelle, societal well-being and the people who are expecting this to kick in 10 days' time. If it is not to happen in 10 days' time, is it time to tell them, "We are sorry. We have not made this deadline. It will not happen in 10 days' time"? For the very reasons that you have just told me, people need to know that we are still committed to it, that there are issues to fix and that it will not happen in 10 days. Is that a fair assessment?

**Mrs Foster:** It is a fair assessment that there needs to be communication. The Victims' Commissioner has, I think, written to us in the past few days. Is that right, Michelle? We will, of course, speak to her about the issue. Some victims' groups are making representations as well, as you would expect. I am disappointed that we have not been able to make progress, but I am realistic enough to know that, when we are in the midst of the pandemic, it is difficult *[Interruption.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Is that George?

**Mr Robinson:** Sorry.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** OK, thank you.

**Mrs Foster:** I hope that we can now get a renewed focus on the issue. We may discuss the historical institutional abuse issue later with some of your members, Chair. That is a better story, but we want to make this into a good story for people as well.

**Mrs O'Neill:** The victims' payment is one part of a package of legacy measures that need to be implemented. If we are to be successful in healing the wounds of the past and making sure that we do not burden a new generation with that past, we need to deal with legacy in the round. All of these things need to be delivered and implemented. We need to show leadership because this is a crucial part, in my mind, of reconciling people and allowing people to move forward.

**Mr Beattie:** You are right, of course. I do not really have any more questions, but I suppose that, in the round, this is about people understanding which elements of government are just not able to hit the mark at the moment. A fully functioning Programme for Government is a bit down the road, and I guess that people want a point to which they can look forward. They want to see where we are going on this, so that we can have that societal well-being. They want us to start to look at healthcare, as we are doing, not just on COVID-19 but dealing with cancer sufferers. It is exactly the same in the political sphere. We need to come out of the COVID-19 bubble, which we have to be in now, because we need to start looking at the other issues that people expect to be addressed. Historical institutional abuse is absolutely one of those. If there is a good story to come out of that, it would be great to tell that good story soon. I certainly have concerns, but thank you very much for your answers.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks to both of you for coming in. I will stay for a moment on COVID-19. Nearly 500 people are now dead; 2,000, maybe, across the island. At the Health Committee this morning, I was saying that there are many unique things about the pandemic and the disease. One unique thing is that nearly everybody has been affected in some way. My next-door neighbour was one of the first to be diagnosed. Alex Easton said in Committee this morning that his sister, who is a nurse, has been diagnosed with it. Others have elderly relatives who are shielding, and they cannot see them. The kids are off school and so on and so forth.

At the time of the Health Committee, I should have been at the funeral of a long-time friend who died a couple of days ago from COVID-19. I played Gaelic football with him at the same club, and he also played Irish League soccer for Distillery. He was an all-round superb athlete, a great family man and a loyal friend. Unfortunately, given the circumstances, there are problems with funerals and people cannot go to them. My friend was from a relatively big family, yet only 10 people can go to the graveside. We cannot have a wake in the normal way. Has any thought been given to a permanent memorial to all who have died? Despite the number of people who are dying, we often do not hear about them. We are not socialising in the same way, so we might not hear that somebody we knew has died. The family do not get the same support as they would in normal circumstances. I ask the Executive to give some thought to a permanent memorial to the people who have died so that they just do not end up as statistics somewhere and that recognition is given to their faces. Will the Executive consider a project like that?

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is a good suggestion, and we should certainly look at it. You are right. You highlight the real human tragedy of all of this for how we traditionally bury our dead. Our normal, natural instinct is to want to be surrounded by our family and friends. People come to pay their respects and so on. Everybody is being denied that right now, and I think that there will be an aftermath for people with regard to their emotional well-being and how they deal with their grief. We have to recognise that, and that is why we are conscious of people's mental health and well-being and their emotional well-being. When making decisions on what can or cannot happen, we have to be guided by the science, but we have to weigh the benefit of doing something to control the spread of the virus against the negative impact that it has on individuals and society. That is always a fine balance.

The idea of marking this period is a good one, and we can work on it together. Generations to come will talk about this. Children will remember that they were not at school. They will remember the experience of going back to school. We will all remember it for various reasons. A lovely memorial would be very positive to do when we get to the other side of this.

**Mrs Foster:** That is right. How we mark this period is a discussion that we should all have as a society in Northern Ireland.

Pat, on a personal level, I am sorry for your loss. Many have suffered in this period in the way that you describe. When you mentioned Distillery, I thought of my late father, who was a real Distillery man. It is a difficult time for people who are grieving. They cannot do the traditional things that we do to grieve. They cannot go to the house of the deceased, attend the wake and help people to get through their grief. In Northern Ireland, we are all used to huge funerals. It is a way of life for a lot of rural communities in particular. That will take its toll on people in Northern Ireland, and we have to be alert to the fact that people have not been able to grieve properly. Somebody said to me that, normally, when you lose somebody, you remember the first times: the first time you met your neighbour, the first time you went to a shop or whatever. However, there is none of that at the moment because we are not doing that.

A huge job of work is to be done on mental health. As you know, the Health Minister has appointed a mental health champion. The action plan was launched yesterday, and there is a section in that on COVID-19. We have a large job to do in dealing with the aftermath of COVID-19, as well as trying to deal, currently, with the response to it.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thank you for that. It will be an important issue, because, as you said, Michelle, in 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years' time, people will think back to this and talk about the time of COVID or the time of coronavirus, however it will be known.

I want to move away from COVID-19 for a minute and on to normal business. The Committee has written to the Executive Office on a number of issues, including clarification of timescales for Bills to establish an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, an Irish language commissioner and a commissioner for focusing on Ulster Scots/Ulster British language, art and literature, as agreed in NDNA. Can you indicate when those will be agreed by the Executive and brought to the Assembly for the proper legislative process? The Committee will have a role in scrutinising that legislation.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We were just in the door and working through all those things. A lot of the preparatory work has already been done on the legislation. COVID meant that we had to scale back all the work that was not relevant to the response, but that commitment remains and, hopefully, we will be in a position to schedule some of the legislation, in conjunction with the Speaker's Office, in the immediate

future. We are starting to get back to regular business, so, in the next number of weeks, we will be able to pick up on some of the legislation that, we said, we would deliver on in NDNA.

**Mr Lunn:** Thank you both for coming today. It is good to see you. I want to talk about the process of opening up generally. When you announced the pathway and the steps, my impression was that step one would start at about the end of the month. I agree completely with you that you should not give dates for these things, and you have not, which is good. It was then all the more pleasing when you decided to bring forward some of the things in step one within a day or two of publishing the steps: I think of the amenity sites, golf courses, garden centres and, particularly, the provision to allow up to six people not from the same household to gather outdoors. Does that mean that, in terms of the length of travel and distance, somebody in living in Coleraine, perhaps, could visit their elderly mother in Lisburn because she needed a bit of assistance? Is it as simple as that, or is there still the feeling that people should not travel long distances?

**Mrs Foster:** Under the regulations, someone with caring responsibilities would be able to travel anyway, Trevor.

**Mr Lunn:** If they do not have caring responsibilities?

**Mrs Foster:** In order to see somebody outside, we would like people to be reasonable in their travel; in other words, not travel huge distances. The legislation had to be changed to allow people to go outside and to travel, and, because that change has been made, people can travel. The Health Minister has a clear view that people should be reasonable and not make long journeys just to be outside in a park or whatever. It is, as we say in our document, about trying to form a partnership between the population of Northern Ireland and the Executive so that, when we try to make a move forward, we have a partnership approach and people will work with us.

When Michelle and I spoke to the Church leaders last Friday, we were really saying to them, "We would like to allow private prayer in churches, but we want you to work with us. How will you make sure that people are safe? How will you ensure that surfaces are cleaned?". That is because shared surfaces are the real challenge, as people can pick the virus up from them. To be fair, they were all very good about that, and that partnership approach has worked well. Likewise, I think that the Golfing Union of Ireland was taken a little by surprise that we had moved into step 1, despite the fact that golf is specifically mentioned in step 1. They have now opened their golf courses and did so in a way that was safe and socially distanced. People have been, on the whole, quite responsible. We want to continue to have that conversation with people and have a partnership approach.

**Mrs O'Neill:** The only thing that I will add, Trevor, is that we had said that inbuilt into the plan was flexibility. Obviously, we demonstrated that we were able to move when the science said that it was safe to do so.

The case has been made for different things, and you can make a rational case for changing many things. However, you have to remember that changes have a cumulative effect. If you do not monitor the lifting of restrictions and watch what happens for a while, the R rate could start to rise again and the virus to spread. We do not want that, and that is why we are doing things gradually and incrementally. I think that we have allowed ourselves enough flexibility to move. We know that people desperately want to know when they can get a hug from their grandchild; that is a question that is asked of me —.

**Mrs Foster:** Just generally a hug. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Stalford:** In that regard, I am quite comfortable with social distancing. *[Laughter.]*

**Mrs Foster:** You are not a huggy person.

**Mrs O'Neill:** You should hug more, Christopher.

It is the connection with family that people want, and we want to get there as quickly as possible. Our message is still the same: we will get there more quickly if people minimise their movements and be reasonable.

**Mr Lunn:** I completely agree with you; I was not being critical at all. The population has been responsible and has responded to the responsible approach taken by the Executive, so I commend you. You have even got the support of the independent sector now *[Laughter.]* I have a couple of quick questions. Two major suggestions were made in the past few days from two unlikely sources. The archbishop suggested that the transfer tests should not be taken this year. Is that a decision for the Minister of Education, or is it an Executive decision?

On the same basis, our good friend Michael O'Leary announced that he was going to start flights from Belfast from the 3 July in what he called "aluminium tubes" where it is impossible to achieve social distancing, so good luck with that one. Is it an Executive decision to allow that, or is it a commercial decision by Ryanair? Who would allow or disallow such a decision?

**Mrs Foster:** It is a commercial decision. The rules on social distancing — I know that there was a lot of annoyance when the Aer Lingus flight was packed to the gills and there was no social distancing — are for the Civil Aviation Authority to enforce, once you are off the airport and in the air. In the airport, I think, it is the role of the Health and Safety Executive, if I am right. However, once you are on the airplane it is the Civil Aviation Authority. I did not know that about our good friend Michael O'Leary. That is news to me.

As you know, the Education Minister does not have the power to set transfer tests. Two companies set the tests and roll them out. Doug asked me about that in the Chamber. We do not have a similar view on academic selection, but I think that there is a need to look at children who have not been receiving help when they have been off school. Some children have been receiving online learning every day and have been getting support at home from their parents, who have been at home because they have been furloughed or are not working. There are other children, however, who do not have that support, and that is where my concern lies, Trevor. I said yesterday that there was work to be done on how we can support some of those children.

I know that Michelle has a different view from me on academic selection. I believe in academic selection because I am a product of it. I believe in it because it does not matter what your background is, you can go forward and go to a grammar school. That is what happened to me, but I know that others take a different view.

**Mr Lunn:** I am a product of it as well, and I do not believe in it, but that is by the way.

**Mr Stalford:** You took the ladder once you got up it.

**Mr Lunn:** I am sorry, Michelle; I do not know whether you wanted to say something. As far as differences between you are concerned, I would be far more surprised if there were not, frankly. You are from opposite sides of the political spectrum, for goodness' sake. You are proving that you may have differences but you can work together for the greater good. That is what it is about, so fair play to you; keep it up. I know that that was not a question.

**Mrs Foster:** Thank you.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Fair play, and thanks for that. Doug brought the question up and said that he loved us all working together, "but —" *[Laughter.]* I am also a product of academic selection — I went to a grammar school — but I still do not agree with it. It is wrong on many fronts. The unregulated bodies that will bring forward the tests later in the year should be ashamed of themselves. Children have not been at school for so long and will not be in their normal situation come September. We still do not even know what that will look like; that will have to be worked up. To put children through that right now is totally unacceptable.

I welcome the bishops' comments with regard to boards of governors. Boards of governors need to assert their authority right now. Anyone who sits on a board of governors has a huge responsibility for the welfare of children. I encourage boards of governors to think carefully about that and about whether there is a better way of allowing children to move to their next stage in school.

**Mr Lunn:** There must be a case for delay, at least. Thanks very much.

**Ms Anderson:** Thank you for being here today and for your presentation. The display from both of you in the Chamber when you announced the five steps was talked about far and wide by many

people in the media. It illustrated the sense of cohesion that we have talked about today. You are working together despite your differences. We come from five different political ideologies, in many respects. This is a contested space, as we all know, and a contested place. We all have our differences. Gavin Robinson made some remarks about Irishness. As an Irish republican, I can say that when — I know that you will not say "when" — this country is united, anyone who is British will be British, and we will defend their right to be British. I did not think that it was helpful of him to say that.

I appreciate the five steps pathway that you outlined and the way in which you did so, giving confidence to people that you would not relax the measures until it was safe to do so. That message resonated with people. There are people who are frustrated and want out, while another group says that we must make sure that we do not move fast in the wrong direction. Your leadership has given them the confidence that you will not move us fast in the wrong direction.

You will not be surprised if I ask a question on Brexit, given the day that is in it. I appreciate that you have not had time to consider the announcement or statement, as it was made only today. It confirms the information that the two junior Ministers gave the Committee last week that the British Government will implement the protocol. We heard today about declarations on goods moving from Britain. Anyone who has heard me say it before, particularly you two, will not be surprised to hear me say again that Brexit is an unmitigated disaster. Unfortunately, those declarations and the impact that they will have on business will be part of that.

I want to ask about the Executive's responsibility to design and operate border control posts here. Even if those were an enhancement of what is already there, unfortunately, we will need border control posts because of the implications of Brexit. Do you accept that that is the case? How will that be moved forward, and whose responsibility will it be? I say that as a member of the Infrastructure Committee, which has some responsibility for ports policy and regulation. I know that the port operators may have to give this information to the Agriculture Minister, for instance, and it will obviously engage the Minister for the Economy too. I assume that all Executive Ministers will be involved in how this is taken forward.

**Mrs Foster:** Thank you for that, Martina. Obviously, we disagree on Brexit and on a number of areas. Today's paper is clear. We have been asking for clarity on all those issues, and some clarity has been given today. Of course, we will continue to work on the technical parts. The entry designation for sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and food and animal origin matters will have to be dealt with. From what I can see thus far, the important point in the protocol is that it talks about minimising that, which I welcome.

Obviously, I did not like the protocol at all. However, we have to make sure that we minimise it as much as possible. I am pleased to see that, again, it talks about unfettered access from Northern Ireland into the rest of the UK market. It states that tariffs will not be paid on goods moving between parts of the United Kingdom; that there will be no new customs infrastructure, which is good news as well; and, of course, that we will benefit from any new trade deals. We will have to work through the technical pieces. As far as I understand it, most of our ports are private ports. It will be more an issue for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. However, how we move forward on the implementation of the protocol, working with the UK Government, will come back to the centre through the Brexit subcommittee and the Executive. There will have to be close working between us and Whitehall on those matters.

**Mrs O'Neill:** As you recognised at the start, Sinn Féin is opposed to Brexit. However, it is helpful that there is at least some more clarity today. The EU will assess for itself the proposals that have been published by the British Government. It will have to decide whether they satisfy the full implementation of the protocol. You are right: the report has just been published, so we are working our way through it. However, it confirms that the British Government will seek to put in place border patrol posts at ports of entry here for all categories of agri-food goods coming from Britain and elsewhere outside the EU. That is work that the Executive will now have to engage on. We have to consider all those things now, but full implementation of the protocol is surely where we need to get to.

**Ms Anderson:** From the engagement that I and others have had with business, I know that one of the reasons why business is saying, "Look, we need an extension" is their belief, which, I think, is right, that we are not ready. We have seven months left before we get to that point, and I think that the demand on that will increase.

I am conscious of what both of you and the paper have said about the relaxation of measures when it is safe to do so. Obviously, what I say about the economy is in the context of public health, people's safety and saving lives being the priority. However, I would like to ask about the economic recovery challenge. The paper states clearly — somebody said that it was hidden away, but there was nothing hidden away about it — that every month was akin to a recession here. We are now in the third month of it. We talk about rebuilding and sustaining jobs, which will be crucial, particularly given the information that you imparted about the number of people who will likely lose their job as a consequence of the pandemic.

I want to acknowledge, first, the Executive's support for the north-west in the Inclusive Future Fund. That was received very well in Derry and the north-west, so I really do want to acknowledge it. All the political parties across the city were on the one page in pushing for a decision on the medical school at Magee, so, secondly, I want to acknowledge the fact that you were able to take it into your office — from where it was, falling between two stools — and make that announcement only a few days ago. That was well-received by the Chamber of Commerce and all the sectors. I am conscious of the work that has been done on that by many people in the city.

I want to ask about how we will go forward. You touched on the kind of economic relief and recovery schemes for people as we move out of this. The amount of finance that has been allocated to businesses and to keep people in work may not be sustainable forever, but we need to look at how we can utilise what we have learned from this and how we can build on that support for both job creation and a sustainable, equal economy. I have heard both of you talk about how the society that we build coming out of this will hopefully be different from the one that we had going into it, especially in respect of our health service.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Obviously, the initial stage was all about response. There are three phases in our approach to the public health emergency: response, recovery and renewal. We are still in the response stage, but we are also moving towards renewal. We have started some conversations around how to build the economy on the other side of this. The unfortunate reality is that not every business will survive; we are realistic enough to know that. A lot of the schemes that have been taken forward have been an attempt to help people to survive it. We also know that some sectors will be worse off than others. Hospitality, retail and tourism have been annihilated by the impact that it is having on them. A lot of the supports that we have been able to take forward have been tailored. The rates package that was announced initially and extended yesterday is targeted at specific sectors and allows us to provide support for the hardest-hit sectors up until the end of the financial year. Childcare providers will be able to avail themselves of that as well. You then have a raft of other different support packages.

We have to be honest enough to say that not every business is covered. Some people have fallen through the cracks of the schemes. I am sure that the Committee is alert to that. The hardship scheme was an attempt to catch businesses that have fallen outside the initial schemes, but we are getting feedback to say that that does not cover everybody either. We have to keep looking at it in trying to support people as best we can. We have an economy to maintain and to lift out of the impact of COVID-19, which, as you described, has been the biggest shock. The Executive's focus will be on how we can build the economy. We should learn lessons from the work that was being done in the engagement forum, where the Labour Relations Agency, the Health and Safety Executive, business organisations and the trade union movement come together. There is an opportunity for us all to look at how we can improve the economy and to see if there is anything that we can do better in the future.

**Mrs Foster:** There are some positives that we will take from this period and use in the recovery and renewal phase. I know that it is not to everybody's taste, but remote working has been a feature for a lot of people. How can that work in the future? Do people want to be able to work from home two days a week or three days a week? It may also help, Martina, with something that I know that you and I and Michelle are very interested in, and that is the regional dispersal of jobs across Northern Ireland. It would perhaps allow people to have their office somewhere but be working from home. That, I think, is a positive.

As of yesterday's announcements about rates, we have the most generous rates relief across the United Kingdom. I think that that was not really picked up. We have given a rates holiday to everybody for four months and then we have targeted it for the rest of the financial year. That is not the case in other parts. It was targeted right from the beginning, and not everybody got a rates holiday. I think that we should recognise that and recognise the funding that we have received from the Treasury in London and the way in which we have been able to tailor it to Northern Ireland. Michelle is right; we have not been able to capture everybody in those schemes, and, no doubt, we will be looking to see

who has been left out. The hardship fund comes online, I think, tonight at 6.00 pm. We will see who has been left outside that hardship fund and whether there is any way that we can intervene to help those people as well.

There is a lot of learning, and there is also experience from across the world. How are countries that are ahead of us with the transmission of the virus coming out? What are places like New Zealand and South Korea doing differently, and can we look to emulate some of that and to put it into our package of moving forward? When I was Economy Minister, it was always about us being small enough to care about what was going on in our whole economy and our whole society but big enough to do the business. We should use that flexibility and the fact that everybody knows everybody else to try to make a difference for Northern Ireland as we come out of what has been the strangest and most difficult of times for an awful lot of people.

**Mr Stalford:** Pennies do not fall from heaven; they have to be earned. Once this is over, we need to have an economy at the end of it. I appreciate that it is not the central driving element in determining the speed at which the draconian laws are relaxed, but one of the central elements of it is the R number. What is the R number presently?

**Mrs Foster:** The R number fluctuates from day to day, Christopher, and what we are really interested in is the trend of the R number over a week's period. So, at the end of each week, we will be trying to look at where the R number has been that week and at the impact that the relaxation has had on the R number. We will not know the impact that it had for probably a couple of weeks because the R number looks at intensive care unit (ICU) admissions, admissions to hospitals and all of those things. As you will have heard from the Health Minister, the ICU numbers have, thankfully, fallen well down now, so that allows us to make some of the relaxations that we have made. I am not giving you a figure for the R number, in case you had not figured that out yet, but we will be talking about where the trend over this week is at towards the end of the week.

**Mr Stalford:** The ICU numbers did not fall in the Stalford household. I had to miss the Economy Committee today because my son stood on a piece of glass and it had to be pulled out of his foot. Has any indication been given as to what the premium or best R value should be to allow a further relaxation of the measures?

**Mrs Foster:** It is not just the R number. It is also about the number of cases in Northern Ireland at the time. Do you want to pick that up, Michelle?

**Mrs O'Neill:** You can get fixated on a figure, so I know that a lot of people ask whether, if it gets to 0.5, for example, that means we can go. It does not work like that. You have to build in enough space. You are trying to keep it below 1. The objective is to keep it always below 1. When you lift measures, it takes about 14 days to three weeks before you see the impact of the spread, which, obviously, would bring it back up. We opened up garden centres and recycling centres, and you will not know the impact of that for about 14 days. At the start of that, say, for example, it was at 0.5, but, when you measure it again, it could be at 0.8 or 0.9. So, you have to keep enough flexibility in there to allow the space to grow, because the virus will grow and come down and grow and come down. We are allowing ourselves enough space, but it is not just that. That is the main science behind it, but then you have to look at the three things that we talked about: how you measure health service capacity, how you measure the societal impacts, and how you measure the impacts on individuals. We set out a risk-based matrix, which looks at each restriction and then measures it to see where it sits on the scale at any given time. Then, the science tries to tell us how much impact that may have on the R factor.

**Mr Stalford:** How many weeks do you think that the R number would need to be consistently below 1 before we would get to the very final point of the end stage?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The whole approach is incremental and gradual, so I actually do not know whether you can measure it in those terms. We do not know how the virus will spread. It would be wrong to say, "Well, we could get there in three weeks' time". You could make a best guess of it, but it depends on how the virus behaves, and that depends on how people behave.

**Mrs Foster:** It also depends on the fact that we will have contact tracing at that stage, so we will have much more information about how many cases there are. Many people out there in society are asymptomatic. They have had COVID-19 and have not even realised that, but they may have carried it to somebody else. That is the problem. That is why we need that tracing piece alongside the economic

recovery piece and our step-by-step plan. It is all integrated so that we can move forward. That is the way in which we want to go.

**Mr Stalford:** Over the last period, a lot of amateur epidemiologists have emerged. I am now going to play one. From the evidence that we have seen, there seems to be an indication — and I think that this is fair and that I can say it without fear of contradiction — that those who are least at risk are younger people, while those who are disproportionately more at risk are older people or middle-aged people who are diabetic. If that is the case, by what logic do we continue —.

**Mr Robinson:** Hello.

**Mr Stalford:** Hello, George. By what logic do we continue to keep schools closed?

**Mrs Foster:** First of all, I want to say this to you, Christopher: this is a novel coronavirus, so we are learning all the time. Look at the impact that the disease has had on people of ethnic origin across the water. The way in which it has spread has been absolutely incredible and devastating. Look at the impact that it is having on people who are obese. You are right to mention the elderly. That is absolutely the case.

The Education Minister will come forward with his proposals on all that in the very near future. I think that he will come to the Executive very soon with a paper on the reopening of schools. It is about giving parents confidence as well, because parents — you are one of them — are very worried about their children. At the start, people wanted us to close schools very quickly because they were worried about their children being carriers or suffering from it. Now, it looks as though the evidence is that children do not suffer particularly from it; quite the opposite, actually. How can we, then, open schools in a safe way? Planning for that will take some time. It is not too long until 1 June. Is it realistic to open schools again before the summer and maybe not have done all the planning? Would it not be better to do all that planning and then be able to come back afresh into a new school year at the end of August or beginning of September? People could start in then, as opposed to bringing them back, going off for the holidays, and then coming back again. The Education Minister has to grapple with those issues. I hear what you say about children. I understand it. However, we have to move in the way that we think is best for Northern Ireland. We will take all the advice that we can on that, even from amateur epidemiologists *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Stalford:** As a father of four who are under the age of 10, I assure you that I am not trying to get them out of the house. I can promise you that.

**Mrs Foster:** You are dying to get them back to school *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Stalford:** If, having run through all the various matrices and tests that there are, it was shown that schools could be reopened, do you think that there would be any scope or time for that in July and August in order to allow children to catch up? I have been doing some of the teaching, and Laura has been doing some of it, but, obviously, it is not as good as it would be at school. It could never be. Is there any scope for time to be used in July and August for children to catch up on what they have missed out on?

**Mrs Foster:** The Education Minister will have to consider that. I have already indicated in response to Trevor that there are kids who will do OK but some children have not had the support that they need. We have to acknowledge that, and then we have to think about how we can intervene and give them that support. The Education Minister will have to consider that.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I will just add that, as you acknowledged, you are not a scientist, nor am I *[Laughter.]* There is no doubt that children can carry it, and that is still a big concern. I also think that parents, right now, are thinking about what this will look like in September. That is the question on people's minds.

People are worried. Naturally, they are worried about children not having their normal education and about what the end of August or September will look like. That work needs to be done quickly by the Department of Education, working with the teaching unions, parents' groups or whatever that forum looks like. We need to start to paint out clearly for people what it will look like. Will it mean different cohorts going on different days? That is a challenge for a family. How do you manage childcare and all of that? You might have four children who could be at school on different days. What will that mean for the family unit? These are things that, I know, parents will quickly turn their minds to: what will that

look like for September? I welcome the fact that the Education Minister will bring forward a plan for that. People should work on the basis that it will be the end of August or September before we do it.

There are also practical things that need to happen. Schools will maybe need to adjust. How do you socially distance in a school, for example, in school toilets and shared spaces? All of those things need to be looked at. A substantive amount of work probably needs to happen there, and we need to use this time to get it ready.

**Mr Stalford:** You mentioned boards of governors. I am on the board of governors at my children's school. It is a 1950s building, so making it practical will be difficult. You are absolutely right about that.

Can I raise an issue about churches? Many churches in inner-city areas in Belfast do not have car parks but have enormous buildings that were put up at the turn of the 20th century. They were put up at a time when they had a congregation of 2,500; now they have 200. In my church — Ravenhill Presbyterian — our congregation could be accommodated in our building in the same way as we are being accommodated in this Committee room. Are there any plans around that or any idea around putting a scheme in place whereby, if a church has a big building but not a huge congregation — we are healthy enough — people could be accommodated in a socially distanced way? You know that it is really important for people, particularly older people, to get the sense of community that the church gives.

**Mrs Foster:** Christopher, we have been engaging very much with Church leaders in recognition of the role that faith plays in Northern Ireland. I very much miss church. I miss singing and all of that in a congregational way. I said to Trevor about shared surfaces: that is the problem in churches. When you bring people into churches — even 20 people in a huge building — they are still in a situation where they may be touching shared surfaces. To be fair to the churches, they very much want to work with us and to find solutions. We are listening carefully to what they tell us about their cleaning regimes and all of that, and we will continue to work with them.

Our medical advice says that we cannot allow a family to meet indoors. We can allow people to meet outdoors, because the virus does not spread as rapidly as it does indoors. We have to take that advice, Christopher, much as we would like to get back to people going to their Sunday services and other services. We have to try to work through this and find solutions, but we will keep talking to church leaders to find solutions.

We have, as you know, facilitated private prayer now. We have said that you can have drive-in church services — not "drive-through church services" *[Laughter.]* I understand that there is now some little difficulty about broadcasting rights and having the spectrum to be able to do a drive-in service. That is another little challenge that has popped up. There are all of these things that we cannot foresee, but we are working through them and will continue to talk to the Churches about it.

**Mr Stalford:** I have been contacted by another church, just up the road from Ravenhill — *[Interruption.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Somebody on the phones is watching the live stream, which is on in the background. That is about 20 seconds behind what we are doing here. We are hearing what we are saying but with a 20-second delay.

**Mr Stalford:** Chair, you mentioned my four questions. I have four without a preamble.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Yes. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Stalford:** Were there to be an extension to the transition period, the UK would continue to pay £11 billion net into the EU: is that right?

**Mrs Foster:** That is correct. That is why I raised the issue of costs. Look, we will not have a meeting of minds on the Brexit transition in this Committee. Michelle and I are happy to come back to talk about Brexit on another occasion.

**Mr Stalford:** That is fine.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Good man, thank you. We need to move to the phones. I am balancing a couple of difficult tensions. We have three people on the phones to ask questions, but we also have two representatives from the Community Relations Council who were expecting to give us a report at 3:00 pm. We should have left a fair bit longer for you.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We have a meeting to go to as well.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** You have a meeting to go to. I dislike having to ask the people on the phones at the end to be quicker with their questions. George, do you have a question at all?

**Mr Robinson:** I do indeed, Chair. I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their presentation. I commend the Executive Office for the sterling work that it is doing on our behalf.

I have a couple of questions. Have the Executive had any discussions with the Irish Football Association (IFA) about the season ending or continuing or whatever is happening? The clubs had about 10 matches to play, but the season is officially over. Has an extension been granted? Have there been any discussions with the IFA about what is happening with Irish League football?

My second question is about testing. Maybe this has been answered. Unfortunately, the phones are terrible, and the sound has been absolutely atrocious. I can hardly hear people speaking. I will ask my second question anyway: will care home staff be tested alongside carers and ambulance crews etc — in fact, all NHS staff? We have seen what has happened in the care homes, and testing of all NHS staff would be very advantageous. Will that take place?

**Mrs Foster:** George, I understand that the junior Ministers have been speaking to the three sporting codes — the IFA, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) — about a range of issues. We will certainly ask them whether they have any updates on Irish League football. That is probably a matter for Deirdre in the Department for Communities, because she has the sport remit. We will take that away and try to get you an answer.

The Minister of Health has announced universal testing for residents in care homes and the staff. I understand that testing sits at about 40% for residents and is being ramped up every day. Other key workers can avail themselves of testing at the national testing sites. If they present there, they can get a test if they need one.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Are you happy enough, George?

**Mr Robinson:** May I have a quick supplementary?

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Yes, of course.

**Mr Robinson:** Pat mentioned funerals: the sooner that situation is resolved the better. I appreciate the reasons why — social distancing and so forth — but it is a very emotive situation. I have had a text in the last couple of hours about a funeral in Limavady today that was, apparently, attended by about 100 people. People have died in care homes and only 10 people were allowed at their funeral. There were anything up to 100 people at that funeral today, apparently. People are starting to ask why.

**Mrs Foster:** There certainly should not be 100 at the funeral. I know that some people find a way to pay their respects by standing at the side of the road as the cortege goes past. As long as people socially distance, there is no difficulty with that, but there certainly should not be that number of people at the graveside. That should not be the case.

**Mr Robinson:** They walked right from the house to the graveyard, roughly two miles.

**Mrs Foster:** Right. Maybe you would like to take that up with us off-line, George. That is fine.

**Mr Robinson:** That is grand. Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Emma, you joined next. Have you a question?

**Ms Sheerin:** My thanks to the Ministers for their presentation. I echo what George said in relation to care homes and the fact that they have been disproportionately affected in all this. They are in the front line.

I want to ask about the stakeholders' forum that is convened under the Labour Relations Agency. It seems to have worked well during the crisis. Is there a plan to use the same model to bring together everyone — employers, workers' reps and government — together to navigate the economic recovery?

**Mrs Foster:** I do not think, Emma, that we have had a full conversation about that. The Economy Minister is currently engaging with the forum on the advice from the UK Department, to see if there is anything extra that we need to add from a Northern Ireland perspective. She is engaging with that forum at the moment. It is, obviously, something that we will continue to discuss at the Executive.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I concur with your commentary and George's on nursing homes and care homes. That has to be where we are focused. I welcome the fact that there has been some improvement. We listened carefully to the comments of the Older People's Commissioner, Eddie Lynch. We met him last week and listened intently to the concerns expressed. As has been described, the battle is in the care homes, and that is where we need to be focused.

I commend all the staff in care homes. This has been a really trying time for them. We clap every Thursday for our carers and are so appreciative. However, I am sure that those people have felt overwhelmed, at times, in the middle of this crisis. I put on record our thanks to them all.

The stakeholder forum is a really good example of how you can bring together all the partners. I met yesterday with the Chamber of Commerce, and they raised the point that the collective approach to these things is very helpful. If we can do more of that, it would be a really good thing.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Are you happy enough, Emma?

**Ms Sheerin:** Yes. Thanks for that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Trevor, have you any questions?

**Mr Clarke:** Like others, I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for what they have said today and for the work that the Executive have done over the past number of weeks. Arlene, you mentioned the furlough payments. We would have been in a very different place with respect to people who are employed, had the Tory Government not been so generous with some of the funding that was brought forward. However, as the Chairman says, there is always a "but". The self-employed are still a wee bit anxious that they are only benefiting for a three-month period. Some say to us, "I have to continue to furlough my employees until August, September or October"; however, they are not receiving any payments beyond June. Are the Executive making any representations on behalf of the self-employed to address that anomaly? Some of the self-employed — I know the micro scheme is out — who only employ themselves say that they have missed this because there is no opportunity for them. They have missed the rates scheme, and they are missing this one. I say that with the caveat that the Executive have listened and made lots of adjustments to other schemes. I wonder whether they envisage an adjustment to this scheme.

**Mrs Foster:** There are a couple of things, Trevor. We recognise that any scheme will have limits. As MLAs, we are always contacted by those who are not captured by a scheme, and we have to find ways to help those people. That is what we have been trying to do through the schemes that we have announced. Undoubtedly, there are still some people whom we have not been able to capture, and it is ongoing work.

We continue to make representations in relation to the Westminster self-employed scheme. It depends in which sector you are, for the self-employed. Some people will go back to work in a tentative fashion, and the question is whether they need to have the scheme. It is a question of what sector you are in as to whether you need that continued support or can go out and work.

**Mr Clarke:** Thank you for that. As you said, some are going back to work. The other ones who are contacting me are childcare providers, particularly the small, independent ones. They are asking, as people go back to work, what the position is for them in terms of providing childcare for those who are

not seen as essential workers. There was provision made at the start of the process for them. The small childcare providers are asking what they will do now that the parents of the children whom they have been providing care for recently are going back to work.

**Mrs Foster:** Trevor, that is a challenge. We have talked about schools and about people returning to work, but the key to all of this is having the appropriate childcare in place to facilitate people to do all of these things. That is one of the reasons why we have a childcare rates relief scheme. I do not think that that is available anywhere else, and that is a recognition of the key work that the childcare sector does. If you are talking about registered childminders in their own home, that is a matter, I think, for the Department of Health in relation to how many children they can keep and what the advice is. We will take that to the Department of Health and try to get a bit of clarity on the childcare issue in respect of registered childcare.

**Mr Clarke:** I appreciate that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Thank you very much indeed. Ministers, thank you for giving us your time. You have given us more time than we had asked for today, but, if we were going to be talking about COVID-19 and the associated issues, we should probably have set aside a bit longer. You have also raised a load of issues in relation to Brexit. We will maybe come back to you and give a full, dedicated time to that, rather than it being something that we refer to otherwise.

**Mrs Foster:** Chair, just before we finish, I want to make this a good news story on historical institutional abuse. We have been able to make some payments in relation to that scheme. We have written to you today about that, and we will make a press release on that today. We think that that is good news, and it shows that, despite the COVID-19 issue, the panel has met and has made announcements. The two of us are very pleased about that, and I am sure that you are as well. I know that the Committee has kept a tight eye on the issue.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Thank you very much for mentioning that. It is appreciated, and I know that people will be very happy with that. We extend thanks for that and look forward to seeing that continuing at this time. Can you please extend to the rest of the Executive Ministers the thanks that were stated here earlier? Thank you very much indeed.