To ask the Minister of Education (i) to detail any plans she has to improve and increase information computer technology education in schools; and (ii) for her assessment of how meeting the needs of industry can be bettered with improving skills in this area.

My Department and the Department for the Economy are working collaboratively to develop a framework for 14-19 education which will help ensure that young people have the appropriate skills to thrive and work in the 21st Century. A key part of that work is to equip young people with the skills they need to succeed in the digital economy and connect to jobs of the future. My Department is committed to promoting the development of digital skills and uptake of qualifications in digital technology.

ICT is one of the three statutory cross-curricular skills at the heart of the Northern Ireland (NI) curriculum. Schools should ensure that pupils develop the three cross-curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT throughout their time in compulsory education. Using ICT aims to develop pupils’ digital skills and encourages them to handle and communicate information, solve problems, pose questions and be creative in using digital technology.

My Department also funds Business in the Community’s Time to Code Programme for Key Stage 2 pupils, as well as a range of programmes developed by Sentinus, including coding activities in primary and post-primary schools. Additionally, this year my Department has funded a coding programme for Year 6 pupils delivered by Sentinus as part of its NI1100 programme.

Recently, my Department collaborated with the Department for the Economy, Civica and a wide range of businesses to support the successful delivery of NI Digital Awareness Week for schools. This innovative online careers event was designed to showcase the many varied jobs and opportunities in the IT sector.

CCEA has worked closely with industry to develop modern, fit for purpose qualifications and currently offers GCSE and GCE Digital Technology along with GCE Software Systems Development qualifications. Over 70% of post-primary schools offer a GCSE in Digital Technology.

To support effective delivery of the curriculum, CCEA has developed a Digital Skills Progression Pathway which illustrates the opportunities for digital skills development that the curriculum offers. It suggests potential progression pathways through learning from Foundation Stage, through the primary key stages, to post-primary and qualifications.
To ask the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the average broadband download speed per household and business premises in South Armagh; and (ii) what plans he has to enhance access to high speed broadband in South Armagh for those properties that fall outside Project Stratum.

As South Armagh is not a clearly defined area, my officials have analysed available data from the Ofcom Connected Nations Update 2021: Interactive Report which reports that, of all premises within the Newry and Armagh constituency, 54% have access to full fibre broadband, with 83% able to access broadband service of 30 Mbps or greater. Please note Ofcom is currently undertaking new analysis with the expectation of proving an updated Connected Nations Report later this year.

My officials have also informed me there are 8,101 premises within the Newry and Armagh Constituency included in Project Stratum. Deployment commenced in spring 2021 and continues until spring 2023. Once completed, availability of Next Generation Access broadband services within the Newry and Armagh Constituency will increase to 99.5%.

The recent announcement by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, confirming extra funding for Project Stratum, is the result of a long and ongoing process of engagement. The additional funding will contribute towards addressing premises that are currently beyond the scope of Project Stratum, as well as premises that were omitted from the target intervention area due to issues with the Land & Property Services Pointer dataset, but have since been identified as being eligible. My officials expect to be in a position to announce these positive developments in the coming weeks, subject to final approvals and State aid Assurance.

In addition to Project Stratum, under the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport’s (DCMS) Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, the UK Government is providing up to £210m worth of voucher funding as immediate help for people experiencing slow broadband speeds in rural areas. Vouchers worth up to £1,500 for homes and £3,500 for businesses help to cover the costs of installing gigabit broadband to people’s doorsteps. Citizens and businesses can check eligibility on the DCMS website (https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk).

My Department is in the process of engaging with DCMS to explore what additional measures can be implemented in Northern Ireland under the UK Government’s £5 billion Project Gigabit, aimed at bringing next generation gigabit broadband to more than one million hard to reach homes and businesses.

The overarching aspiration of the Department is to ensure that all identified eligible premises benefit from public intervention, to ensure that the broadband connectivity gap that exists in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the UK is fully addressed.
To ask the Minister for the Economy for an update on the Shared Rural Network project.

As telecommunications policy is a reserved matter, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is leading on improvements to 4G in rural areas across the UK. My Department maintains regular contact with DCMS on all telecommunications matters and ensures that all local considerations are front and centre of any policy decisions taken regarding the improvement of mobile connectivity in Northern Ireland.

My Department fully appreciates the importance of good mobile connectivity, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland. My officials continue to engage with Mobile Network Providers (MNOs) and Mobile UK on an ongoing basis.

The Shared Rural Network (SRN) will see Vodafone, O2, Three and EE jointly invest over £500m to increase 4G mobile coverage throughout the UK. The UK Government will provide a further £500m to build new masts to eliminate ‘total not-spots’ – hard to reach areas where there is currently no coverage at all.

Plans to address 4G mobile coverage in the rural areas are already in place with O2, Three and Vodafone announcing they will build and share 11 new mobile masts in Northern Ireland. These Mobile Network Operators are currently working on finalising the location of 222 new masts in partial not spot areas across the UK, with exact locations to be confirmed by the end of 2021; planning applications will be submitted soon after, with the first sites going live towards the end of 2022. This work is due to be completed by June 2024.

Mobile Operator EE will upgrade 4G in 38 areas across Northern Ireland by the end of 2021. These improvements will be carried out through upgrades to existing telecoms infrastructure, requiring no additional masts being built. Extensive work on these upgrades is already taking place and it’s anticipated that by the end of 2021 many sites in partial not spot locations will have been upgraded and providing improved coverage as part of the Shared Rural Network.

As part of the legally binding commitments set out within the SRN, mobile coverage in Northern Ireland will reach 98% from at least one operator, and 85% from all four operators compared to 97% and 79% respectively today.

More information about the Shared Rural Network can be found here [https://srn.org.uk](https://srn.org.uk).

My Department also fully understands the need to embrace mobile technology, and is currently leading on the development of a Mobile Action Plan (MAP) for Northern Ireland. This is a key target in our Covid Business Plan. The MAP will identify the main issues that impact on the roll-out of mobile technologies and provide solutions that aim to remove these barriers, allowing us, amongst other things, to maximise the benefits of the SRN for citizens, businesses and visitors across Northern Ireland.
To ask the Minister of Finance what steps he is taking to ensure that (i) older people; and (ii) people who are not computer literate have full access to departmental services via telephone or a written application form.

A significant number of individuals here still don’t have the necessary digital skills required to take advantage of the benefits the internet offers.

My Department’s Digital Inclusion Team has been addressing this issue with the Go ON NI programme which identifies user needs and ensures those individual needs come first.

Events and support are focussed on the harder to reach digitally excluded sections of the population including:

- People who were over the age of 50.
- People with physical or mental disabilities.
- Socially or economically disadvantaged communities.
- Long-term unemployed; and
- Rural communities.

The Go ON NI programme is supported by three main partners comprising LibrariesNI, Supporting Communities and Business in the Community.

As a result of the COVID-19 situation the GO ON NI programme is providing training sessions remotely whereby anyone can join in. In addition, the “Connected” pilot project has provided free training as well as a loan of an internet enabled device for a minimum of 6 months to a limited number of elderly or vulnerable people. This project will be looking to specifically target the digitally excluded with a specific focus on rural areas through liaison with DAERA and the Rural Community Network.

The Digital Inclusion Team are pro-active members of the Digital Assist Steering Group, a cross-sectoral body chaired by Business in The Community (BITC) which helps ensure that government services are not delivered in isolation through appropriate interaction with organisations from across the private, voluntary and community sectors.

For more information on all current and future Go ON NI activities, please visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/go-on-ni or contact the Digital Inclusion team directly at future@finance-ni.gov.uk
To ask the Minister for Infrastructure what steps she is taking to ensure that (i) older people; and (ii) people who are not computer literate have full access to departmental services via telephone or a written application form.

While my Department is keen to move many of its services online, its services remain accessible via telephone or written application. Telephone calls and letters are accepted and responded to in the manner received. Application forms for various services are available in hardcopy, and alternative formats, on request.

I am aware of the difficulties the computer age poses to some of our citizens. My Department is contactable by telephone through the NIDirect call centre service at 0300 200 7898 (prefix with 18001 to use text relay service). Call centre operatives will assist in making bookings, payments, or providing advice on Departmental services.

You may also wish to note that my officials have been working with Libraries NI to consider a pilot service to assist customer access the online Driver and Vehicle test booking system.

I am also aware of the Department of Finance’s Go ON NI programme which identifies digital skill needs and provides training to help new users take advantage of the internet’s capabilities.
To ask the Minister for Communities what steps she is taking to ensure that (i) older people; and (ii) people who are not computer literate have full access to departmental services via telephone or a written application form.

Where an individual is unable to use the online platform a claim by phone for non-digital customers can be put in place to ensure they receive the support they require while claiming Universal Credit. A telephony claim can be requested by contacting Universal Credit on 0800 012 1331. If a person seeks the support of a third party organisation they can contact Universal Credit via the Trusted Partner line to arrange for a claim to be made.

Older people can apply for the other social security benefits that they may be eligible for through a Freephone service or a paper application form.

The Housing Executive has arrangements in place to allow customers who are older or who do not have access to, or are not familiar with, digital communication, to access and avail of Housing Executive services. Customers may request telephone assistance to apply for a service (principally the housing application) or support to complete an application form in writing (which includes Housing Benefit and Grants services). In addition (with regard to our Grants services) Housing Executive can provide additional help by linking the customer to a third party service that can assist the customer in making the application.

The Housing Executive also has a comprehensive communication support service which will provide assistance for customers with sensory disabilities and a Sign Language interpreting and Video Relay Service for Deaf customers. Housing Executive communication support service will consider the needs of all customers and where necessary provide a bespoke solution.
To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail on the uptake among College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise students of the Digital Poverty Support Payment.

In total 1,594, full and part-time, Further and Higher Education students from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) were eligible to receive the £60 payment to address Digital Poverty.

Of these 1,162 students applied for the scheme and the £60 payment was made electronically, using the bank account details provided by the students.

An additional three students indicated that they did not wish to receive the Digital Poverty Payment and a further 429 students did not respond to the letter, email, text and face-to-face requests from the College to take up the opportunity to receive the payment.