

NEWS*Wishing you a safe and happy Yuletide*

THE LATEST NEWS FROM STEWART DICKSON MLA

A LOOK BACK AT 2020

2020 has been a challenging year like no other. In the Spring businesses closed and people were told to stay at home to hold back the New Coronavirus (Covid-19), and protect each other and our health services.

Personally, you may be aware that last December, I had major life saving surgery in December to remove a tumour in my oesophagus. I am so thankful for the professional and compassionate care I received at the City Hospital, and can happily report I am well on the road to full recovery, and have returned full-time to the Assembly in September.



Covid-19 has of course dominated life at the Assembly over the past few months. I include in this newsletter a selection of stories of events over the past year.

The NI Assembly has spent huge sums of money to fund the Health Service and support businesses. Unfortunately, many have been left out of that support and I will keep pressing the Economy Minister to take action.

I hope that 2021 will be much brighter for all. Already, we have seen the start of a Covid-19 vaccination programme, to help end the Pandemic.

Northern Ireland has a lot of long term issues we need to be getting on with tackling and building a better future for all.

IMPROVING RAIL SERVICES

I have been pressing the Minister, not only on the upgrading of road infrastructure at the York Street Interchange, but also for the inclusion in plans of foundation strengthening below the single track Dargan Rail Viaduct.

So I welcome the Infrastructure Minister's answer outlining that this is to be part of the project, as it is vital to the future of the rail link to East Antrim.

Unfortunately for many users of the Larne Line and other services that pass Yorkgate, there is often a wait for another train to go over the single track viaduct which can cause delays and add time to journeys to and from the city.

With the strengthening of the foundations, we can ensure that the full dualing of the railway between Yorkgate and Central stations can be delivered in the future, and increase the frequency and reliability of Larne Line trains and other services using the track.

It would therefore be inconceivable that the road project would commence without future proofing the rail line.

**OPPOSING FRACKING**

In October I spoke in the Assembly on my opposition to fracking and petroleum exploration in Northern Ireland.

A few years ago the people of Carrickfergus faced the prospect of oil exploration at Woodburn Forest in the hills above the town. Fortunately for the town, and Northern Ireland, no oil was discovered, and the prospectors left. But we still have concerns from other energy proposals in the constituency with regards to gas storage in Islandmagee. Now there are concerns that fracking could take place in Fermanagh, something which I completely oppose.

I think we need to draw this to a close now, by banning the practice altogether. The risks are too high, for any potential benefits, not least as we move towards a post-fossil fuel era. Let's leave these fossil fuels in the ground.

PROGRESS ON BROADBAND

Businesses and local people need online connectivity more than ever before, and so it is vital that we work to future-proof the network, and make Northern Ireland an attractive place to do business.

I note the aim is to reach 60% of properties with full fibre by the end of March 2021, and there is still much work to do for many more rural communities in East Antrim, to provide for better connectivity. This is especially

the case for the agricultural, tourism and other sectors, as well as local services and schools as we try to resume daily life and business.



In September, I met with Openreach to discuss their plans for East Antrim, and press the need for rapid rollout to areas, especially those in the Glens and on the Antrim coast.

MINISTER'S ANSWER ON GP SERVICES

In November I welcomed an answer from the Health Minister that confirms GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their patients during the current Covid-19 Pandemic.

Over the past few months, I have heard numerous concerns from patients having difficulty in contacting their GPs, or reluctant to do so because of the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic.

In response to question from me about GP services, the Health Minister has confirmed that core GP services are continuing. Of course GPs will need to prioritise patients and ensure safety, and operating a telephone triage service is a key part of this.

SUPPORT FOR 'EXCLUDED'

Over the past few months I have been pressing the Economy Minister to provide financial support to those that were previously excluded from business grant schemes.

Those excluded comprise of a wide range of people from the newly self-employed to sole traders and others who have fallen between the cracks.

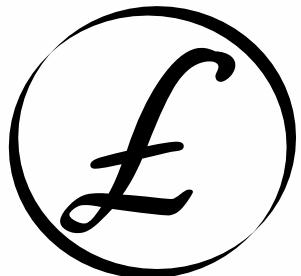
I was delighted to have secured a meeting with the Economy

Minister and ExcludedNI in September.

On Monday 16 November I was able to bring the Minister to the Assembly to answer urgent questions on the support scheme for businesses during the heightened restrictions.

The Minister confirmed that the rest of the scheme would open on Wednesday 18 November, and is also putting together a proposal to support those previously excluded.

I will continue to push Ministers on providing financial support as well as seeking the required information from HMRC for the Economy Department, so that we ensure that those excluded from support will be helped.



Contact Details

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WELCOMING FINANCIAL HELP FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

As Chair of the All Party Group on Social Enterprise, I am aware of the considerable hardship that the sector has faced over the past few months as a result of restrictions and changes to demand.

Social enterprises provide vital services to our communities, as well as exceptional employment and training opportunities, it is therefore key that we support them through this

difficult time until more normal business can resume.

I was therefore very happy, following months of pressing Executive Ministers, when in September the Department for Communities announced a funding support package for charities and social enterprises.