



Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 1 November 2021
Volume 144, No 3

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 1 November 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I take the opportunity to extend my personal condolences and those of all Members to Peter Weir on the passing of his dear mother in the past number of days. The funeral will be tomorrow. We all know that the passing of any relative is always very hard to endure, but the passing of your mother is particularly poignant and difficult. On everyone's behalf, I extend condolences to Peter Weir.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: If Members wish to be called to make a statement, they should indicate that by continually rising in their place. Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to make their statement. Members are reminded that statements will not be subject to debate or questioning and that interventions will not be permitted. I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Crisis

Mr Gildernew: This past weekend, we heard of a worsening crisis across various health trust areas, with some patients even being cautioned against presenting unless faced with a life-threatening situation. The warnings given were stark and alarming, and all of us can imagine the stress and fear that this crisis will be causing for anyone who is experiencing unmanaged acute pain or who was concerned about their health condition over the weekend and unable to access health treatment.

The staffing crisis all across the health and social care system is causing havoc, and we are hearing that in the stark statements from various trusts. The GP crisis continues, with patients still being unable to see their GP. We are also hearing of a further reduction in GP out-of-hours services in some areas. Emergency rooms are filled to capacity, and, at times, there are no hospital beds for patients who need them.

In addition, there is a delay in the roll-out of booster vaccines for those aged over 60. I have been contacted by very worried patients in my constituency who should have received their booster vaccine weeks ago. We were told that booster vaccines will be given at GP practices, but GP practices are ill-prepared to provide this service given the pressures that they are experiencing. There is also confusion around where first, second and, indeed, third COVID vaccines will be administered. It is vital that we

get this right as we still need to encourage uptake of the vaccine given that our numbers are extremely low compared with other regions.

We must have some solutions from the Minister of Health before the healthcare system collapses. We need a robust vaccination campaign that effectively examines the role that volunteer vaccinators can play in moving the vaccine campaign along at pace. We may also need to consider reopening walk-in centres so that we can get these vaccines rolled out as soon and as effectively as possible. Perhaps now is the time for the Minister of Health to call an emergency health summit to bring together unions, professional bodies, trust leads and others who can discuss some solutions to get us through the crisis that we are currently engulfed in.

Bellaghy GAA Club/Saoradh

Mr K Buchanan: On 2 October 2021, the Saoradh hunger strike commemoration 2021 used the grounds of Bellaghy GAA club. The use of the grounds by Saoradh indicate that the club is aligning itself with the views of that organisation. I find this offensive, as do many people in mid-Ulster who repudiate violence or the threat of violence.

That organisation has been responsible for justifying and promoting outrageous statements and actions. Following the murder of journalist Lyra McKee on 18 April 2019, Saoradh released a statement saying:

"a Republican Volunteer attempted to defend people from the PSNI/RUC. Tragically a young journalist ... Lyra McKee, was killed accidentally".

This was an vicious and indiscriminate murder by the so-called New IRA and was unacceptable and rightly rejected across the board, yet that group sought to justify and explain a gunman being on the streets targeting police officers. Such violent views are outrageous, undemocratic and madness. Such madness led to a journalist being murdered.

I have written to the chairman of Ulster GAA and the chairman of Bellaghy GAA club, and, to date, have received no response. The Bellaghy GAA club and Ulster GAA must make a clear statement to explain how their facilities were used, condemn the use of violence, support the PSNI and call for those who murdered Lyra McKee to be prosecuted. If Bellaghy GAA club is now aligned with the group Saoradh, any public funding allocated to the club should be

recouped and the club barred from such funding in future. Taxpayers' money should not be used to sponsor those who promote and condone terrorism. You cannot deliver food parcels one day and support that type of event the next. Which is it?

COP26: Climate Emergency

Mr McNulty: As the COP26 summit gets under way in Glasgow, the challenges facing the North could not be starker. We remain the only part of these islands not to have net zero carbon legislation, and we have failed so far to take the bold steps necessary to transform our economy and society to address this crisis. This is despite the fact that we risk suffering the worst effects of climate crisis, from flooding, coastal erosion and extreme weather events to threats to our biodiversity and more. The SDLP's message on the climate emergency is clear: it is the greatest threat that our world faces. It is the fight of our lives, and it demands radical action.

While we often hear this crisis described as an urgent emergency, too many Governments are still abdicating their responsibility to treat it as such. It is time for that to change. At this summit, the global community must finally recognise that this cannot be a moment for small thinking, small talking, limiting our ambitions or tinkering around the edges. Neither is it a time for platitudes, warm words or rhetoric alone. If we are to save this planet, this is a time for radical action. That is why we have co-sponsored a climate change Bill in the Assembly, why our party leader has proposed radical climate legislation in Westminster and why Dolores Kelly is bringing forward her environmental and nature restoration Bill. We recognise that further hesitation is simply not an option. Young people everywhere are showing and leading the way with their activism. We must listen to their leadership, follow their example and step up to the plate.

While we will hear a lot of words from world leaders and media pundits over the next few weeks, it is only through radical, collective action that we will seize this moment to save our planet. For the sake of our planet, we must demand that radical action from our leaders across the globe over the next two weeks. We owe the next generation nothing less.

Newtownards Bus Hijacking

Mr Nesbitt: At 6.30 am today, two armed and masked men hijacked a bus in Newtownards and set it alight. I invite the Chamber to join me

in sending a message to the perpetrators: you have no legitimacy and you had no authority to do what you did.

What you did was damage your own community. There is a reason that that bus was on the road at 6.30 am. It was because of law-abiding, hard-working people seeking transport from A to B, from their homes to their place of work, and they were denied that opportunity by these terrorists. I think of that community this morning, and I also think of the driver, because, for all I know, that driver will wake up every day for the rest of his life having to confront and cope with the sights and sounds that greeted him at 6.30 am on Monday 1 November 2021.

I am told that the attack may have been motivated in some sense by the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol. If that is the thinking, it is perverse. The protocol is about politics. Some in the House may say that it is good politics, and others will agree with me that it is bad politics, but it is politics, and politics is about talking, negotiating and building relationships. You cannot build a relationship with somebody wearing a balaclava and carrying a handgun. I repeat: if that is the thinking, it is perverse.

I am not naive. I have represented Newtownards for some 10 years, and I understand that a variety of terrorist organisations still have a presence in the town. It is high time that they quit and high time that they used their energy and commitment to help their communities, not hinder them. They should help them by creating a truly peaceful, prosperous society that the people who wanted to catch that bus this morning aspire to. I say to the perpetrators: your time is over. Time to go. I say to anybody who knows who carried out that attack that it is time to get that information to the police. You can do it anonymously and without fear for your own safety, but it is important that these people are stopped and brought to book. It is time for an end to this mindless, perverse thinking.

Mr McNulty: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not take points of order during this item of business. I declared that at the outset.

Newtownards Bus Hijacking

Ms Armstrong: I, too, rise to speak about the attack in Mr Nesbitt and my constituency this morning, and I, too, would like to pass on my support to the bus driver who was targeted and,

understandably, very shaken after the attack this morning. The police have called for information from anyone who was in or around the Abbot Drive area at around 6.30 am who may have seen the hijack take place and can help the police to catch the individuals, who are alleged to have been masked and armed.

This is 2021, not 1971. The Troubles are behind us. Paramilitaries, no matter what type, should have left the stage, yet here we are: two masked men brandishing a gun hijacked a bus in a residential area, poured petrol into the bus and set it on fire. Thousands of pounds worth of public property was damaged by two thugs. The people behind this attack on a public service have no remit for doing so. They are criminals. They have caused delay and upset in the residential areas of Movilla and Bowtown, near Abbey Primary School and Castle Gardens Primary School. They have harmed the community. They are anti-community. They are a disgrace.

I am sure that the whole House will condemn the atrocious activity this morning and support the PSNI in its endeavours to catch those individuals and remove the weapon or weapons from the community.

12.15 pm

Violence has no place in Northern Ireland, and people who carry out violent activities have no place in our society. No rationale or reason excuses that criminal activity. It is a misguided sense of entitlement to cause criminal damage. Like my Strangford constituency colleague Mr Nesbitt, I absolutely condemn those who were behind the attack. It was an attack not just on our public transport service and public services but on the whole of society.

St Columbanus' College, Bangor

Mr Easton: St Columbanus' College is a secondary school in my constituency. It is 62 years old, it has a population of 810 pupils, and it is growing every year.

Well before the summer break, two portable classrooms in the school were declared to be in a bad state and taken out of commission by the Education Authority. Since then, there has been no attempt by the Education Authority to put two new mobile classrooms in place. As a result, the school has to use the assembly hall for technology and science classes, which is affecting hundreds of pupils, and has to hold music classes in the assembly hall because of social distancing. That has the knock-on effect

that PE can no longer take place there. If that is not bad enough, the library has had to shut so that sixth-form classes can take place.

I highlight that to the Education Minister so that she will take action to ensure that two new Portakabins are brought to the school as soon as possible. I also ask the Minister to visit St Columbanus' College to try to resolve all the issues.

Drink Spiking

Ms Ferguson: I am gravely concerned and disturbed by the reports of drinks spiking in Derry over the last week. A young woman who was socialising in the city was taken to hospital due to her drink being spiked. Over the same weekend, Ulster University received three reports from students who believed that their drinks had been spiked. The PSNI has confirmed that, as a result of social media claims, it was aware that up to five people had had their drinks tampered with in a bar in one night. That may be the tip of the iceberg. It is really difficult to know the true extent of those heinous crimes across our villages, towns and cities. It is extremely worrying and very sad that, in today's society, we must all still be conscious of the potential danger of drink spiking. Those acts are absolutely despicable, and I really hope that those who have been affected receive the love and support that they need at this traumatic time.

Collectively, we must do all that we can to ensure that those predatory and abusive individuals in our communities, who are determined to act in such a violent way, particularly towards women, are caught. Women should not feel unsafe when they are out and about in their villages, towns or cities and socialising with their families and friends. It is a worrying trend, and we must all work collectively to ensure that the individuals responsible are caught.

Health Service Pressures

Mr Middleton: I take the opportunity to raise serious concerns about the ongoing pressures in our health service. I do that particularly for patients who are seeking treatment and, indeed, the staff members who work tirelessly day in, day out.

Our emergency departments face particular pressures. We heard earlier today about the messages that have been put out to discourage people from going there. Obviously, people should go to our emergency departments only if

they have genuine emergencies. However, when we hear that over 95 people were waiting to be seen in those departments, we have to say that there is something badly wrong with the system. I have seen at first hand the way that staff in our emergency departments are under pressure and how they try to support all the people there and to see them as quickly as they can.

I am mindful that, later today, mention will be made of an additional £200 million going to our health service through the October monitoring round. Money alone will not solve the crisis that we face in our health service: there has to be fundamental change and reform. We need to get on with that reform urgently. There is no doubt that the pressure will increase as we enter and continue through the winter period.

We need to see a clear strategy and plan to ensure that not only the issues in our hospital settings but those in our GP services are addressed. Day and daily, my office is inundated with constituents who cannot get a face-to-face appointment with their GP. Despite the statements made in the media and in the Chamber, people cannot get face-to-face appointments. If they do, it does not happen in a timely manner, so the condition with which they are dealing gets worse. They feel that they have no option — I have seen it in my personal experience — but to go to their emergency department and seek a face-to-face appointment to get advice there and then.

I urge the Department and the Health Minister — please — to try to break down the silos that exist in the health service between GPs and our emergency departments. The crisis will get worse.

I am proud of our National Health Service and of the staff in it. They deserve better. Patients in our society deserve better. We need to grapple with the situation before it becomes much worse.

Irish-medium Education

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to raise the need for correct and further investment in Irish-medium education in the North.

Recently, I was lucky enough to visit Gaelcholáiste Dhoire in Dungiven, in my constituency, to see at first hand how Irish-medium education is one of the fastest-growing movements on the island and to see the passion in our young people, right now, for this living, breathing language. While I was there, I

was aware of several challenges. It is vital to raise in the House some of the current barriers in the sector. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 states:

"linguistic diversity"

is

"part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland."

The agreement rightly highlighted the duty of promotion and protection of the Irish language. Crucially, it gave the Department of Education a statutory duty to:

"encourage and facilitate Irish medium education in line with ... integrated education".

In relation to Irish-medium education, we must ask ourselves, "Where are we, today?". Gaelcholáiste Dhoire has gone from 13 pupils to nearly 300 in just five years. That is remarkable. Does current departmental funding adequately support and help to sustain that growth?

I will be raising several key issues with the Minister of Education on teacher training in the North, examiner issues and the pressing matter of unsustainable, unsuitable accommodation. At present, 60% of Irish-medium schools are housed in non-permanent buildings. Most importantly, long-term planning and investment are badly needed in the sector. I feel strongly that the Irish language is not being facilitated and legislated for in the way in which it should. I call on the Department to meet the leadership of the Irish-medium sector as a matter of urgency and to work to address the issues and concerns.

Fundamentally, excellence and achievement in education are vital for equality and prosperity in our society. The SDLP is committed to the development of an education system of which all our young people really feel part. All children have an equal right to academic achievement regardless of the language that they speak. I wholeheartedly encourage the Minister to visit and to see first-hand the commitment from teachers and pupils to the language and its growth.

COP26: Climate Change Legislation

Dr Aiken: Yesterday marked the start of the COP26 summit in Glasgow. It also marked the publication of reputable, peer-reviewed

research that showed that the level of global warming has risen to 1.2°C and that, with the pledges made by nations so far, we will be lucky to contain temperature rises to between 2.7°C and 3°C. That will be a catastrophe.

The Prime Minister and a large number of commentators have made it clear that action is needed now. We, as a party, strongly welcome our nation's commitment to decarbonisation and, in particular, the push to have considerable changes made by 2030. That is less than a decade away.

We, as part of the United Kingdom, have our part to play in making the start that is needed to achieve the national goal of net zero carbon by 2050.

We are far from our First Minister and deputy First Minister's comments today that we are committed to tackling the climate emergency, building a cleaner environment and creating new green jobs. We instead have a situation in which two climate change Bills will come before the House. Those Bills should be combined so that realistic targets can be met, independent verification can be set up, a just transition can be made, and Northern Ireland can get legislation that brings it into line with the rest of these islands and beyond.

That would be a small but worthy start to our contribution to COP26, and we urge all parties to push to achieve that aim. Our party leader has written to the Minister of Agriculture and to Clare Bailey, asking both Clare and Edwin whether they can talk to Lord Deben and ask him to adjudicate between them to get a combined Bill that can deliver our requirements so that we can meet some commitments towards dealing with the climate emergency. Pushing towards that goal would be a worthy aspect of COP26.

COP26: Climate Emergency

Mr Blair: I am also grateful for the opportunity to make a statement at the commencement of COP26 in Glasgow. The climate crisis is no longer a looming threat; it is here and it is happening now. Further delay to action would be deadly. Government action towards rapid and drastic reductions in greenhouse gases to prevent climate breakdown has never been more crucial. Northern Ireland needs to play its part in addressing the global challenges. We must act, not because it is convenient or just because it is the right thing to do, but because it is our only option. We urgently need radical changes to the structure of our economy, based

on long-term security and shared prosperity. Failure to take the required action immediately would be unforgivable. Members of the House, including me, some of my Alliance colleagues and others from Northern Ireland, are attending or preparing to attend COP26. We must ensure that, when we return, we work at pace throughout the remainder of the mandate and in the time ahead to deliver action on the climate emergency. Doing that will also assist with nature's recovery and habitat protection. As well as asking others to act, we must act.

Today, as world leaders gather and begin negotiations at COP26, it is important that we remember that the solutions for the climate crisis are in front of us and that the answer is clear. The answer is a green new deal. Through a green new deal, we can address the climate crisis, create tens of thousands of new green jobs and build a fairer society at the same time. We need a green new deal, we need joined-up action to deliver it, and we need those now.

Rural Road Network: Underfunding

Mrs Erskine: My local newspapers recently carried stories about large potholes, most notably outside Magheraveely in rural Fermanagh. There was a front-page story that showed a man who was able to crouch down inside a pothole. That story is not unique to Fermanagh and South Tyrone; it is common to all rural constituencies, where it feels that there has been chronic underfunding of our rural road network.

I was delighted to hear the Minister state that £10 million will go to our rural road network, but it feels like Groundhog Day with images such as this on front pages. Roads have craters rather than surfaces that are fit for any vehicle to travel along. That is not acceptable. People have damaged their cars, tyres have been wrecked, and road accidents have even been caused as a result of that. That results in extra costs to vehicle owners at a time of high fuel costs.

Rural people feel that there are road inequalities. I ask this question: where is our rural road fund? In Enniskillen, we have been told about the progress that has been made on the Enniskillen southern bypass, but I believe that funding has not been ring-fenced for the entirety of the project. That project would significantly improve infrastructure in the town centre and reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere by reducing congestion.

It is time for the Minister to take action to address my constituents' concerns about the rural road network and to ensure that the pots of money and million-pound investments mentioned in shiny announcements reach the most-affected areas. The Department is tied up in legal challenges, and, ultimately, this is affecting my constituents on the ground. We need to wake up to the reality that we have a poor road network, through no fault of DFI divisions on the ground. I hope that the Minister will listen and that she will create further actions in her Department to solve this issue.

12.30 pm

Care Provision in Mid Ulster

Ms Sheerin: At the outset, I want to address the allegations made by Mr Buchanan against Bellaghy Wolfe Tones GAC in his Member's statement. On 9 September, Bellaghy Wolfe Tones released a statement in which they stated unequivocally that they had not granted permission to Saoradh to hold a commemoration on their grounds. It is important that that is clarified.

This afternoon, I want to raise the issue of care provision, specifically in rural Mid Ulster. I have been raising this issue with the Department, the Minister and the Northern Trust consistently since I became an MLA, because it is brought to me every week by the constituents whom I represent. At the minute, the ramifications of what I would call a crisis in our community care are extensive. I am contacted all the time by sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, in-laws and even grandchildren who are in total distress because of their family situation. We have people who are trapped for longer than they need to be in hospitals and care homes, perhaps recovering from a stroke or another debilitating illness, trying to deal emotionally with the overnight loss of their independence and mobility, and having this compounded by an unnecessary stay in an institution. That is mentally devastating for them and for their family members, who are worried about them and know the impact that it is having on their mental health.

For people who are trying to manage at home, there is the stress for them as well as their family, and that is unbearable. We have siblings creating and then covering shifts on their own rotas, coming in and out and passing each other like ships in the night. There are no social visits with their loved ones, and they are unable to spontaneously call in for a cup of tea or spend quality time with them. Instead, they

have a burden added to their daily lives. There are young people who are trying to hold down a job, pay a mortgage, maintain a house and a marriage and rear a family of their own, and, on top of that, they have the responsibility of caring for a loved one and carrying out personal care visits that should be coming from the NHS. People who have worked all their lives and contributed to the system feel like a burden on the system because they cannot get the care that they need.

On the other side of that, we have domiciliary care workers, many in the independent sector, who are yet to receive the £500 bonus that they were promised at the beginning of the year. They are not even getting a fuel allowance. They are running from pillar to post, trying to cover rotas, and they are being asked to work for weeks on the trot without a break. The role that they carry out is a vocational one, and it is incredibly mentally, emotionally and physically draining. I call on the Health Minister to properly recognise that, to properly resource this service, to give our care workers a fair day's pay for the work that they do and to ensure that we have a community care service that works for rural dwellers.

Waiting Lists

Mr McCrossan: Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak. I, too, will talk about waiting lists. I am sure that many MLAs will agree that their in tray is filling up with correspondence from quite a number of patients across our constituencies who are suffering on waiting lists. Each and every day, I receive calls and correspondence from individuals who have been waiting for a prolonged period for any form of care and treatment, and the needs of those patients are diverse. One patient who phoned me in desperation over the past two or three weeks is waiting for two hip operations, and she cannot receive any pain relief because she has a heart complaint. Therefore, she has to endure that insufferable pain daily. This is a lady in her 70s who lives alone and has no form of support or care. As a result of how her needs have been ignored because of the current situation with waiting lists, there is a need now for care to be provided in her home. As Ms Sheerin rightly pointed out, that, too, presents considerable difficulties. An unbearable loop of difficulties exists.

Another lady, who was diagnosed with cancer five months ago, was told that she was in need of urgent treatment. She has still not had an operation. The consultant has said that he is

ready to walk away because there are endless lists of people in similar circumstances. The lady cannot go private because the theatres are also booked up in Ballykelly, so there is no option for this lady whatsoever. Another lady, who is 76 years of age, has to crawl up and down stairs to get to bed or go to the toilet. Occupational therapist lists are through the roof, and there is no form of care and support for her. She is in constant and considerable pain, and I have witnessed huge deterioration in the health and well-being of this individual. Another lady, who is a mother of four children, has cancer and is waiting on an operation. She has been told that there is no certainty about the date, nor is there any urgency about her need for treatment. There is an endless list.

I appreciate that our health service is in difficulty. I understand that there is a crisis with staff, I understand that there is a crisis with our waiting lists and I understand that there is a crisis even with getting a GP appointment, as other Members have pointed out. How much suffering can our people endure, however? The situation has gone beyond cruel. In the instance of the lady who cannot take pain relief, it is inhumane. I have written to the Minister of Health on a number of occasions now, and, although I appreciate the pressure that he is under, the answer is inadequate. There is no plan, there is no strategy and there is no time frame. People cannot continue to suffer because poor management of the health service has been allowed to continue.

I also put on record my thanks to the hard-working staff, who are under pressure, but that pressure is worsening as a result of a failure to act and deal with the issue now. This cannot go on for a number of months longer than it already has. We cannot put people's needs on pause just because of poor management.

Mr Speaker: That concludes Members' statements. Mr McNulty, you were looking to make a point of order.

Mr McNulty: Yes, very quickly, Mr Speaker. I feel that it is long past time that the DUP get off the back of the GAA. The GAA is not a sectarian organisation. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: I take your point, but, I am sorry, it is not a point of order. You have put your sentiments on the record. I appreciate that.

Assembly Business

Public Petition: Reassessing Contact Tracing in Schools

Mr Speaker: Mr Justin McNulty has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mr McNulty: It gives me no pleasure to table a petition with 35,425 signatures from parents, teachers, grandparents, carers and classroom assistants who are concerned about the contact-tracing measures currently in place, or not in place, in schools. They want the contact-tracing system to be reassessed. Some 35,425 people have expressed their concern about the current arrangements, or lack thereof.

The bringer of the petition is Suzanne Kenny, and I thank her for starting it. Her mother is here today, and she says that the petition just goes to show the depth of concern in school communities from parent groups, teachers, support staff, grandparents and carers.

Suzanne's children, Eva-Rose and Scarlett, are here today. They talked to me earlier about how worried they were when a friend in their classroom tested positive, yet their parents were not automatically informed. They are worried. What is happening in schools at the moment is inconsistent. Contact tracing amounts to nothing in some schools. It is largely fair in other schools, while a strict approach is adopted by others, whereby all classes are sent home. There is too much inconsistency, which is creating too much fear and concern around the issue. Parents and children are worried, and, even though adults are doubly vaccinated, they can still get sick from COVID. Those people are still expressing huge levels of concern and anxiety.

The bringer of the petition sees this as being a health issue and wants it to be addressed as such. She does not want schools to be closed down. She wants parents to be kept informed and kept up to date on what is happening.

Some of the reasons given for signing the petition are: "I work in day care, and it is ridiculous that children can come into a setting when there is a positive case at home"; "I work in a school where nine children out of my class have tested positive, while a few others have been off sick and came back early without being tested"; "It is the right thing to do to protect our young people"; "As a teacher, I

know that children in schools are, without doubt, in close contact. The current regulations are shocking. It is as though COVID doesn't exist in schools, which couldn't be further from the truth. Our children deserve to be looked after"; and "You can go into a restaurant and get pinged for sitting beside somebody for 15 or 20 minutes, but you can go into a classroom and be in close contact with numerous other children who have tested positive, and nobody is even notified. That needs to be addressed".

The prayer of the petition is that, if classmates of pupils who have tested positive for COVID are classified as close contacts, parents should be informed if a pupil in their child's class tests positive for COVID.

Mr Speaker: As the Member knows, I would normally invite him to bring his petition to the Table and present it. In the light of social distancing, however, I ask the Member to remain in his place, and I will make arrangements for him to submit the petition to our office electronically. I thank him for bringing the petition to the Assembly's attention.

Once I have received the petition, I will forward it to the Minister of Education and send a copy to the Committee. I thank the Member for that contribution.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mrs Deborah Erskine replace Mr Jonathan Buckley as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr Thomas Buchanan be appointed as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. — [Mr Clarke.]

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Aisling Reilly be appointed as a member of the Committee for Communities. — [Mr O'Dowd.]

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

Ministerial Statements

October Monitoring Round

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in light of the social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber may do that by rising in their place or by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions should be avoided at all costs. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the period for questions afterwards.

Mr C Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to make a statement on the outcome of the Executive's 2021-22 October monitoring exercise. On Friday, I made a written ministerial statement and notified you of my intention to make an oral statement today to allow Members to engage more fully on these important issues.

As Members will be aware from my written ministerial statement, in this round, the Executive had £223.6 million resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL), £31 million capital DEL and £66.7 financial transactions capital (FTC) DEL available to address pressures. The majority of that, some £180 million, arose from the Barnett consequential relating to an additional £5.4 billion for the NHS in England. There were also a number of reduced requirements totalling £41 million resource DEL and £19.6 million capital DEL. Further details are included in the tables that have been provided with the printed version of this statement.

The Executive met on Thursday 21 October to discuss the monitoring round. The resource DEL bids submitted by Departments amounted to £516 million, more than double the £223 million available. Full details of the bids and allocations are set out in the tables that accompany this statement. However, I will highlight a few specific areas.

In my view, Health should be our top priority. I am therefore glad to announce an additional £200 million for the Department of Health. Of that, £80 million is for hospital pressures arising from COVID-19, £70 million is for the pay award requested by the Health Minister and £30 million is to fund elective care. That adds to the £31.5 million that was allocated in June.

There is also £15 million for health and social care trusts and £5 million to expand the mental health support fund.

12.45 pm

The Department of Education will receive £9.2 million. Of that, £7.7 million is to help children with special educational needs (SEN). In my view, SEN should be prioritised in the January monitoring. There is £1.3 million for non-SEN school-based pressures, and the remaining £0.2 million is for non-SEN substitute teacher cover.

The Department for Infrastructure will receive £6 million. Of that, £4 million is for road maintenance and winter pressures, which meets that bid in full. There is £0.5 million for a scheme to encourage people to become taxi drivers. That money will refund licence fees and cover the cost of taxi meter tests. NI Water has been provided with £1.5 million to aid with increased electricity costs. I appreciate that NI Water faces significant pressures as a result of increased energy costs, and that can be revisited in January monitoring.

The Executive Office has been allocated £3.2 million for lost FTC loan interest repayment income due to the revision of loan terms and holiday payment arrangements that impacted on the timing of the interest repayments.

The Department of Finance has been allocated £3 million to cover the COVID-19 localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS), which supported businesses subject to health restrictions.

The Department of Justice receives £2 million: £1.5 million for the Legal Services Agency (LSA) and £0.5 million is for the safer communities programme.

The Assembly has been allocated £0.2 million to cover Members costs, including allowances and pensions.

All available resource DEL funding has been allocated. Members will be aware that, shortly after information was provided to the

Communities Committee, it was leaked to the media that the Minister for Communities had made a £55 million bid for universal credit. That bid was to reinstate the £20 per week uplift that, disgracefully, has been withdrawn by the British Government. After £200 million was allocated to Health, only £23 million of resource was available. That was not enough to meet the universal credit bid. Meeting the universal credit bid from the monitoring round would be incompatible with the public commitment of the Executive and of many Members to prioritise Health. In addition, it would be important to replace the universal credit uplift on a long-term basis and not just until the end of March. The costs of that are expected to rise to £200 million per year. In order to adequately fund Health and universal credit, I set out the pro-rata contributions needed from Departments other than Health to fund the universal credit uplift not just for this financial year but for future years. Given the cynical party politics that have surrounded the issue, let me reiterate that it was not possible to fund both Health and universal credit from the monitoring round. Therefore, I presented a different means of funding the universal credit uplift on a long-term basis. That option was not accepted.

The £27.8 million in capital bids submitted by Departments have all been met. That includes £11.5 million for the Department of Education: £8.2 million for minor works across the school estate; £2 million for CO2 monitors to assess classroom ventilation in the context of COVID-19; and £1.3 million for IT equipment.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs receives £8.6 million for a range of COVID-19 recovery schemes, including rural community and small settlements regeneration programmes. The Department of Health will receive £6.7 million: £3.6 million for the health and social care trusts and £3.1 million for health support services impacted by COVID-19. The Executive Office has been allocated £1 million for the social investment fund (SIF).

With all the capital bids having been met, £3.2 million of capital DEL remains available for allocation at the conclusion of the October monitoring exercise.

Ring-fenced resource DEL is strictly controlled by the Treasury, and funding cannot be moved out of that area. Changes to that area are shown in the tables that accompany the statement. Colleagues should note that we have exited the monitoring round with no surplus funding in ring-fenced resource DEL for depreciation and impairments. There are

pressures of £21.9 million that have not been met, and that situation will be reviewed in January monitoring.

There remains, as previously notified, £443.8 million unallocated in relation to student loan impairment. As that funding may be used only to address pressures in the student loan impairment ring-fence, it is not available for allocation by the Executive. There is £66.7 million of financial transactions capital that remains unallocated at the conclusion of October monitoring. I again call on Departments to consider ways to use that lending capacity.

To aid transparency in the process, the statement is accompanied by tables outlining the detail of changes to spending areas in Departments.

Before I conclude, I will comment on the use of urgent procedure and the timing of this announcement. Regrettably, at the Executive meeting on 21 October, the First Minister was not in a position to sign off on the monitoring round. The decision was therefore taken at that Executive meeting that the monitoring round would be approved by urgent procedure. To be clear, no changes have been made to the allocations, and the decision on universal credit has not changed from the position discussed at the Executive meeting.

Following the Executive's discussion on October monitoring, I wrote to all Ministers informing them that I was seeking approval through urgent procedure. A week passed, and no Minister replied to propose an alternative allocation or to object to urgent procedure. On Friday at 3.46 pm, urgent procedure was granted. I immediately released a written statement and wrote to the Speaker to inform him of my intention to make an oral statement.

Members are, of course, free to disagree with the October monitoring outcome, but it is hypocritical to say publicly that Health should be prioritised while privately seeking to reduce funding for it, disingenuous to say publicly that you support the universal credit uplift when privately you did not support its funding on a long-term basis and dishonest to say publicly that you object to the use of urgent procedure when privately you raised no objections.

I commend the October monitoring outcome to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his statement and for meeting me and the Deputy

Chairperson earlier today to discuss the key points.

I am sure that the Finance Committee will greatly welcome the £223.6 million of resource DEL allocations, as well as the £27.8 million of capital allocations, with most of the former going to Health, including an important and well-deserved pay award for our vital health service workers.

Minister, in June, the Committee asked you about financial transactions capital and the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI). We asked whether, owing to uncertainty in respect of capital programmes, underspends in conventional capital and financial transactions capital would lead to a reduced requirement for RRI. If I understand the statement correctly, there appears to be something of a problem with capital and a looming underspend in respect of financial transactions capital. I, therefore, ask the Minister this: how much of the originally projected £74 million of financial transactions capital spending and £170 million of RRI borrowing will be spent in 2021-22?

Finally — I am sure that the Speaker will give me this indulgence — I will ask about the spending review. The improved allocation for Northern Ireland looks quite good compared with the £12 billion baseline of resource DEL of which the Department had previously advised the Committee. Will the Minister, therefore, advise the House as to why he is disappointed with the spending review outcome?

Mr C Murphy: On financial transactions capital or RRI borrowing, we cannot give the figure for the end of the year until we get to the end of the year. I discussed this with the Chairperson earlier. I am disappointed that we have not got a greater uptake to this point. We will go back and encourage Departments to make use of it, because we are challenged in the resources that we have available. I have always been of the view that we should maximise those resources and look at that closely.

On the figures in the spending review, the £1.6 billion did not match the figures that we had. They were starting from a previous baseline, whereas we were starting from last year. The only way to measure the additional money that you have is to look at what you had last year as a baseline. Therefore, it is about £450 million. As that goes on into years 2 and 3, it drops off, given the increased pressure on services and inflation, until we reach what is basically a flat line in years 2 and 3. I am disappointed. I know that we will debate the Budget and the spending review at a later stage, but there was

an opportunity to invest properly in public services and recognise that public services got us all through the pandemic experience and continue to do so. We should invest properly in them. That opportunity was not taken, and that is why I am disappointed with the outcome.

Mr Gildernew: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Minister, thank you for your statement. I very much welcome the priority given to Health in the October monitoring round, with an allocation of £200 million. Do you agree that health should continue to be the top priority for the Executive? As we move to a three-year Budget and given the importance of multi-year Budget to planning within the Health and Social Care (HSC) service, can you outline any upcoming engagements that you have planned as part of the process of agreeing a draft Budget?

Mr C Murphy: When we first came back into office in January 2020, the Executive agreed that health would be our priority. That was prior to the pandemic landing on top of us. If anything, it is an even greater priority now, given the pressure that the health service is under, so, of course, I will continue to argue that. As part of our three-year Budget planning exercise, I proposed to the Executive that we retained health as a priority and that, if needs be, we would have to look to other Departments to contribute to that priority. We are examining closely the outcome of the spending review. We are also discussing with the Health Department and the Minister the Health Minister's budget requirements in the time ahead and the money that is needed to reduce waiting lists, to bring about transformation and to support healthcare staff. We will try to provide a draft Budget that is based on those priorities and to get support for that in the Executive.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. In his statement, he referred to £3 million that is being allocated to his Department — the Department of Finance — to cover the COVID-19 LRSS scheme, as we know it. Is that £3 million for a tidying-up exercise? Where are we in that scheme? Is it being wound down? Has that money been allocated to help close it down?

Mr C Murphy: It is money that is required at the end of the scheme. As the Member knows, the LRSS was a vital support for a lot of businesses during the pandemic. It was based on the health regulations and requirements that were placed by the Health Department on businesses to close in order to assist in restricting the transmission of the virus. Once those regulations ceased, the support ceased,

but there are tail ends to sort out. For instance, some people have appealed because they did not get it, and there are others who received money that, perhaps, was not required. That is part of the tidying-up exercise. I hope to get that concluded in the not-too-distant future.

Mr O'Toole: The Minister's statement contains a lot of complicated process around the failure to allocate £55 million to support people on low incomes through the winter. However, is it not the simple truth that his party colleague asked for £55 million to undo the Tory universal credit cut, even if it was just to the end of this year? That money would have helped the poorest people to get through a winter of skyrocketing energy and other living costs. Minister, you decided not to allocate that money, despite the money being there, including through flexibility with regard to next year's Budget, and despite your party colleague asking for it. Is anything about that statement incorrect?

Mr C Murphy: The statement is not complicated. It is simple: if we gave the £200 million to Health, we did not have enough money. That is a simple mathematical calculation. Instead, I presented an option to the Executive, because there had been a lot of discussion on that. Of course, my view is that the situation should have been prevented in Westminster, where the Member's party attends. In any event, there was not sufficient funding within the moneys available to us, and, of course, our decision on those was taken prior to the outcome of the spending review. When we are having those discussions around the Executive table and there is an option on the table, it is time for parties to put up or shut up. If they want to go for that option, that is the time to speak up. They should not wait for a week, speak to the press and criticise others for what they did or did not do. When people are asked to put up or shut up, some people, unfortunately, shut up. Therefore the option that I had put forward was not accepted. It is not complicated: there was an option to do it; there was not enough money in the monitoring round. People did not go for the option when it was available to them.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to answer questions on the monitoring round. There are a number of questions, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland Water and the bid that was not met.

As has been outlined, there are still millions of pounds unspent of conventional capital funding and financial transactions capital. What more is being done by the Minister and his Department

to ensure that we can invest, using that capital money, this year and in the next financial year, when it is likely that more funds will be allocated to Northern Ireland?

Mr C Murphy: We allocated all the capital that was bid for. We cannot add on for Departments if they have not bid for it. That left about £3.2 million at the end. Departments will now know that that is available, and we would expect improved bids in January monitoring to ensure that it is spent. The picture for accessing financial transactions capital has improved from where we were a number of years ago, but it is still short of where we need to be. I will continue to encourage all Departments, including the Department for Infrastructure, which will be bidding on behalf of Northern Ireland Water, to make sure that they seek opportunities. There are restrictions on using financial transactions capital and parameters within which it can be used, but I have always encouraged and will continue to encourage Departments to explore that to see whether they can meet the requirement and make use of that funding.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the Minister's statement and the allocation to the Department for Infrastructure. Will he confirm whether the bids relating to road maintenance and encouraging people into the taxi sector have been met in full?

1.00 pm

Mr C Murphy: Yes; those bids were met in full. As I said at the outset of the statement, there were more than double the amount of bids than we had the resources to allocate funding to. Departments, of course, are disappointed with the overall outcome, but it is important that we have funding for winter pressures for DFI Roads and the taxi sector. There is a shortage of drivers, and we need to do anything that we can in order to encourage people into that profession. That bid was met in full.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. Seeing the Department of Health getting that amount of money is very welcome. I know that difficult decisions had to be made, and I do not know whether anybody in the Chamber realistically thought that the £55 million for universal credit could have come out of the monitoring round. Something else needs to be done to address that. Did any money at all go to DFC? I note that it submitted a £7 million bid for councils and their income that was lost owing to COVID-19.

Mr C Murphy: The tables accompanying the statement show the bids that were made and the funding that was received. I do not believe that there was money for DFC, and I am sure that the Minister was disappointed. As I said, more than twice the amount of money was bid for than we had to deliver. If you take out the £180 million that came across as a Barnett consequential for Health, the rest of the money was a very small amount to distribute as part of the monitoring round. It is a challenge, and I know that Departments want funding. Given the cost of living crisis into which we are heading, I am sure that the Department for Communities will seek additional support over the winter period, because people are facing many challenging circumstances.

When the option that I presented in relation to universal credit was not taken up by the Executive, there was an agreement to come back to a discussion on poverty issues and to see what the Executive collectively can do on those. I look forward to that. While we do not have resources for that at the moment, we may get the sense between now and January as to whether any other resources are being surrendered. I am sure that the Department for Communities and the Minister for Communities will want to see as much support as we can offer going to assisting people with the cost of living crisis that is beginning to develop.

Ms Brogan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. I thank the Minister for the statement. Minister, I welcome the funds that have been allocated to Education and particularly to special educational needs (SEN) provision. I am glad that that remains a priority for you. Will you provide more detail on the £1.3 million that has been allocated to IT systems in Education?

Mr C Murphy: It is, perhaps, for the Minister of Education or the Department of Education to go into the granular detail of that bid. It was a bid to support IT across the Department of Education. As the Member said, special educational needs provision is a priority, and it is also a priority for the Education Minister. She has written to me since the October monitoring round to ask for some assurance that we will continue to prioritise it in the January monitoring round. I have assured her that we will. We recognise that there are significant challenges across all Departments, but we need to look after the most vulnerable, particularly our most vulnerable students.

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

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister of Finance for his statement. The most pressing priority for the Executive remains the recovery of our health service. That has been reflected in this monitoring round, with the vast majority of money allocated to bids from the Department of Health. I very much welcome the pay award for staff, which can now be implemented. Most of the funding, however, will be used to plug the gap. Will the Minister outline whether we will be able to embrace the multi-year budgeting that is especially necessary in our health service to take those longer-term strategic steps forward that are so desperately needed to transform our system? What discussions has he had with the Minister of Health on that?

Mr C Murphy: There have been very significant discussions at official level. No doubt, I will talk to the Minister of Health in the time ahead. We have talked many times since the Executive returned about the requirements for the health service, the desire to get into that longer-term planning and budgeting, what needs to be done around recurrent spending to attract and retain staff, and the impact that that will have on reducing waiting lists and improving the viability of the service generally. We have had a lot of discussions. As I have said on a number of occasions, during the planning session on the three-year Budget, I proposed that Health remain our priority in the time ahead. We are working through the figures with the Department of Health to see what it absolutely needs in the time ahead and what resources, as we now understand them to be following the spending review, will therefore be available to the Executive over the next three years. It is my clear view that issues such as waiting lists and support for staff need to be tackled on a longer-term, recurrent basis. If we do not address them in the longer term, they will become cyclical problems. That is my firm intention, and I know that the Minister of Health shares that view.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, it is fair to say that the UK Prime Minister has a fondness for stretching the truth. I would argue that so do you. There was a bid from your Communities Minister. You had the power and the money to deliver the £55 million for universal credit; you chose not to do so. You are the Minister who also signed off on £165 million for a shopping voucher —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to her question, please?

Ms McLaughlin: — for all over-18s. Surely you have the foresight to know what the priorities of

the most vulnerable in our society are. That is your job.

Mr C Murphy: I resent the suggestion that I am stretching the truth in these matters. The figures are there. If the Member or her party colleague at the Executive wanted funding to Health to be reduced, because that is the only way in which you could have made up the £55 million for universal credit —

Ms McLaughlin: There were other options.

Mr C Murphy: I am not sure which figures the Member is using. Perhaps someone could provide her with a calculator. When you do the simple maths, you see that either it adds up or it does not. A total of £200 million for Health left about £23 million of resource. That is all that was left. Those are the figures. The rest of it was capital, and that cannot be used for universal credit. There was not £55 million, unless we took money off Health. If her party wants to propose that we take money off Health, it should make that proposal. Her Executive colleague could have made that proposal. As I say, at the Executive table, it is time to put up or shut up. There is no point in sitting silently at the Executive and not proposing changes and then coming out in public to try to present a different position. You have a responsibility to be honest to people and to stand over the decisions that you take. It is similar to when the high street voucher scheme was being proposed: you had a responsibility. Unless you objected and called for a vote at the Executive at that time to reduce that or to do away with it, do not try to present a different position now. Be honest with people.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the Minister's comments that Health should be our top priority. I especially welcome the fact that the Health Minister will now be in a position to deliver the 3% wage increase to health staff. Will adequate funding for the health service continue to be a priority for the Minister? Given his comments about hypocrisy, does he agree that some parties in the Chamber are not being entirely upfront about where their priorities lie?

Mr C Murphy: I find it difficult to keep up with the priorities of some parties in the Chamber, because their private priorities are often quite different from their public ones. That is a matter that they can explain to the electorate in the time ahead. My commitment to Health remains. As I say, when the Executive returned, pre-pandemic, in January 2020, they said that Health was their number one priority. The pandemic, if anything, has reinforced that

necessity. As I said in response to previous questions, I put that to the Executive at our planning session for the three-year Budget. I will continue to discuss with the Health Minister what his requirements are. On the basis of what is needed for Health, we will have a discussion with the rest of our Executive colleagues about how we can plan appropriate funding over the next three years.

Mr Buckley: The Minister will be fully aware of the considerable pressures facing the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic that have resulted in considerable, continuing backlogs in MOTs and driving tests. The Department bid for £8 million for DVA costs and pressures, and it has received nothing. Will the Minister outline whether a case was made for DVA to address MOT and driving test backlogs?

Mr C Murphy: As I say, in general terms, the amount bid for was more than twice that which was available to give. All the bids made by Departments were backed up with supporting evidence for the particular demand. I have no doubt that the Infrastructure Minister was disappointed that a number of her bids were not met. That becomes a difficult question.

Contrary to what was said in previous questions, I do not decide these things. I would love for the SDLP to propose that I get decision-making powers over all Executive finances, because it would then be a simpler exercise for me, but the Executive decide. I make a proposition based on the bids that have been received, on the amount that we have, on the analysis of my Department and on the discussions that my departmental officials have had with officials in all the other Departments on the priorities and on what is needed. I make a proposition to the Executive, and the Executive or Executive Ministers can propose amendments to that or reject it out of hand. The proposition that I made for October monitoring was accepted by the Executive. Although Ministers will undoubtedly be disappointed that various bids were not met, they all recognise that way more bids were made than we have money for, and that means that choices have to be made. We presented the paper to the Executive, and they endorsed it. As I said, I waited for over a week for final endorsement of the urgent procedure, and nobody proposed any change during that time.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, thank you for your statement. I will also focus on its health element. I am concerned that, although there is agreement on the additional money for the pay

increases, it will not provide very much comfort for those people who are at the lowest end of the scale. I was speaking to some domiciliary care workers last week, and they can barely make ends meet, not least because they have to cover their own travel costs. What discussions have you had with the Health Minister on those people who are not directly employed by the health trusts but who provide a very valuable service in our communities?

Mr C Murphy: We were pleased that, at the very least, we could make the pay award that the Health Minister had asked for for health workers. I am sure that the Member is aware that, under the procurement policy that I am bringing forward, there will be a requirement for anyone who receives government contracts to pay the standard living wage in the time ahead, and that will help in particular domiciliary care workers who are outside the health system and working for private companies. Even though it will do so in a limited way, I hope that that will improve the lot of many of those people who are vital to providing care and service to our elderly and vulnerable people right across the community.

The level of resources available to us, particularly the allocations for the next three years, do not match the rhetoric from the people who stand outside Downing Street on a Thursday night to clap for our healthcare workers. We continue to try to support people as best we can within the limited allocations that are available to us, but there are other measures, such as the one that I have taken with procurement, that can be taken to better the lot of people, particularly those in the domiciliary care sector who are outside the public-sector pay structures.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his statement and recognise the fact that health has been prioritised for investment. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber will disagree with that. I welcome, as others have, the investment in special educational needs.

Minister, the OECD confirms in various reports that those who achieve a good standard of education will enjoy a better standard of health and, indeed, live longer. Is that not a reason to prioritise education? Doing so will remove the short- to medium-term burden on the health service by enhancing education and the health of those who enjoy successful educational outcomes.

Mr C Murphy: I do not disagree with the Member's analysis. When the Executive have

discussed prioritising health, that has not simply meant the Health Department, although it obviously carries the lion's share of the burden. There is a range of contributory factors to poor health outcomes, including poverty, social exclusion and educational underachievement. When we therefore get into the longer-term planning for health, although it will very significantly be about funding the Health Department, it will also be about looking at other contributory factors. The Member's is a valid argument, but the problem comes when you have to secure the level of resource required to do all that you want to do. Prioritising health goes beyond the Health Department, and I recognise the contribution that education makes to health too.

1.15 pm

Mr Durkan: I have been an MLA for over 10 years, and this is the first time that I have seen a Finance Minister attacking a party for supporting a bid, not from its own Minister but from his party colleague. It would seem that for Minister Murphy and Sinn Féin, attack is still the best form of defence. Over 100,000 households here face into sheer poverty this winter. By submitting the £55 million bid, the Communities Minister dangled a lifeline in front of them, only for it to be cruelly and quietly removed on Friday afternoon.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Durkan: If that is not cynical party politics, I do not know what is. Is the Minister saying that the bid was undercooked or unprepared. If so, can he explain why the Communities Minister made the bid? If not, why did he not support it? In terms of putting up —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked —.

Mr Durkan: In terms of putting up or shutting up —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, order. The Member has already asked a number of questions. I call the Minister.

Mr C Murphy: The Member's party seems to be determined to flog the mistruth that it has been spreading. I do not understand why he wonders why I respond in the way that I do. If you are going to misrepresent people's positions and misrepresent your own party's position, you should expect to be called out

because of that. That is exactly what I intend to do. I will not sit here and allow his party to have one position privately in the Executive and another position in public and not call that out. That is exactly what has been happening here. Just do the maths. If you want to take money from the Health Department, make a proposal to do so. Do not stand up here and say "There was money available, because it says here in the paper that there was money available". If you take £200 million and give it to the Health Department, that leaves £23 million or £24 million available for a £55 million bid. In that context, the bid could not be met.

The Member should bear it in mind that I put a proposal to the Executive. The Executive decide: I do not decide the money. I did not make the cut to universal credit as you, perhaps, alleged on social media as well — talk about expanding the truth in relation to that. The Executive decided in relation to that. I put an option to the Executive not only to fund the universal credit uplift now in the time ahead but to fund it over the next three years. That option was not taken up and was not argued for by the SDLP, which was present at the meeting. I say again that Executive meetings are "Put up or shut up" time. If you are not prepared to put up, there is no point in complaining publicly afterwards.

Mr Nesbitt: I note a reduced requirement of £10 million with regard to the PSNI training college. What are the implications if or, more likely, when the PSNI identifies land that it wants to purchase for the college in the next financial year? I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board.

Mr C Murphy: If there is a reduced requirement, it needs to be surrendered. I do not have the detail of that; the Member, as a member of the Policing Board, probably has more detail than I have as to why there was a reduced requirement. We are in the process of planning the next three years' Budgets, and I have no doubt that the Department of Justice and the Minister of Justice are putting together bids in consultation with the Policing Board and others in the Department's interest to be put into the three-year budgeting process.

I will engage with all of my Executive colleagues in the time ahead. I think that we have meetings scheduled over the next couple of weeks, and, on the back of those engagements and the pre-planning discussion that we had in relation to our priorities, I will try to put together a draft paper. I do not call that draft paper; contrary to popular belief, it is the Executive who call it. They can amend it or

negotiate around it however they choose. Hopefully, we will come to a draft Budget that the Executive can launch for public consultation. That process of discussion of what is required over the next number of years is happening as we speak, and I will engage with Executive Ministers over the next couple of weeks.

Mr Lyttle: The statement exposes the urgent need for serious leadership in order to reform health and education services in Northern Ireland when we see that 90% of resource allocation has gone to Health and that the Department of Education bid for almost £85 million but received only a quarter of that bid.

Ventilation is well established as a mitigation of the spread of COVID-19, so much so that Wales allocated £6 million to school air quality in the summer. Why have the Finance Minister and the Education Minister allocated only £2 million for that purpose to schools in Northern Ireland? Will that allocation fund not only CO2 monitors but air filtration devices in our schools?

Mr C Murphy: When the Health money was taken out of the allocations, Education received the lion's share of the remaining allocations, much more than other Departments. As with all other Ministers and Departments, they had bid for a range of things that were needed. The reduction in some of those is to try to get people through to January monitoring. If there is still a requirement then, there will be an opportunity to revisit some of the requirements, like those the Member talked about. If the bid was not met in full, it might be a consequence of the intention to get through this next period and, rather than meet that full bid now, revisit it in January.

I have had correspondence with the Education Minister since the Executive met to discuss the monitoring round paper, and she highlighted special educational needs. I will continue to discuss with all Ministers their requirements. Of course, January monitoring will be the last opportunity in this financial year to bid for additional money. It may be the case that this allocation is, if you like, an instalment on spending that will be required to continue through the early part of next year.

Mr McNulty: In terms of putting up or shutting up, Minister, which Ministers in the Executive supported the bid for the universal credit uplift? Name Ministers who did support it.

Mr C Murphy: It is not appropriate, in general, to talk about which Ministers said what in the Executive. I draw attention to your party because your party *[Interruption]* publicly said something different from the stance it took in the Executive. In general terms, as you will know — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I ask Members to give the Minister an opportunity to answer the question. Members should not comment from a sedentary position.

Mr C Murphy: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I repeat: I put the option to the Executive. The option was not taken up by the Executive to fund universal credit for the remainder of this financial year or, indeed, for the next three years. I am not prepared to comment on which Ministers took what position, only that the Member's party came out and argued in public something that it had not argued in private. That is what I said, and I repeat it.

The Executive table is the place to discuss it, if people have a proposal to reduce the allocation to another Department or a proposal in relation to an allocation that they want themselves. If an option is put to them of funding a particular issue now and into the future, they can propose to support that or ask for a vote on it. None of that happened with his party in the Executive. Therefore, it is dishonest to take up a public position that is not the same position as they took in private.

Mr Carroll: It is not cynical to highlight the fact that people want investment in welfare protection and health. It is cynical to say otherwise.

Minister, given that the Executive have failed to cushion people from the brutal cut in universal credit, what is your message to the hundreds of thousands of people who will struggle this winter?

Mr C Murphy: I say again that the Member misrepresents what I said. I said that the maths of the equation were simple. If he feels that we should have taken money from Health and made a proposition to take money from Health to put it to universal credit uplift, that is a different issue and one that, I am sure, he can articulate in public if he feels the need to do so.

The Executive are juggling with limited resources and finances. The decision to end the universal credit uplift was taken in London. They made the decision. They own that

problem, which they have put on many families who struggle. I recognise entirely the struggle that many families and individuals have as a consequence of the cut to universal credit. That decision was taken in London. The First Minister and deputy First Minister joined the Scottish First Minister and Welsh First Minister to challenge directly the British Prime Minister to reinstate the universal credit uplift because he was the person who oversaw that decision.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of questions to the Minister on his statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before the next item of business.

Glenarm Forest Queen's Commonwealth Canopy Accreditation

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Members. The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has not joined us. As such, I will move on to the next item of business. We will suspend for five minutes in the expectation that we will bring the Finance Minister back for the next item of business.

The sitting was suspended at 1.28 pm and resumed at 1.37 pm.

Executive Committee Business

Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr C Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions to implement the remedy solution for age discrimination in public service pension schemes, and associated measures on scheme cost control, and judicial pensions and terms of office, in the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill as introduced in the House of Lords on 19 July 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr C Murphy: The matter before us is relatively straightforward, despite the complexity of the policy area. There is a legal requirement to address unlawful age discrimination that has occurred as a result of how reforms have been implemented in the public service pensions scheme since 2015 and to ensure that the discrimination is removed for future pension accrual.

I will give Members some background information on how we have arrived at the position where changes are required to address the discrimination. In 2010, the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission, led by John Hutton, was tasked with undertaking a fundamental structural review of public service pensions provision. The commission published its final report in 2011, setting out recommendations to better balance the interests of taxpayers, employers and members. The recommendations formed the basis for consultations for a policy to reform public service schemes managed by the Treasury and devolved schemes managed by my Department.

In April 2015, new schemes were introduced for each of the main workforces: local government; teachers; health workers; firefighters; the police; the judiciary; and the Civil Service. In the devolved schemes, the reforms were implemented by regulations made by Departments with responsibility for a public

service scheme under the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

As part of the 2015 reforms, those who were within 10 years of their normal retirement age on 31 March 2012 remained in their legacy pension scheme arrangements of mainly final salary scheme design. That is the transitionally protected cohort. Younger members moved into the reformed career average schemes from 1 April 2015. That transitional protection was not a recommendation of the commission. It was agreed following the Treasury's discussions with member representatives and formed the basis of discussions with member representatives for the devolved schemes.

In December 2018, in the McCloud and Sargeant cases — better known as the McCloud judgement — the Court of Appeal in England and Wales found that the transitional protection arrangement unlawfully discriminated against younger members of the judicial and firefighters' pension schemes. In June 2019, the Supreme Court denied permission to appeal that judgement. Legal advice confirms that steps must be taken to remedy that in the devolved schemes, as identical transition measures exist in the reform schemes here. Indeed, many legal cases in this jurisdiction are currently stayed as they await the remedy response to cases in England and Wales. I again emphasise that the issue is with how the reforms were implemented. The case for reform schemes still stands, in that they provide for pensions that are affordable, sustainable, fair and transparent, and they achieve greater fairness between lower and higher earners, as well as greater fairness for taxpayers.

The Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill contains provisions to remedy the unlawful age discrimination that was identified by courts in the McCloud judgement. The Bill will provide a legislative framework for each public service scheme to provide members affected by that discrimination with a choice of legacy or reform scheme terms for service in the seven-year remedy period from 1 April 2015, which was the introduction date for the reform schemes, to 31 March 2022. From 1 April 2022, all members will accrue future service in the reform schemes. That date is significant because protected members who were within 10 years of their normal pension age on 31 March 2012 will reach that normal retirement age by 1 April 2022. They can, of course, continue working with the service post April 2022, accruing benefits in the 2015 reform scheme.

Pension benefits accrued in the legacy scheme are protected. The Bill ensures that those who deliver public services continue to receive guaranteed benefits in retirement, on a fair and equal basis, that are among the best available. Perhaps it would have been simpler to return all members to the legacy scheme for the remedy period, but not all members would have been better off from having their benefits calculated in the legacy scheme; many will, in fact, be more advantaged in the reform scheme. Remedy proposals therefore ensure that members receive a choice of which scheme terms available during the remedy period provide the best benefit package for them. That choice also introduces considerable complexity, however. My Department consulted on options for how the remedy could be delivered from August to November 2020: to make an immediate choice once the required arrangements were in place; or to make a deferred choice, choosing the point at which scheme benefits are paid.

The deferred choice remedy solution, which the Bill delivers, represents the preference of the overwhelming majority of those who responded to the Department's consultation on this issue. That option removes the discrimination that occurred, while also providing clarity, control and the choice that is based on the accurate and up-to-date information necessary to inform decision-making. The majority of members will make their choice at the point of retirement, at which point it will be clear which scheme is most beneficial to each individual. An exception to that arrangement is with the judicial schemes, where affected members will make their choice before retirement in an options exercise. The separate consultations undertaken for the local government and judicial schemes reflected scheme-specific requirements for how the discrimination should be removed.

The Bill provides the framework for the required changes. However, the scheme-level regulations that are required to implement the changes, remove discrimination and give choice to members for the remedy period will be scrutinised and made by the relevant Assembly process. As I already stated, that is a complex exercise that will involve adjustments to benefit entitlements for affected members for the period from 2015 to 2022, as well as related adjustments where contributions and tax amounts for that period may have been overpaid or underpaid. The guiding principle is that affected members will be compensated for any overpayment of contributions or tax for that period. To ensure fairness for all scheme members, including those who have already

paid the appropriate amount of scheme contributions and tax for the period in question, the Bill sets out processes by which adjustments will also be required where underpayment of contributions or tax liability occurs for any extra pension entitlement due as a consequence of the choice made for the remedy period. Where both overpaid and underpaid contributions occur, interest will be applied in line with directions by my Department, following consultation with the Government Actuary.

In the case of deceased members, overpaid and underpaid contributions may also arise where a beneficiary of the member elects to take the higher remedy benefits available in the scheme. Again, that is intended to ensure fairness for all scheme members. The Bill, however, also provides scope for the individual schemes to reduce or waive completely any underpayment of contributions in scheme regulations where it deems that to be appropriate: for example, where that might cause hardship.

1.45 pm

There will also be cases in which members have already retired and received pension benefits for remedy period service or will do so between now and the introduction of the regulations for respective changes by October 2023. My Department will work with schemes to ensure that those members can exercise a choice at the earliest available opportunity concerning the revised entitlements, where adjustments are required. The Bill ensures that all members of comparable, similarly constituted schemes here and in Britain are treated equally through the scheme design available to them after the discrimination has been addressed. It would be unfair and would perpetuate the unlawful discrimination if some members of the public-sector schemes and not others continued to be in legacy schemes after April 2022, as that difference in treatment would still be attributable to an unjustified age-based criterion.

It is important to be clear that it is only the transitional protection element of the reform schemes that has been deemed to be discriminatory and must be removed. The case for the 2015 reform schemes, as approved by the Assembly in 2014, to commit to the new career average revaluated earnings scheme design with normal pension age links and a safe pension age for most schemes, in line with their equivalent scheme in Britain, and not to adopt the different approaches here, still

remains valid. As well as promoting fairness across scheme members, those changes, legislated for by the Assembly, were and still are necessary to ensure that the schemes remain sustainable and fit for purpose in the future.

The proposed provisions in the Bill include closing the legacy schemes from 31 March 2022; affirming the 2015 schemes for all members from 1 April 2022; establishing arrangements for compensation for overpayment and underpayment of benefits, including for tax purposes, during the remedy period; implementing the proposed waiver of any cost-cap ceiling breaches that emerged from the reworked 2016 cost-cap valuations; establishing a reformed judicial scheme; reforming certain terms of office for the judiciary; and establishing new schemes to replace the Bradley and Bingley and Northern Rock pension schemes.

I will address some of the provisions in more detail, starting with the judicial scheme. The devolved scheme contains the same discriminatory transitional protections as the other schemes established under the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014. In addition to addressing that discrimination, the Bill enables the provision of a new reformed career average judicial pension scheme. Judicial scheme members will be given a choice to retain remedy period benefits in either a legacy or reformed scheme by way of an options exercise, and all members will also accrue benefits only in the new reformed scheme from 1 April 2022. The devolved judicial scheme has a very small membership. It has only 56 registered members, approximately 30 of whom are affected by the age discrimination scope of the remedy. Since its introduction in 2015, the scheme already differs from other devolved schemes, in that, owing to concerns around value for money, efficiency and economy of scale, it does not complete its own actuarial valuation but rather applies the outcome of the Ministry of Justice valuation in order to determine the appropriate contributions and cost controls for scheme members and employers. Governance and some administration functions for the scheme are also already linked to or shared with the Ministry of Justice scheme. Under the legislative consent motion (LCM), the devolved judicial scheme would be incorporated into a reformed judicial scheme established by the Ministry of Justice.

Other measures for the judiciary are unrelated to pensions. They include reforming the scheme of judicial allowances, increasing the mandatory retirement age for the judiciary from

70 to 75 and widening the scope for judges to sit after they have retired. The Department of Justice has consulted separately on those changes. The Committee for Justice has also been briefed, and I am advised that it is content that they be made.

The Bill also introduces an additional UK asset resolution (AR) measure, which will establish the UK AR pension scheme as a new public service pension scheme, defunding the existing Bradford and Bingley and Northern Rock asset management pension schemes. After that point, the Government will bear the cost of paying the pensions directly. There are no impacts for devolved arrangements in that Part of the Bill.

The remedy solution will implement an identical remedy response to that proposed by the Treasury following its own consultation for the analogous scheme in Britain. In the light of the shared policy objectives emerging from both consultations and the time frame to implement the remedy solution by April 2022, an LCM for the provisions for devolved schemes to be included in the Westminster Bill represents the most practical approach to ensuring that the unlawful age discrimination is removed in good time for members here and that scheme members are not disadvantaged.

The Bill makes provision for each Department with responsibility for a devolved public service pension scheme made under the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 to make its own secondary regulations to implement the remedy on age discrimination for its members. These regulations will be subject to the full requirements of the Assembly under the terms of the negative resolution process and subject to scrutiny by the relevant Assembly Committee in the same way as any other scheme regulations would be made under the 2014 Act. Each Department will be required to undertake full consultation with scheme members or their trade union representatives before the regulations are made. Where Treasury responsibilities will now also exist under the Bill for directions and technical guidance to the schemes in Britain, my Department will retain responsibility for all directions and technical guidance on equivalent matters for the devolved schemes.

An Assembly Bill could also be used to implement these changes. However, in the context of the very close timescales now faced to implement the prospective remedy solution by 1 April 2022, a stand-alone Bill would exert an additional strain on Assembly legislative workloads for the remainder of the mandate. If such a Bill were not completed before

dissolution for elections, it would fall, and the unlawful age discrimination for the affected scheme members would not be resolved. My Department's consultation on the issue has not identified any justified rationale or realistic scope to deviate from the core policy approach developed in conjunction with the Treasury to address the effects of age discrimination across all similarly constituted schemes. These are targeted and technical changes that will focus on the discriminatory elements of the transitional protections now identified by the courts as unlawful.

The main features of the reformed 2015 schemes — career average scheme design with revised pension ages, as agreed by the Assembly in 2014 — are not affected by the court's ruling. Those remain legal, fit for purpose and appropriate for future service.

It is imperative that the provisions in the primary legislation for the devolved schemes are passed into law before April 2022. If that target date is not met, long-term liabilities may increase by up to £97 million for each additional year that the remedy window is open. The current cost equates to approximately £680 million in total. Any delay in the primary legislation will also impact on the introduction of the secondary legislation by the schemes here. These estimates reflect the expected cost of members receiving benefits from whichever scheme provides the highest value to them for the remedy period. The costs are in addition to those already arising from members receiving benefits from the scheme that they are currently in.

The Bill will also effectively set the scheme model and funding envelope for the public service scheme design, which will be funded by the Treasury from April 2022. Any alternative approach that would deviate from that design or cost envelope, or provide a more generous benefits package for any particular cohort or workforce, would inevitably require additional funding from the block grant.

Having explained the rationale for bringing the motion to the Assembly, I commend the Committee for Finance for the timely manner in which it considered the report on the motion, and I thank the Committee for its general support for the motion.

In summary, the Bill builds on the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 to create an overarching legislative framework for all public service pension schemes. Implementation of the 2015 reforms introduced an age-related criterion that favoured older

scheme members in comparison to younger members. This Bill provides the framework for a remedy that removes that difference in treatment, provides members with a choice in how their service in the remedy period is treated for pension purposes and treats all scheme members equally for service post April 2022. Any delay in legislating for these changes would extend the current disadvantage and risk further costly legal challenge for the scheme and responsible Departments here if the required legislative changes are not in place to address the discrimination to the satisfaction of the courts by April 2022.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Steve Aiken and give him advance notice that I may have to interrupt him, as Question Time begins at 2.00 pm.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and for the related oral and written briefings that he and his officials provided to the Committee for Finance on this legislative consent motion and the relevant Westminster legislation. I also thank the public-sector trade unions who briefed the Committee on these matters on several occasions.

Public-sector pensions are important. They cost around £1.3 billion per annum in Northern Ireland alone and are a vital component of retirement provision in this jurisdiction. The changes that are being brought forward by the Westminster legislation will affect around 130,000 of our public-sector workers and retirees in Northern Ireland. Clearly, the process of Assembly scrutiny of these important matters will always be better served by devolved legislation and judicious consideration by the Committee for Finance. For various reasons that I will discuss, however, the Committee has, with some reluctance, agreed to support the passing of the legislative consent motion, or, at least, not to oppose it.

As the Minister has indicated, the roots of all this go back to the pension reforms of 2015. In order to address demographic pressures, public-sector pension schemes were changed, and protections were put in place for certain groups nearing retirement. The courts subsequently determined that some of those protections were discriminatory. Our Government eventually agreed that a remedy, the so-called McCloud remedy, was required. The McCloud costs — about £700 million in Northern Ireland alone — are substantial.

The Government have also developed a solution: the so-called deferred choice

underpin. That will allow affected retirees to choose, at the point of retirement, whether they wish to receive benefits from a reformed scheme or a legacy scheme. The solution will require all public-sector workers to accrue pension benefits in the same way from 1 April 2022. Crucially, the remedy will require the costs to be treated as member costs and thus to be met by the pension schemes themselves.

The Committee understands, however, that the Westminster Bill guarantees that, notwithstanding the above, there will be no increase to employee contributions as a consequence of the McCloud remedy put forward by the Government. In principle, the Committee takes the view that the previous discriminatory protections were the responsibility of the British Government and thus that our Government should pay for the associated reparations. The Government will not do that generally, however, and they will certainly not provide additional funding for a public-sector pensions solution that would be more generous in Northern Ireland than in the rest of our country.

If the Executive were to go their own way and meet the associated costs themselves, they would have to do so from the Northern Ireland block grant. The Executive's expenditure is already under a lot of pressure, and all our money will be needed for other urgent and important matters, not least our hard-pressed health service. The Committee therefore felt that, as there is to be no increase in employee contributions, there was no option other than to go along with the Government's McCloud remedy and treat the extra costs as member costs.

The Committee accepted that any deviation by the Executive from the United Kingdom Government approach could lead to legal challenges, which, to date, have been directed at central government. Again, that mitigated acceptance of the McCloud remedy. In respect of the legal question, members also understand that other court challenges are planned or under way on the revaluation of public sector pension schemes. It has been suggested that the Executive could simply and prudently wait until those are resolved and then bring forward their own devolved legislation that could reflect the final legal position.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I am afraid that I must interrupt the Member. Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm, so I suggest that the House take its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question

Time, when Dr Aiken will have the opportunity to finish his speech [*Inaudible.*]

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.01 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Communities

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Job Start: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

1. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the benefits of the Job Start scheme in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQO 2622/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thanks very much. Since its introduction, more than 1,529 employers have signed up to provide opportunities through the Job Start scheme. As of 30 September, 64 employers in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area had submitted a Job Start funding application. Ten young people from that area have already commenced employment through the scheme.

Job Start provides a financial incentive to encourage employers, including those in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, to provide Job Start opportunities for young people who are at risk of long-term unemployment. Opportunities are available for six months, which can be extended to nine months if they meet the additional criteria. It is intended that, by the end of the opportunity, Job Start participants will either be offered a job by the employer, or have the necessary skills and experience to help them to find another job or to progress into further education and training opportunities. Employers are openly encouraged to retain the participant at the end of the programme. Work coaches in the local jobs and benefits offices will support young people who participate in the scheme.

When the scheme was developed, unemployment levels for young people were predicted to be significantly higher. Thankfully, the expected levels have not come to pass. Therefore, I have asked officials to explore further enhancements to the scheme to encourage increased participation.

Mrs Erskine: Thank you for your answer, Minister. Can the Minister detail the work in her

Department to sustain and improve the numbers availing themselves of the Job Start scheme in my area, given that it has excellent facilities such as the newly opened South West College in Enniskillen, which will allow people to gain new skills?

Ms Hargey: We are trying to do all that we can. When the scheme first came into being, it was a programme that was run in Britain, and it then transferred to here. We had projected that the jobseeker's allowance claimant count would be at 120,000 at this point. We are at around 48,500, so, thankfully, we did not get to the projected levels. That said, we have 4,942 opportunities for young people right across the North in a variety of sectors, and those employers are keen to get young people through their doors.

We are engaging to rapidly increase the numbers. I am looking at incentives for the scheme. We have talked to young people to find out what further supports they would need to take up the opportunities. We are looking at providing more full-time employment and childcare costs and also at, potentially, increasing the age range for those who can access the opportunities.

The bigger part is how we can engage and get the word out that these opportunities are available. In the Member's area, 64 employers have come forward, and that is brilliant. We need to find young people to match to those positions. There may be MLAs who can say that the opportunities exist, and we are more than glad to facilitate that. We will work with councils, training providers, the community and voluntary sector and employers to get the news out that these opportunities are here.

Ms Armstrong: I absolutely welcomed the Job Start scheme when it came forward. Has the Minister, too, heard complaints from businesses that the take-up rate for Job Start opportunities has been disappointing? She talks about helping to encourage young people into positions, but where are the jobs advertised? As we know, they do not read the newspapers. Is there anything that the Minister can do to help businesses that are offering opportunities?

Ms Hargey: Many businesses have come forward, and many opportunities are available. We are looking at how we can enhance the scheme to encourage young people to come forward. As I said, we want to make it be worth their while. Among their concerns are the rate of pay and the fact that placements are not necessarily full-time employment. I am looking

at enhancements for young people who want to consider placements. There are, obviously, issues around childcare as well, because parents are coming forward. We also want to broaden the age range to allow more young people to apply.

We will advertise jobs differently. We are looking at social media, such as Instagram, where young people can be reached. They do not necessarily look at the jobs and benefits office's internet line, but they are to be found on Instagram and other platforms. We are looking at new incentives. There will be almost a relaunch of the scheme, to tell people where the opportunities are. It is important for us to work with organisations and employers on the ground to get that word out. MLAs and others will play a key role in that.

Ms Á Murphy: The Job Start scheme is a welcome initiative to support young people into employment. Is the Minister confident that young people on the scheme receive quality experience and real opportunities?

Ms Hargey: Over the last couple of months, I met a number of young people, some of whom work in my Department in a variety of areas. I also met those working in the private sector; a mixture of those with a disability, who are on the nine-month placement, and those on the six-month placement. From what I gathered, they enjoy the experience. They like the opportunity to try out an area of work that they have not previously thought of. It has been a good opportunity for them to come together and meet other young people.

We continue to listen to the young people, and we may need to make enhancements to the scheme. In some of the engagement with them, they tell us that we should do that, particularly in regard to pay, incentivisation, childcare and working hours for different age brackets. I will announce those enhancements soon and promote them widely in the time ahead.

Mr McCrossan: I, too, welcome the scheme. Will the Minister outline how many young people in West Tyrone have benefited from it? What will happen at the end of the process, if the young person does not end up in employment?

Ms Hargey: I do not have the figure for West Tyrone, but I will send you the breakdown.

We are working with employers to provide opportunities at the end of the placement. Young people can then seek to transfer into

employment. In my Department, we are looking at how we can transfer them over and guarantee them an interview for employment opportunities that arise. We are also matching them to opportunities, through work coaches and local jobs and benefits offices so that they can consider other opportunities. They will have garnered skills, and we help them to write applications and present CVs, which allows them to consider other employment opportunities on the jobs list at the moment. We also work with colleges on pathways to further education for those who need it. Therefore, we try to create multiple pathways, but the key is working with employers to find employment opportunities. That will be a focus for us in the time ahead. I will write to the Member with the specific information that he requested.

Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Sectors: COVID-19 Support

2. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the level of Executive support that has been allocated to assist the culture, languages, arts and heritage sectors during the pandemic. (AQO 2623/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank my Executive colleagues for the £33 million that was allocated last year, to which my Department added a further £3 million. That brought the total support to just under £36 million. For well over a year, our culture and arts venues fell silent. We have not been able to enjoy the magic of live gigs, festivals, plays and many other activities that enrich our cultural lives.

Funding allocated for the 2020-21 financial year continued to flow. We provided much-needed support for individuals. Some 3,000 people received awards, which came to just under £10 million in total. We also provided over 400 organisations with £18 million to eliminate deficits and to help with reopening and any adaptations that they needed to make to ensure that they could reopen safely. I also supported our languages sector with over £3.5 million. I distributed a further £4 million to the community support programme at a local level to develop local initiatives, harness the power of the arts and to improve people's lives for the better.

In the 2021-22 financial year, my Executive colleagues have allocated a further £13 million of support for the culture, arts, languages and heritage sectors. I have already allocated up to £5.5 million of that to support self-employed and freelance individuals. That allocation was made on the back of the work of the task force

that was established earlier this year around culture, arts and heritage recovery, which identified issues around freelancers as the number one issue. The task force report will be published soon. Members will remember that, up until just over a month ago, a lot of the sectors and venues were still closed. That fund was to support them. I assure Members that we will continue to work to bring forward further support urgently, particularly for organisations.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Ms Hargey: I will make further announcements shortly.

Mr McHugh: Tá mé an-bhuíoch den Aire as a freagra. I am very grateful to the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that, even with the relaxation of restrictions, the return to live music and so on, the creative sector will require ongoing support? I am not talking about only financial support. One of the comments that I hear continually from musicians and the like is that they need to perform, just as a mechanic needs to work with machinery and a surgeon needs to perform surgery. There are mental health issues, so that type of support is required for those who depend on the sector for their living.

Ms Hargey: The sector was hit very hard, and now it is trying to restore public confidence as venues reopen and events return. The sector is trying to straddle both. We will continue to work with the sector. The task force carried out its work, and many from the music sector were involved in that. I also met representatives from Music NI throughout the period to get an update on the impact on the artists, the industry's support staff and the jobs that the sector supports. They have made a series of recommendations to me by way of the task force. I announced the funding package, and that was the number one issue that came up as part of the task force. I am looking at the recommendations, and I will write to the task force shortly about what I will bring forward as a result of its recommendations and proposals. I want to continue to work with the task force, the Arts Council and artists — at an organisational and individual level — to support them in the time ahead, which, as the Member rightly says, is required. Even as things begin to open, there is a struggle, and we need to continue to work with them and to support them. They all recognise the importance of coming together through the task force. They do not want to lose that, and I am keen to see that continue as we develop a longer-term strategy.

Mr Dunne: Will the Minister give an update on the provision of a culture and community fund to support community halls, which was a New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment?

Ms Hargey: Some of that fund was a commitment by the British Government. I have not heard of any progress being made. I urge engagement with the British Government on the issue.

2.15 pm

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, will you give an update on any work that your Department is doing around the sign language Bill?

Ms Hargey: Work is ongoing. It was unfortunate that we could not progress the sign language Bill in this mandate. That was communicated to the Committee a while ago. Work on social inclusion strategies and on looking at the legislation and policy development around that is ongoing. We continue to engage with the sector. We will introduce legislation as soon as we can. I am hopeful that that will be done early in the new mandate.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, will you outline how your Department intends to spend the remaining COVID funding allocated to the arts and culture sector?

Ms Hargey: We are looking at that. It is also contained in the recommendations from the task force, which included representatives from the culture, arts and heritage sectors. The task force has made recommendations to me that they see as supporting the sector going forward. I am giving consideration to those, and I will communicate my decision soon. Of the £13 million, I have allocated £5.5 million to a support fund for individuals. That has gone live, and applications are being processed. Once I have firm proposals, I will inform the Committee and the House. I hope to do that soon.

Parkrun

3. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Communities what plans her Department has to support the establishment of new parkrun events. (AQO 2624/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Parkrun is a global charitable organisation that delivers events that are run by volunteers, with the primary aim of helping people to live healthier, happier lives. The events are free to enter and non-competitive

and are generally for runners and walkers who enjoy taking part in less formal settings than the more structured competitive events organised by governing bodies or sports clubs. The success of parkrun has been remarkable globally and locally in terms of its popularity and getting people of all ages and abilities into running and walking. There are now 35 events taking place every Saturday morning. My Department recognises the great work that goes on through parkruns. As COVID restrictions were lifted, parkruns played an important role in getting large numbers of people back outdoors and into a safe environment and bringing volunteers and communities together.

Parkrun has and will continue to have a positive impact on communities, and my Department has engaged extensively with the organisers to assist with the early return of events. Last year, Carál met the Member who asked the question and the event organisers, and that engagement with parkrun organisers continues.

While government involvement in the development of new events is not consistent with the parkrun delivery model, my Department is happy to look at where we can assist. We have done so during the COVID pandemic through PPE packs and other supports. We will continue to keep that engagement going in the time ahead.

Mr Muir: At the outset, I declare that I am the event director for Crawfordsburn Country Park parkrun. I thank the Minister for her response. Does the Minister agree that the physical and mental health benefits of participating in parkrun events on a Saturday morning are immense? Following on from that, does the Minister recognise the challenges in getting funding for new events? Will she join me in taking part in a parkrun on a Saturday or, failing that, meet the organisers and me to see how we can give further support?

Ms Hargey: I tried a parkrun once in Ormeau Park, and I left it after one. I preferred to play camogie, but that was just me.

They are enormous events. Recently, on social media, I saw one person who will complete his 500th parkrun in January. With no running experience at all, he started on a treadmill a few years ago, and he went on to do parkruns and has the tattoos to show for it. Parkrun has a huge impact, and, as I said, people from all age groups, backgrounds and abilities can come together to share in those events.

Some of the difficulties are to do with parkrun not being a sports governing body. There are certain rules about who can apply for the funding that I can give through Sport NI. However, we are looking to work with parkrun, because we recognise the wider impact on getting people active, looking at healthy living, improving health and well-being — particularly mental health and resilience — and the importance that the events have in all of that. I am keen to work with it in the time ahead. I know that Sport NI is doing Project Re:Boot as part of the Supporting Sport to Build Back Better programme. Again, I encourage parkrun organisers to speak to Sport NI. My officials and I are more than keen to continue to engage with them to see what further support we can provide.

Mr Delargy: I know that the Minister is supportive of parkrun events. What engagement has been undertaken and what support has been provided during and after COVID to help parkrun get back to normal?

Ms Hargey: At the start of this year, three parkruns, including two junior parkruns, received the COVID-safe PPE sports packs as part of my Department's support package. Moreover, in the financial year 2018-19, three parkruns, including two junior parkrun events, benefited from the Department's defibrillator programme and associated training. The sports packs and the defibrillator programme are managed through Sport NI, so I encourage parkruns to continue to engage with it.

Further back, the Department also provided IT system support for some parkrun initiatives. We will continue to support them. A fund is available through Sport NI as part of the Supporting Sport to Build Back Better programme. Notwithstanding the fact that it is not a recognised sport, we are more than willing to continue to work with the parkrun initiative to see how we can support it in the time ahead.

Mr Durkan: The Minister has accepted and repeated many of the benefits associated with running. I very much welcome her commitment that the Department will work with the organisers to see how it can assist them more. Will the Minister extend that offer to the organisers of the Walled City Marathon and Derry City and Strabane District Council to see how we can get that great event back up and running?

Ms Hargey: We will continue to work with parkrun. As I say, we met Andrew and a couple of the organisers last year. I am more than

happy to do that. I am not aware of having received a request from the organisers of that marathon. I regularly work with Derry City and Strabane District Council, so I am more than happy to pick up that specific issue as part of my engagement.

Social Housing: Green New Builds

4. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for Communities what support will be available to lower carbon emissions and promote greener energy in social housing new builds. (AQO 2625/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There is a rapidly increasing policy and regulatory focus on improving the energy efficiency of dwellings as a key measure in the drive to make energy savings and reduce carbon emissions. Increasing the energy efficiency of homes is a vital way of mitigating the effects of climate change, reducing fuel poverty and improving health. The Department is therefore supporting sustainable and energy-efficient design beyond the statutory minimum by allowing associations to claim a supplementary energy-efficient multiplier for new dwellings that exceed the minimum standards currently required under the Building Regulations (NI) 2012. That standard is optional, and the majority of new social homes are built to the standards set by Department of Finance under the Building Regulations and my Department's housing association guide to development.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Will you advise what support you will give to non-new builds in the countryside?

Ms Hargey: There is a huge challenge ahead, given the carbon emissions from homes. We have over 800,000 homes across the North. Retrofitting will be a huge challenge. Given the extent of the retrofitting that some homes may need, the issue will be whether we demolish and rebuild those homes or fully retrofit them.

We are involved in discussions with DAERA and the Department for Infrastructure. We are part of a cross-departmental climate action group, because we know that one depends on the other in looking at the energy efficiency of homes. That work continues. We are looking at the housing supply strategy and at some of the challenges that we have with the supply of new homes. The financing of that will be an issue for the Executive shortly. Retrofitting properties is a much larger expense, and we need to look at from where that money will come. We are obviously working with our colleagues in

Scotland, the South of Ireland and Wales to look at models of best practice and what we can do to reduce carbon emissions and look at the issue of fuel poverty. As part of those discussions, we will bring back proposals for what we can do in the private rented sector. For example, could there be grants and stuff given around that? There is potential at some point — we spoke about this a couple of weeks ago — for a whole-house approach to energy efficiency and carbon emissions and maybe not just doing a patchwork. However, that will need a huge financial investment, and that is part of the discussions as we work with DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for the Economy on bringing forward firm proposals.

Ms Hunter: Will future affordable warmth schemes focus on support for energy efficiency programmes and the use of renewable energy sources?

Ms Hargey: We will keep that under review. Part of the discussion at the moment is that, if we are going to reduce carbon emissions and go for zero, we need a step change in the programmes that we run. That will mean an increase in upfront costs, and we need to find the money to do that. Obviously, we are already setting new targets for all new social housing building programmes that housing associations deliver to ensure that they are carbon-neutral. From this stage forward, feeding into the housing supply strategy and the social housing development programme, we will start to look at that to ensure that homes are fit for purpose not just now but for the next 20 or 30 years. We will look at new methods of construction as well, because we know about the emissions from the construction of homes on site, so there are difficulties there that we need to work through. Part of that will involve looking at the affordable warmth schemes and what we can do to change them to make sure that there is a greater focus on energy efficiency.

Miss Reilly: Minister, we are all concerned at the escalating global climate crisis that we face. There is, of course, enormous focus on that crisis today in particular with the climate conference in Scotland, which the joint First Minister Michelle O'Neill and some of my Assembly and Dáil colleagues are attending. Will the Minister ensure that new homes being built by her Department will exceed the minimum standards set in building regulations, with a clear objective of delivering carbon-neutral homes?

Ms Hargey: My Department is able to set a requirement for all new social homes that are being delivered by housing associations to be carbon-neutral as a condition of receiving the grant. However, when homes are built to a carbon-neutral standard, the costs are higher, so careful consideration will need to be given to how any increase in construction costs will have an impact on the number of homes that we can build.

Part of the discussion will be with Executive Ministers. As we deal with the issue, we know that we need to act to address the climate challenge and the code red alert that we have been given. However, if we are going to do that by building in those requirements, that will have to be matched with increased provision for the social housing development programme. If we put money in to address the carbon challenges, fewer homes will be built, unless we get significant capital investment. Those are some of the discussions that are going on at the moment. That is obviously part of the housing supply strategy as well, so we will be able to provide more of an update. We continue to work with housing associations and others who are looking to go above and beyond the current minimum standards, because we know that the issue of fuel poverty is huge and needs to be addressed. That needs to be done in a way that ensures that the cost is not put onto those who are already struggling. We need to look at solutions going forward.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Patsy McGlone. The Member may not get to ask a supplementary question.

Social Housing: Bungalows

5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Communities what action she has taken to increase the provision of bungalows for social housing. (AQO 2626/17-22)

Ms Hargey: New build social housing bungalows are included in the social housing development programme on a scheme-by-scheme basis. Housing associations work with the Housing Executive's regional place-shaping teams to agree appropriate housing mixes to meet identified local need. As a general principle, bungalow development is not considered to be the best use of land. It is uneconomical when compared with other residential uses at a time when land that is suitable for housing is expensive and in limited supply. Therefore, bungalows are included in social housing schemes only in exceptional circumstances.

2.30 pm

A number of policies have been introduced to address the housing needs of older people and disabled tenants. Annual incremental targets for wheelchair-accessible homes have been included in the social housing development programme since 2017-18, with a minimum requirement of wheelchair-accessible new-build units. The current target is 10% for 2020-21. In addition, all new-build social homes are built to lifetime homes standards, which ensures that homes can be easily adapted to meet the changing needs of tenants. Finally, since 2004, bungalow accommodation has been allocated separately from the house sales scheme, which is a better way of targeting need.

Mr Speaker: There is time for a very brief question and answer.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. Thank you, Minister. Can you explain why, given the growth in the numbers of older people and people with disabilities, only one social housing bungalow has been built in Mid Ulster in five years?

Ms Hargey: The population, more broadly across the North, is ageing. We are living a lot longer. There is going to be an increasing challenge in terms of the type of housing that we will need to supply in the time ahead. The housing supply strategy, which will be going out to public consultation later this year, will look at the supply chain that we are going to need between now and 2035.

We are trying to get to a position of meeting the needs of older people and those with underlying health conditions. It should not be just one housing type, such as a bungalow; we should be building homes that can be retrofitted to meet the changing needs of the people who live in them to ensure that they can stay in them and that they are a home for life. Bungalows are there in exceptional circumstances. That being said, if the case is made, it can be done. It has been done in other areas, so I am more than happy to look at the specifics. When we are looking at houses and trying to build more homes for the future, we need to recognise that people will live longer. It is about making sure that we have the flexibility in the homes that we build so that people can grow old in them and are not forced to move later in life.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Universal Credit Uplift

T1. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the Minister of Finance's refusal to fund her bid for the universal credit uplift. (AQT 1711/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There was no refusal by the Minister of Finance. It is crass to try to make the accusation that there was. I made a bid in the October monitoring round for the money to fund the loss in the uplift, which was taken away by the Tories. That is the first thing. It was good that every party in the Executive supported me in writing to the British Government, calling for the uplift to be retained. We joined Scotland and Wales in that regard.

The Minister of Finance has been very clear that he put the proposal on the Executive table. He also stressed that, if we were going to fund the uplift, we had to do it permanently because we should not be bringing people to a cliff edge. I completely agree, and I supported him in that. The reality is that it is a Tory cut that will result, at the highest end, in £200 million having to be found. When that was placed on the Executive table for discussion and decision, no other Ministers were forthcoming with the finance to cover those costs, so he would have had to make a cut to the budgets of Departments, including Health, Education and Infrastructure. It was the unanimous view around the table that we cannot continue to cover Tory cuts. We, obviously, need to stand up and fight. The Executive had been doing that. It is unfortunate that people are now trying to undermine the consensus that had been there.

Mr Catney: Minister, I was not a Member at the time, but, as far as I am aware, those powers were handed back to Westminster, and I know that Sinn Féin was the party that handed them back. I thank the Minister for her answer. My question is about the thousands of poor people who have been left without that money, are accumulating debt and are feeling the worst constraints of coming out of the pandemic. They have been left behind because of backroom deals that have been done here in Stormont.

Ms Hargey: Again, the Member is just being crass in some of his assertions.

Mr Catney: Not at all.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Hargey: He knows how finances are worked out in the Assembly. It was the British Government who withdrew the money. They hold the purse for making the additional payments. The British Government withdrew the money. All of the parties around the Executive table — the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the DUP, the Ulster Unionists and Alliance — supported me in calling out the British Government, who made the cut. I commended all of the parties for supporting me in doing that. We already put money in in the form of interventions. Up to £600 million a year out of our block grant goes towards trying to soften the worsening impacts of Tory austerity and cuts.

There was a recognition by all around the table at the Executive meeting a few weeks ago that, financially, we cannot continue to do that. I would have loved the money to have been found to meet that need, but where does it come from? Where do you take it from? Do you take it from Health? Do you take it from Infrastructure? You would be taking it out of other vital public services. Our focus now needs to be on a right-wing Tory Government who want to hurt the most vulnerable in our society. It is the same in England, Scotland and Wales. I was glad that all the parties stood up with me, along with the Welsh and Scottish Ministers. The focus needs to be kept on the British Government, who withdrew that funding.

Mid and East Antrim Borough Council: DFC Intervention

T2. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Communities, given recent events and publicity, what action her Department is taking to ensure that the morale and confidence of staff, councillors and, indeed, ratepayers in the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area is restored and protected. (AQT 1712/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can understand the concerns that have been raised. Members from different parties have raised concerns with me and done so publicly as well. In recent weeks, there have been interventions by the police and others. I have looked at the limits of my powers and my ability to intervene. I continue to keep options open where I am able to do that. That said, councils are autonomous bodies. I have intervened in other scenarios, so I have no fear of intervening, but I have to make sure that, where I intervene, I am legally allowed to do so. I am keeping under careful consideration all of the matters that have come to the fore recently. I will continue to engage. If I need to make an

intervention and I believe that it is the right thing to do, I will have no hesitation in doing that.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that answer. These are difficult issues. In light of the detail given in the answer and some of the issues that I referred to in my question, may I ask whether the processes that are in place are to be reviewed as a result of the recent events and the publicity around them?

Ms Hargey: Publicity is one thing but facts and information can be another, given what is out there in public forums or arenas. It is about establishing the facts and whether I can assess that, legally, I have the grounds to ask for more detail. As I said, councils are autonomous bodies in their own right. They have their own procedures to deal with things, whether those are to do with staff or councillors or wider issues. I am aware of the public interest element and that there might be such an effect that those who live in the borough have real concerns. I will continue to keep that under review, but I need the information and the facts. Saying something in public or making an assertion is not factual, and I look at black-and-white scenarios. I continue to keep the matter under review, and my officials continue to engage with the council. That is all that I can say on the matter at this point.

Sport and Physical Activity Strategy

T3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the sport and physical activity strategy. (AQT 1713/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. First, I am sorry to hear, Chris, that you will be stepping down. It was a shock to everyone, as I said outside. You will be missed in the Chamber, but good luck in your future endeavours. You will probably have a better heart condition afterwards.

Work to update the strategy is ongoing. We continue to work with Sport NI and other key partners on the development of the sport and physical activity strategy. I am hopeful that we will be launching the draft strategy shortly. I will update the Committee and the House when we are ready to go live with it.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for those very kind words, Minister.

Minister, I welcome your recognition of the importance of sport and physical activity for the well-being of everyone in Northern Ireland. How

do you intend to measure the success of the strategy?

Ms Hargey: We are looking at how broadly we will go. I completely get the importance of sport and physical activity. I played camogie when I was younger. I can see the impact, even over the summer, on young people taking part in sport and physical activity schemes and programmes and the huge benefit that it has for health and well-being. During the pandemic, when those activities had to cease, we saw the impact on those who usually participated and whose children usually participated and heard the outcry that it caused.

We continue to engage with Sport NI on the outputs. We have to take into account the impact of the pandemic, particularly on mental health, well-being and resilience. Those are some of the areas that we are looking at on the physical activity side. Once we have a conclusion on that, I will be able to update Members.

Welfare Mitigations Legislation: Update

T4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the steps that she has taken in the renewal of welfare mitigations legislation. (AQT 1714/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Members will know that I have spoken about this. I was before the Committee a few weeks ago. At that point, I said that I had made 39 attempts to get the legislation onto the Executive agenda to be agreed and progressed. It is now up to 40 attempts. I tried again to get it on the Executive agenda two weeks ago, to no avail.

Members will know that, if it is not approved within the Executive Office to be put on the agenda, it cannot be discussed. I raised it under any other business, but all that I could do was to register my disgust that it was not on. The frustrating thing for me is that I have tried 40 times to get this put on the table for a decision.

I have the legislation ready and the money in place. Some of the money had to be returned because it could not be spent. The legislation is about binning the bedroom tax and closing the loopholes for those families that are falling through the net at the moment to make sure that their payments are covered. It is then about continuing those mitigations, obviously with a review to see if they are working. I am ready to go out with the new review that was committed to within 'New Decade, New Approach'.

I am still unhappy, and I am going to call it out again, that the DUP continues to block this matter being placed on the Executive agenda. I have submitted it again to be put on the agenda at this Thursday's meeting for a decision. I am not speaking for the Speaker, but you will have seen the Speaker say in the media last week that time is running out in terms of the Assembly sitting days that we have left. My frustration is that we will come to another cliff edge in the way we were in January of last year.

I first came into the Chamber as a Minister in January.

Mr Speaker: Minister, your time is up.

Ms Hargey: I had legislation ready by February, and it still has not moved.

Mr Speaker: I call John O'Dowd. Sorry, supplementary, Trevor Lunn. My apologies.

Mr Lunn: I am a long way away here. I thank the Minister for her answer. I am glad that she has made it quite clear where the blockage is in this matter. Will she outline the worst-case scenario if mitigation legislation is not introduced during this term, particularly around the bedroom tax, which she mentioned, and the benefit cap?

Ms Hargey: At the moment, we are making payments under the Budget Act. The Budget Act should be used only in emergency crisis situations. The difficulty is also that, if anything happened to the Assembly, officials cannot continue to renew the Budget Act. That can be done only by a Minister, and the Budget Act has to be renewed yearly, so there is a concern there.

The other concern is that I need the legislation and regulations through to close the loopholes. Families are falling through the net at the moment and are losing out on hundreds of pounds each month because the loopholes have not been closed.

That includes people who maybe moved house, there was a change of circumstances and, therefore, they lost the bedroom tax mitigation. They would get that back again under the loopholes being closed. I am not able to do that unless I get the legislation through.

2.45 pm

The big concern is that time is running out. We do not have time. I am already trying to fast-track this because it will not have time to go through the normal processes, but, that having been said, I still want the Committee to have a scrutiny role in what I am putting forward. If you have an issue with what I have proposed, at least allow it to reach the Executive table to be voted on. I have said that I will respect the democratic decision of the Executive, but the issue has not even been allowed on the agenda to enable that decision to take place.

Welfare Mitigations Legislation: DUP Blocking Rationale

T5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Communities, in response to Mr Lunn's question, to state whether the DUP has given her its rationale as to why it is not allowing such an important piece of legislation on to the Executive's agenda and, more importantly, why it will not allow it to be debated on the Floor of the Assembly. (AQT 1715/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My understanding is that it is about end dates: the DUP wants an end date of three years again. I have said that the bedroom tax, in particular, will not be resolved in three years. We will continually bring people to another cliff edge. I have the legislation ready to go. Any changes in that legislation would mean redrafting. That is more time being wasted when the money is there and the legislation is in place. I agreed to a review, and that was one of the concerns that was raised. I do not know why, even after all this time, there has been no movement on it. That question needs to be asked of the DUP.

Mr Speaker: There is just under a minute left. I call John O'Dowd for a brief question.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, we hear much from the opposite Benches about the harm that the protocol is allegedly doing to working-class unionist communities. Does she agree that the bedroom tax is doing much more harm than the protocol ever will?

Ms Hargey: This is having a huge financial impact — definitely. We can see the impact of that Tory policy in England, where families are being forced to leave the home that they have lived in for years with their children and move hundreds of miles away. We talk to NICVA and other organisations. The bedroom tax was brought in as one of the key mitigations back in 2017. We know that our housing make-up here cannot meet the need, and, if this legislation is

not progressed, it will force families out onto the street and force them to move miles away. The reality is that it would force them to become homeless, because we do not have the housing composition to meet the need. That will affect working-class families, low-income families and particularly children the most, both in loyalist working-class areas, yes, and across the board. It will affect thousands right across our society.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two before we move to the next item in the Order Paper. Thank you.

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

Infrastructure

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Questions 7 and 10 have been withdrawn. Topical questions 3, 7 and 9 have been withdrawn.

DVA: Temporary Exemption Certificates

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why temporary exemption certificates were not used during August and September to ease pressure on drivers and Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) staff. (AQO 2636/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): From Monday 26 July, the DVA reinstated normal vehicle test times, which increased capacity across the network of test centres. The DVA conducted 117,000 full vehicle tests in August and September, which is 96% of the five-year average for those months.

From a road safety perspective, there are no plans to issue further temporary exemption certificates (TECs), as it is important that all vehicles are brought forward for testing at the earliest opportunity. I have, however, issued a call for evidence on the potential introduction of biennial MOT testing, one element of which is the consideration of any impacts that such an approach would have on road safety. That call for evidence closed on 19 October 2021. Over 1,000 responses were received and are being evaluated by officials.

The DVA is experiencing significant demand for vehicle testing services, and, in some cases, customers may not be able to have their vehicles tested before their current MOT certificate expires. In such cases, customers must book the earliest available test

appointment for their vehicle, which may mean travelling to another test centre instead of their preferred location.

The DVA has steadily increased its vehicle testing capacity by adopting a range of measures, including the recruitment of additional vehicle examiners, the use of overtime to provide cover for leave and sickness absence and a reduction of the vehicle test appointment time. It is also offering vehicle test appointments on Sundays and bank holidays at most test centres. Following the conversion of an adjoining building at the New Buildings test centre, additional testing capacity was made available to meet demand in the north-west.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring that our plans for the restoration of services are in hand. However, all vehicle test services across these islands are experiencing high demand and longer than usual waiting times, and we ask customers for their continued patience.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her answer. I recognise that DVA staff are working exceptionally hard and are working overtime in the evenings and at weekends. However, some drivers continue to have to hunt daily for an earlier test. They are unable to tax their car without an MOT, and, if they drive without one, they risk breaking the law and being fined. They may even be fined for a failure to provide a statutory off road notification (SORN).

Mechanical failure has resulted in a very small number of accidents, and there has been no statistical difference —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member come to his question, please?

Mr Beggs: — since the temporary exemption certificates came in. Minister, why do you not use some temporary exemption certificates, particularly for newer vehicles, to take pressure off your staff and hard-pressed workers?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I also thank him for his kind comments about DVA staff. They are working exceptionally hard, and that is demonstrated by the performance statistics.

I would consider introducing temporary exemption certificates only if I were convinced that truly exceptional circumstances existed — for example, the issue with the lifts or because of COVID-19 — and that no other reasonably

practical measures were available to manage demand for vehicle testing services. The current demand for MOTs is viewed as temporary. Slots are available to be booked in the system, and more will become available as we bring additional resources on line.

I will very quickly address your point about drivers being concerned that they will be penalised if they cannot tax their vehicles. Vehicle tax is an excepted matter and a responsibility of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea. We ask our customers to book their earliest available appointment and keep checking the booking system. However, if they get to within five days of their MOT expiry date, they should contact dva.customerservices@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk, and the DVA will do its best to get them an urgent appointment. To date, I can confirm that all customers who contacted the DVA in those circumstances have been offered an earlier appointment slot.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, I recently raised an issue that was brought to me by constituents who are would-be driving instructors. They experienced problems completing the theory test that is necessary for their qualification because of a technical issue with the computer system. Have you looked into that? Can you provide an update?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I understand that the technical issue has been resolved, but I commit to writing to the Member to provide her with the most up-to-date information on that.

Ms Hunter: We welcome the Department for Infrastructure's efforts throughout this challenging time. Recently, the Infrastructure Committee heard from the Association of British Insurers (ABI). Will the Minister provide further assurance to drivers, ahead of their MOT, about the PSNI and insurance?

Ms Mallon: DVA officials have consulted the PSNI and the Association of British Insurers to make them aware of the current position with MOT appointments. The PSNI has agreed not to penalise motorists who are unable to book an MOT appointment before their MOT expiry date but who still need to use their vehicle, as long as the vehicle is in a roadworthy and safe condition, it is properly insured and the driver can provide proof, in electronic or paper form, that an MOT test has been booked for the vehicle.

The ABI's view is that not having a valid MOT certificate will not necessarily invalidate insurance. Customers who find themselves in that situation owing to delays in getting their vehicle tested should, however, check their policy documents or speak to their insurer. The ABI confirmed that it is a condition of insurance that owners maintain their vehicle so that it is in a roadworthy condition. DVA customers must book a vehicle test appointment as soon as possible, even if it is after their current MOT expiry date.

Ms Armstrong: I take the Minister back to Mr Beggs's point about MOTs and taxing a vehicle. She said that taxing a vehicle is outside Northern Ireland's control. Given that people cannot tax their vehicle unless they have a valid MOT certificate, what conversations has the Minister had with the DVLA to try to deal with that issue for Northern Irish customers?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Officials are in regular contact with colleagues in the DVLA in Swansea. As I said in response to Mr Beggs's question, we encourage our customers to keep checking the system and to book the earliest available appointment. To provide reassurance, however, I reiterate that all customers who have contacted us having found themselves in that situation have been offered an earlier appointment. The DVA is working very hard to ensure that we maximise our capacity so that we can bring forward testing to prevent customers finding themselves in that situation.

HGV Drivers: Shortage

2. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department plans to address the current shortage of HGV drivers. (AQO 2637/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is aware of the wider issues around the haulier shortage. A recent Road Haulage Association (RHA) survey identified drivers' retirement, Brexit and changes to off-payroll working rules as the three main reasons for the shortages. The commercial difficulties will require improvements to pay and working conditions, and that is now being recognised by some of the large companies that have increased their drivers' pay to help improve retention. Brexit is also a significant factor in the haulier shortage, with many EU drivers reportedly no longer working in GB. It is important to point out that testing is not seen as a significant reason for HGV driver shortages here.

My officials have been in contact with the Department for the Economy, which advised them that Apprenticeships NI offers apprenticeship training in driving goods vehicles at level 2 and level 3. Both frameworks include knowledge-based and competence-based qualifications in driving a range of goods vehicles, including articulated vehicles.

On testing, the DVA has taken a range of measures to maximise the availability of large goods vehicle driving test slots. In addition to normal weekday slots, it now offers LGV tests on Saturdays and Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. Uptake from the industry, however, particularly on Sundays, has been less than expected, given the demand for those tests. Overtime is also used to rota off-shift dual-role driving examiners to provide further capacity.

DVA test centre managers frequently liaise directly with the LGV training schools to meet specific requirements and help address demands. In the first five full months since driving tests resumed on 23 April, the DVA conducted 1,626 LGV driving tests, which is 66% more than the five-year average for that period, demonstrating a clear commitment to providing increased testing capacity for the sector.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer. She cited many reasons for why she thinks that there may have been an impact on driver numbers. Those same impacts are being suffered in the rest of the UK, however, where mitigations and relaxations of tests have been considered. Why does the Minister refuse to bring in the same relaxations for the testing regime in Northern Ireland?

3.00 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to identify the fact that the difficulties faced by the haulage industry are in GB, and that is largely because of Brexit and the other issues that I identified.

I am aware of the changes that have been made. Unfortunately, we only became aware of those changes when they were announced by the British Government. In our view, however, testing is not a difficulty. We have been engaging directly with sector representatives in Northern Ireland on a number of the relaxations that the British Government brought forward. For example, it is the clear view of the haulage sector here that the cabotage relaxation would undermine the haulage industry locally. I will, of

course, continue to keep all these matters under review so that we do what we can to support the haulage industry.

Dr Aiken: The apprenticeship training support from the Department for the Economy is focused on under-25-year-olds. Has the Minister had an opportunity to talk to the Economy Minister to see how we can extend that support beyond 25-year-olds? As the Minister is fully aware, one of the biggest problems with HGV licensing for under-25-year-olds is the increased cost and the difficulties with licensing and insurance costs. Has the Minister had any conversations with the Minister for the Economy about expanding that? I will put in a plug for the great Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, which has been doing quite a lot of good work on that locally.

Ms Mallon: The issue of apprenticeships falls to the Department for the Economy. I have not raised the issue of extending that to further age groups directly with the Economy Minister, but officials have been engaging about what support that Department and my own can continue to provide to the haulage industry. I am happy to raise that matter with the Economy Minister following today's Question Time.

Mr Boylan: The Minister recognises the good and hard work that the hauliers and lorry drivers have done, especially throughout the pandemic. To follow on from that, I know that there is a 66% increase in testing. Is there any way to try to expedite that and see whether we can get more drivers in? What discussions have you had with the relevant Ministers, in the South and across the water, to see how we can expedite these matters to try to address the shortages?

Ms Mallon: I suppose that the challenge is about having a very clear understanding of where the difficulties lie. Whenever we have engaged with the sector, it has not cited testing as an obstacle. It says that, in its view and from its experience on the ground, it is to do with retirement, payroll, terms and conditions and Brexit. Of course, when it comes to testing, I am pleased that, through the hard work of the Driver and Vehicle Agency, we are carrying out 66% more testing than the five-year average. Those are record high numbers of tests, and we will continue to keep that situation under review and to bring additional resources online.

My officials work with their colleagues right across these islands on a range of issues, and

they will continue to do so. Where we can provide solutions, we most certainly will.

Mr Carroll: Does the Minister agree with unions such as Unite that these issues are some 20 years in the making and that they are primarily down to the gruelling conditions faced by workers who literally do not have a pot to pee in? Will the Minister's Department agree to look at the HGV drivers' manifesto that Unite has published to see about implementing its recommendations?

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member that the issue of terms and conditions has been around for quite some time and that it has been flagged by the industry. When I took up post, I became aware — particularly throughout the COVID pandemic, when we were working to support the haulage industry — of the challenges faced by drivers, and particularly female drivers, when trying to access facilities and services while on long journeys. I was involved in a piece of work to try to improve the conditions for drivers so that they could access bathrooms, washing facilities and so forth. I am happy to take a closer look at the manifesto to see what we might be able to do. I agree with the Member that we are in a much better place when government is working with a range of stakeholders in a genuine way, and, of course, some of the key partners are our trade unions.

Infrastructure Investment: West Tyrone

3. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on infrastructure investment in West Tyrone. (AQO 2638/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The West Tyrone constituency falls within both the Derry City and Strabane District Council and the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council areas. There has been infrastructure investment in this area by many parts of my Department, such as DFI Roads and DFI Rivers, as well as its arm's-length bodies, Northern Ireland Water and Translink. The western divisional roads manager met both councils early in the summer of this year to present details of proposed investment in roads and active travel in these areas in 2021-22. I can confirm that officials are currently working their way through the programmes outlined in these reports, which include schemes on the Dublin Road and at O'Kane Park in Omagh, as well as a junction improvement scheme at Bells Park Road and Orchard Road near Strabane. The Member has raised that with me on a number of occasions.

The most strategic road scheme in West Tyrone is, of course, the A5 western transport corridor project. Following an interim report from the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) on the public inquiry held during 2020, the Department is now working at pace on the publication of a new environmental statement addendum so that the public inquiry can then be reconvened, as recommended by the PAC, next year. Receipt of the PAC's final report from the inquiry will then allow a decision to be made in relation to this project.

I can also confirm that, subject to the successful completion of the legislative procedures, it is hoped that a weight restriction will be introduced in Clady by the end of this year. The proposed order will prohibit vehicles exceeding 7.5 tons maximum gross weight from using the B85 Urney Road, Clady, from its junction with the B165 Bells Park Road to its junction with the Urney Road. HGVs making local deliveries or travelling to and from local businesses will be exempt from the restriction.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Minister. On behalf of the people of Clady, I put firmly on record their appreciation to you for your swift action and your leadership in resolving what has been a huge issue for that village for over 30 years. You have been in office for just over a year and a half, and you have resolved this in a very short period. I thank you on behalf of those people.

Minister, you will know that it is no secret that I sleep and eat the A5 every day of week. It is vital to the people I represent, and I appreciate the update to the House. Can you provide any timescale for how quickly it can be brought back so that we can get some movement? Also, can you reaffirm your commitment, as Minister, to this vital project?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his questions and his comments. I met the residents in Clady, and I could see the difficulties. I went to see it for myself. I saw the impact on road safety and the impact on the quality of life of people living on the street and the damage to their property. I was pleased to be able to move that forward.

The Member never misses an opportunity to raise the topic of the A5, and of course I reaffirm my commitment to it. It is a strategic project that will better connect communities in the north-west, but it will also enhance economic and employment opportunities for local people, and, importantly, it will improve road safety. As I said, my officials are working at pace on the publication of a new

environmental statement addendum so that the public inquiry can be reconvened, as recommended by the PAC, next year. Of course, the timing of the public inquiry is outwith my gift as Minister, but I am sure that all of us across the House are very keen to see this project progressed.

Mr Delargy: As the Minister has mentioned, the A5 is a vital piece of infrastructure for the entire north-west. It is vital that we see a speedy outcome once the public inquiry recommences. On the issue of funding, can the Minister confirm whether she has received any assurance from the Southern Government that they will honour their original commitment to finance half of the project?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Irish Government have reaffirmed their commitment, set out in New Decade, New Approach, to make a financial contribution. Of course, the Shared Island Fund is there, and there is a very keen enthusiasm from the Taoiseach to be investing in all-island infrastructure. The national development plan was also recently announced by the Irish Government, with significant amounts of funding being made available for infrastructure projects. I am happy to continue to have that dialogue with the Irish Government, and I really wish that we could have those discussions within the structures of the North/South Ministerial Council meetings because this is a key project and a strategic project that will benefit communities and our economy, North and South.

Countryside Development: PAN Engagement

4. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement she has had with local authorities regarding the planning advice note (PAN) on the implementation of strategic planning policy on development in the countryside, published in August 2021. (AQO 2639/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member will be aware, I updated the House on 19 October that I had withdrawn the PAN on 15 October. The intention of the advice note was to provide clarity and certainty and to have a positive impact on the planning system overall and on our rural communities. It became clear, however, that it was not achieving that objective. Having listened carefully to and having reflected on all the concerns expressed since it issued, I decided to withdraw the PAN in order to restore clarity to the situation. That

gives me the opportunity to take stock of the concerns raised and undertake further engagement and analysis on this important policy area. That will include consideration of current and emerging issues, such as the emerging climate change Bills and our green recovery from this pandemic.

The Department already regularly engages with councils and other stakeholders to understand how the planning system is working and to assist with its effective and efficient operation. That will continue and provide an opportunity to discuss planning policy for the countryside. I am committed to ensuring that strategic planning policy for development in the countryside remains fit for purpose.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome that the Minister ended up withdrawing the guidance following calls from my party and others to do so. It is vital that proper engagement with councils is now committed to. Will the Minister look at other ways to improve rural planning? For example, will the Department explore allowing for a maximum of three houses on a gap site instead of two, and allowing farming families to get permission for a house every five years instead of 10?

Ms Mallon: I firmly believe that the strategic planning policy statement (SPPS) does, and should continue to, provide opportunities for farming families, other rural dwellers and sustainable development in the countryside in general, striking a balance between supporting and sustaining rural communities and protecting the countryside from inappropriate development.

Subject to acceptable proposals in appropriate locations, the SPPS offers considerable development opportunities for all people who wish to live in the countryside. It does that by providing for new dwellings in existing clusters, replacement dwellings, dwellings on farms, dwellings for non-agricultural business enterprises, infill dwellings, the conversion and reuse of non-residential buildings as dwellings, a dwelling to meet compelling personal or domestic circumstances, and social and affordable housing schemes.

Planning statistics for single and replacement dwellings in the countryside demonstrate that there continues to be a relatively steady rate of approvals provided for under the extant policy provisions. Data for the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2021 indicate that approximately 9,800 applications for single dwellings in the countryside were approved, along with 3,800

replacement dwellings. That equates to approximately 2,260 approvals for such developments in the countryside per year.

Mr Muir: SPPS, PPS 21 and the PAN that was withdrawn are key parts of our planning system. The Minister will be aware of the review of the 2011 Planning Act. Will she update us on when the outcome of that will arrive? Will the Minister commit to the House to deal with statutory consultees and their delays in coming back, because they are inhibiting economic growth in Northern Ireland and resulting in a planning system that is not fit for purpose?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Officials briefed the Infrastructure Committee on the review of the Planning Act. There were a substantial number of responses to that review and a number in free-flow text, so it is taking officials time to work through all those. I hope to be in receipt of a submission so that we can identify the best way forward. The purpose of the review is to look at what is working and what is not working so that we can make a judgement around retaining, repealing or amending.

The Member is right to highlight the issue around consultee response times. I have not shied away from saying that that is a difficulty. The Department has established a cross-departmental planning forum, the purpose of which is to work with all the consultee response partners to ensure that we get much more efficient in consultee response times. It remains a challenge, but I have met my officials to make it clear that I want to see us maximising capacity, particularly in my Department, so that we can respond to those in a timely fashion. Of course, the volume and complexity of the applications has increased as well. However, our planning system is key to our economic development and to tackling the climate crisis, so I am keen that, where we can, we make significant improvements.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her action in listening to rural communities on an issue that is of huge importance to them. Earlier this morning, in response to questions on his statement, the Finance Minister made several allegations around parties stretching the truth and playing cynical party politics. Does the Minister agree that the political party behind the distribution of leaflets outside chapels and around rural communities on this issue is engaging not just in petty party politics but in fake news and misleading rural communities?

Ms Mallon: The Member is correct. Having withdrawn the PAN, I found it hugely disappointing that mass goes in rural Armagh on Sunday past came out to find leaflets on their windscreens that were factually incorrect. The leaflets called on me to take action that I had already taken because I listened intently to people and was quick to respond. The public deserve better than that. They deserve the truth. The pattern of fake news is hugely disappointing. It is not about standing up for rural communities; it is about standing up for them and telling the truth. On that occasion, that clearly did not happen. *[Interruption.]*

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will not have any remarks from a sedentary position, please. Members should have respect for others.

We can briefly get another question.

Private Streets: Adoption Resources

5. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what additional resources she will allocate for the adoption of private streets in developments that have been built at least 15 years. (AQO 2640/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The adoption of private streets is primarily a developer-led process. It is the developer's responsibility to construct road infrastructure to the required standards, and my Department then adopts it into the public road network. Since 2015, my Department has adopted 1,856 bonded streets and released bonds valued at about £88 million. Enforcement action has also been taken at 140 sites.

The majority of developers act responsibly and progress their developments' infrastructure for adoption without the need for intervention by my Department or Northern Ireland Water. However, I acknowledge that the process can sometimes take longer than desired, and I fully acknowledge the difficulties that some residents encounter on a day-to-day basis living in unfinished developments.

As a result of the need to reduce staff numbers in 2015-16 after severe budget cuts were imposed on the then Department for Regional Development, my Department lost a significant number of experienced private streets staff. That reduced my Department's capacity to take enforcement action where developers had commenced work without a bond in place or failed to complete their development roads as

agreed. While it is not possible under current resource budgets to increase numbers of private streets staff, my Department continues to liaise successfully with developers and to adopt a considerable number of new developments each year. That includes progressing a significant number of older sites impacted by the property crash in 2007.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a brief supplementary and a brief response.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You talk about the reduction in staff, but that is not good enough, particularly for homes in streets that have not been adopted for over 15 years. What plans do you have to meet the needs of the homeowners who still wait to have their footpaths adopted, their roads completed and their bins collected?

Ms Mallon: I agree that it is a difficult issue. In 2011, an assessment was carried out of the costs of adopting the unadopted network, and it was £300 million. We are talking about a huge amount of investment that will be required to deal with the issue. There are also challenges around vires, and that is against the backdrop of a difficult financial situation facing my Department. It is hugely challenging. Where we can, of course, we will work hard to maximise capacity, but it is a long-standing challenge and will be difficult to get to grips with.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That ends the period for listed questions. We will move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

A1: Safety Scheme

T1. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the action that she has taken on a safety scheme for the A1, given that she is very aware of the need to enhance the safety measures on that road, with, just recently, a number of very serious accidents close to Banbridge. (AQT 1721/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. On taking up my post, that was one of the projects that I was clear about giving a commitment on. I met people who have lost loved ones on that stretch of road, so I recognise the huge importance of making sure that we get the upgrade right in the quickest possible time. My Department has allocated money so that we can progress the scheme. Where we can, we try to do the development

work in parallel, so that we can complete the upgrade as quickly as possible.

I am content to write to the Member to provide the latest update, because I know that she has a keen interest in the issue.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Minister. I know that she has the issue on her radar. I stress the absolute importance of dealing with the matter. Perhaps, at an early opportunity, she will give an exact start date for the works in the Banbridge area. Has the Minister made a bid to extend the safety scheme in the three-year spending review? It is a hugely important issue.

Ms Mallon: I reassure the Member that, since taking up the post of Minister, I have allocated sufficient funding to ensure that all the developmental work can proceed at pace. I have included the A1 in my capital bid under the spending review. The definitive start date for construction will depend on the multi-annual budgets that come forward for my Department. I will continue to push that project not only because I recognise its strategic importance as an economic corridor but because of the important road safety implications. If we do this, we will save lives.

Bus and Coach Sector: Additional Support

T2. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider introducing additional support for the bus and coach sector, given that she will be well aware that that sector has been badly hit by the pandemic and it is vital that it gets the support that it needs and deserves to help it to recover fully. (AQT 1722/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have met the bus and coach sector, and I understand the difficulties that it faces. It will be one of the industries that will be hit the hardest for the longest time. I am also conscious that the Department for the Economy's tourism recovery action plan has a specific commitment to bring forward a scheme for the sector. On 1 September, I wrote to the Economy Minister and asked for an update on that work. I have yet to receive a response, though I have chased that on multiple occasions. However, my understanding is that Department for the Economy officials are working through the business case. I am keen to understand the outworkings of that at the earliest opportunity in order to identify what my Department can do with the Department for the Economy to support the industry as it tries to recover from the pandemic.

Ms Ennis: I appreciate that response. The Minister has frequently referenced the scheme that is working its way through the Department for the Economy. However, she will also know that most coach operators are not tour operators: that is a discrepancy. Her Department has managed previous schemes and is well equipped to bring forward any new support or scheme if that is needed. I urge the Minister to give the issue serious consideration because the industry needs that vital support to recover.

Ms Mallon: The Member is right to say that the industry is varied. I have not yet seen the detail, but my understanding is that the Department for the Economy's scheme will likely provide support to the higher end. Without having the definitive detail of what that scheme entails and the support that it will provide, it is difficult for me and my officials to identify how we can support others who may not be eligible for that scheme. I sincerely hope that I will get a response from the Economy Minister soon because I am committed to working with him to support the industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Dalradian Gold Mine: Public Inquiry

T4. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the formal request that she made to the Planning Appeals Commission to hold a public inquiry into the Dalradian gold mine project, alongside the approximate timescales. (AQT 1724/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Dalradian gold mine application is hugely controversial and complex. We are in receipt of a vast number of representations, largely objections. Early on, I was clear that the application merited a public inquiry so that everyone involved, including the local community, had the opportunity to present their views. Therefore, I have formally asked that a public inquiry be convened. The timing of that hearing is not within my gift as Minister because it is independent. I hope that we can get a date and give clarity to people at the earliest opportunity because this has been going on for such a long time. I appreciate the depth of people's concerns.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. On a similar theme of planning and projects, she will be aware of the recent studies that show a lack of public confidence in the then centralised planning system and a desire for reform dating back to 2011. Does the Minister

support the introduction of equal rights of appeal to our planning system?

Ms Mallon: This issue has been raised on a number of occasions by partners in the planning process. It was also raised by those who responded to the review of the Planning Act. I await a submission from officials before I can delve into the detail and rationale being provided by the stakeholders who feel that it would be an important step forward.

Planning Applications: Judicial Reviews

T5. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, who will be aware that although he wrote to her on 25 October about the potential ramifications of the judgement in the North/South interconnector case and the subsequent application, he has not received a response, to state whether she anticipates any impact on any other recent and regionally significant applications, such as for Casement Park. (AQT 1725/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The court judgement on the North/South interconnector was handed down on 19 October. While those important planning decisions were not quashed, the wider implications of that complex judgement are still being considered by my officials and the Executive Office, who were also respondents to the judicial review. Until such times as I receive further advice from my officials, I am not in a position, as, I hope, the Member will understand, to offer further comment.

Mr Buckley: The judgement, in referring to the Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020, said that the Infrastructure:

"Minister did not act in accordance with the provisions of section 2.4 of the Ministerial Code by failing to refer the significant and/or controversial decision on the relevant planning applications to the Executive Committee to be considered by it for discussion and agreement."

Will the Minister provide clarity on whether she asked for the ministerial code to be amended at any point prior to my letter of 25 October?

Ms Mallon: I reiterate that, until such times as I receive further advice from my officials, I am not in a position to offer further comment.

Road Resurfacing: Backlog

T6. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to advise what is being done to address the road resurfacing backlog, given there have been serious delays to road resurfacing in four council areas, one of which is Mid Ulster District Council, meaning that a number of roads close to where she lives are affected, with one of the most serious cases being the Dungannon to Coalisland Road, which needs to be resurfaced immediately and has needed to be resurfaced for a number of years. (AQT 1726/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully appreciate the need to invest in road infrastructure and deliver much-needed resurfacing to preserve and extend the life of our roads. The lack of asphalt resurfacing contractor resource in Mid Ulster and other areas is the result of a legal challenge.

My officials have been working at pace to develop a new procurement strategy, and that has now been completed and published. It is proposed to tender the work in four phases, with six contract areas in each. The first phase is being developed with a view to going to tender shortly, leading to the award of new contracts in January. The first phase includes the majority of the four areas that were impacted on by the legal challenge to the previous competition. In addition, the first one-off large resurfacing contract in Moneymore and Cookstown is currently out to tender, and similar one-off contracts are in the pipeline for the coming months.

The Member may also be aware that, this year, I have allocated £17 million to the road recovery fund, and that will enable much-needed resurfacing work, particularly in rural areas. The delivery of that work will not be impacted on by the current lack of asphalt resurfacing contractor resource.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answer. I hope that that reassurance will come to fruition soon.

The Minister spoke about the £17 million for rural roads. I am sure that she is well aware that, in rural areas, there are deep inequalities across access to services. Infrastructure is one of the biggest inequalities in rural areas. Can she give some assurances on what will be done to address that deficit in rural areas, particularly in my constituency of Mid Ulster?

Ms Mallon: There is an issue of regional imbalance. You have only to look at the rail network in the North to see it. That is why I specifically set up the rural roads fund. I have

increased the funding by 50% this year. I am happy to provide the Member with further detail of how that will be rolled out in her constituency. I very much recognise the need to tackle regional imbalance, and that was one of my key considerations in proposing an infrastructure commission, so that we can take an objective approach and ensure that we get the right infrastructure and investment in the right locations.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 7 has been withdrawn.

October Monitoring Round: DFI Position

T8. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the spin and politicking from Sinn Féin earlier today, to outline the truth of her position on the October monitoring round. (AQT 1728/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question and for the opportunity to put the facts into the public domain. Fact: the Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey, bid for £55 million for universal credit. Fact: I was the only Minister around the Executive table to state my support for that bid. Fact: the Finance Minister had power, money and a bid from his party colleague. He could have recommended that bid for approval, but he did not do so. Fact: the October monitoring decision was not brought to the Executive for decision. Rather, it was brought for discussion, and it was agreed exclusively by the joint First Ministers via urgent procedure. All the spin in the world will not detract from those facts.

Ms McLaughlin: Does the Minister agree that it is totally wrong that a Minister would come to the House and repeatedly peddle falsehoods and spin? It is punishing the people who are most vulnerable. They do not deserve it. They deserve the truth.

Ms Mallon: The reality is that so many low-income households are facing into a hugely difficult winter, with a rising cost of living and rising energy costs. At the same time, they are seeing a reduction in the social welfare on which they are reliant. Twenty pounds may not seem like a lot of money to many, but it is a lifeline for people. I have certainly seen that in my constituency. I therefore hope that we can focus all our efforts on ensuring that we are able to provide support to those families so that

they are not pushed further into poverty and pushed into ill health as a result of the poverty in which they are being forced to live.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 9 has been withdrawn, and the Member in whose name question 10 is tabled is unable to attend. That ends the period for topical questions. I ask Members to take their ease.

Executive Committee Business

Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions to implement the remedy solution for age discrimination in public service pension schemes, and associated measures on scheme cost control, and judicial pensions and terms of office, in the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill as introduced in the House of Lords on 19 July 2021. — [Mr C Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Dr Steve Aiken to resume.

Dr Aiken: I will continue where I left off before we suspended for Question Time, if Members can remember where that was. It is not clear when the legal challenges might be ruled on by the courts, thus waiting around for all of this to happen would leave Northern Ireland public-sector pensioners in the lurch while pensioners in other parts of our nation received their revised pension benefits. Further to that, the onus will be on central government, not the Executive, to bring forward further remedial legislation for the legal challenges that are successful. It is more than possible that this will not be the last time that we talk about the McCloud remedy or public-sector pension revaluations in the House.

In order to make all the changes to a large number of schemes, our Government have set a very challenging timetable, with the legislation needing to be in place by the end of this financial year. That is to support the calculation and payment of revised benefits from 2022-23. Committee members consequently accepted the Department's argument that there was indeed insufficient time to draft Northern Ireland legislation and undertake Assembly scrutiny on it prior to the key date of 1 April 2022. Thus a legislative consent motion (LCM) is the only option, if we are to provide clarity in good time for public-sector pensioners in Northern Ireland.

Standing Orders allow only 15 days for the Committee to take evidence, deliberate and report when considering legislation. The Committee consequently took evidence in

advance of its sight of the Westminster Bill, even though it was difficult for external witnesses to comment on a Bill that they had not seen. Despite that, members took the time to consider other important issues relating to the legislation. I will deal with those now.

The Committee noted assurances from the Department that subordinate legislation and technical documentation associated with the McCloud remedy will be considered at the Assembly rather than at Westminster. The Committee sought assurances around both the provision of advice to individual retirees when they come to make their deferred choice underpin (DCU) decision and the provision of administrative assistance to the smaller pension schemes. Additionally, members noted that, where retirees making their DCU decision have to make back contributions, they may be charged interest on those contributions, although those charges may be waived. Members also noted that the surviving relatives of deceased retirees may also be required to make back contributions, depending on their DCU choice, though, again, those charges may be waived. All of the above caused disquiet amongst members, as it seemed more than a little unfair that those additional costs will fall to schemes and their members when it is central government which is at fault. Perhaps, in the Minister's response to the debate, he will reiterate the answers that he kindly provided to the Committee around advice, interest on back contributions and relatives of deceased retirees.

Finally, the Committee wrote to both the Bill sponsor in Westminster and to our own Minister, lobbying in respect of the issues that I have set out, including the treatment of member costs, and urging a fairer solution for all public-sector pensioners across the UK. Perhaps the Minister will also indicate whether he anticipates any progress in that regard. As indicated, I anticipate that Committee members will either reluctantly vote in support of the motion or abstain. I further anticipate that they will eloquently set out their reasoning in that regard during the debate.

Ms Ennis (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Committee for Justice in this debate. The Committee first considered information from the Department of Justice on two proposed consultations relating to judicial pensions at its meeting on 8 October. The first consultation covered how to address the McCloud judgement findings that taper protections that were extended to older judges as part of the 2015 reform of pensions amounted to direct age discrimination. The

second consultation covered reforms to judicial pensions and mirrored proposals made in a Ministry of Justice consultation to resurrect the previous pension scheme for eligible judges and to make some modernisations to it in relation to governance and accountability arrangements. While it was agreed that further information should be sought from the Department of Justice on the estimated costs and that the Department of Finance should be asked whether there was an agreed approach to a remedy for the McCloud judgement across the public sector, the Committee was content for the consultations to proceed and to consider the results when available.

At that same meeting, the Committee also considered information from the Department about a consultation on proposals to raise the mandatory retirement age of devolved tribunal members and lay magistrates in the North to either 72 or 75 and to allow appointments to be extended beyond the mandatory retirement age. The Committee again requested additional information from the Department but was otherwise content for the consultation to take place and to consider the matter further when the results were available.

Written briefings on the outcomes of all three consultations were considered at the Committee meeting on 25 March 2021. As there were no responses to the consultation on the McCloud remedy, it was the Department's view that a formal options exercise would be the best way forward, whereby the judges affected would be given a choice to have accrued benefits within the remedy period in either the legacy pension schemes or the NI judicial pension schemes. That is in line with the approach taken by the Ministry of Justice for its judges.

There were also no responses to the consultation on future pensions reforms. The proposals included a career average model, with no restrictions on the number of accruing years in service; the normal pension age being linked to the state pension age; and the ability to commute part of the pension to a lump sum.

A small number of responses were received to the consultation on the mandatory retirement age. The Department advised that, on balance, respondents were in favour of raising the age to 75. A change to that age would maintain parity with the excepted court judiciary, for which the British Lord Chancellor is responsible. The Department advised that members of the devolved judiciary will only be able to continue sitting beyond 75 to finish a hearing in a part-heard case. The consultation report also

advised that to maintain parity with excepted court judges, provisions would be put in place so that:

"eligible judges will be able to sit in retirement on a fee-paid, ad hoc basis, where there is an exceptional business need which otherwise cannot be met."

In addition, given that the Ministry of Justice will make provision to allow fee-paid members of the court judiciary to sit in retirement, provision will also be required to cover the removal of those members of the judiciary who are to sit in retirement, as removals from office is a devolved matter.

Having considered the information provided on the outcome of the consultations, the Committee agreed that it was content with the proposed way forward in respect of the McCloud remedy, future pensions reforms and the mandatory retirement age.

In its written briefing on the outcome of the consultations, the Department advised that, in its view, the most appropriate way to bring about the required legislative changes was by way of a legislative consent motion and set out its rationale for adopting that approach. The Department indicated that an LCM was likely to be the timeliest, most reasonable and proportionate way forward, given the challenge of implementing pension reform by April 2022, and cited the cost benefits of the North being included in the larger Ministry of Justice contract arrangements.

The Department also suggested that an LCM presented the opportunity to close an existing legislative gap in relation to the recruitment and retention allowance to eligible County Court judges in the North. There is currently no statutory basis for the Department to make those payments. The Committee agreed on 25 March that it was content in principle with the proposals to proceed with the legislative changes by way of an LCM, subject to sight of the relevant Westminster legislation.

The Committee subsequently received correspondence from the Committee for Finance, which advised that the provisions relating to the McCloud remedy would be included in the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill. The accompanying briefing paper from the Department of Finance stated that the Bill was also expected to include additional related measures for judicial pension schemes, such as the mandatory retirement age and payment of allowances. An update provided by the Department of Justice on the

next steps to deliver the McCloud remedy for the judicial and police pension scheme was also noted by the Committee on 24 June.

I can confirm that, having considered the outcome of the consultations and the additional information provided by the Department of Justice and the Committee for Finance, the Committee for Justice is content for the provisions relating to the McCloud remedy; reforms to judicial pensions; the mandatory retirement age for devolved judiciary; the appointment to and removal from sitting in retirement; and the payment of allowances, where there is currently no statutory provision, to be included in the LCM motion for the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill.

Mr K Buchanan: My comments will be quite short, due to the fact that the Chair has covered a lot of the main points about this very technical Bill. The Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill that is currently making its passage through Westminster is aimed at implementing a deferred choice underpin in the pension scheme. All eligible members will be treated equally and will be able to choose to receive pension scheme benefits from either scheme. The reasons for the original reform still stand: public service pensions should be affordable and sustainable whilst providing an appropriate pension to members.

The LCM will address the close timescales now required to implement the remedy solution by April 2022 and ensure the changes for devolved schemes are implemented to the same timescales as similarly constituted schemes in Britain. Support for the LCM will mean that members of the schemes in Northern Ireland should not be disadvantaged and will mitigate the risk of future litigation, should the Northern Ireland changes be delayed or differ in cost or design. We should remember that any changes that we wish to make would have to be paid out of our block grant, and that would likely impact existing budgets.

3.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: I declare an interest as a member of a UK Civil Service pension scheme.

The LCM that we are debating relates to the outworking of public service pension reforms that were first announced by the British Government a decade ago. Those reforms happened during the austerity era, and their very clear intention was to save money by making public service pensions less generous. However, in the years subsequent to those

changes, a court judgement, popularly known as the McCloud ruling, ruled that the means by which the reforms had sought to build in transitional protections for those within a decade of retirement were unlawful on the basis that they discriminated against younger workers. The same transitional arrangements that were found to be unlawful in Britain were included in the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 for various public service pension schemes on this side of the Irish Sea. This LCM, as has been said, would extend the Westminster remedy to Northern Ireland wholesale.

It is worth saying that the entire process of pension reform, both here and in Britain, has clearly discriminated against younger public servants. No workers under the age of 40, indeed very few under the age of 50, will ever have the opportunity to benefit from a final salary pension scheme. Those days are long gone. It is also worth expressing frustration that the proposed remedy of the UK Government, which will effectively be transposed to tens of thousands of pension holders in Northern Ireland, imposes costs on members of the scheme. It is true that that will not mean increased cash contributions by those pension holders, but it will impose relative costs on them. That is understandably a source of disquiet among trade unions and their members, given that they were not the source of the unlawfulness in the first place.

The Finance Committee has taken substantial evidence from the Department and various interested trade unions. As well as an in-principle objection to scheme members effectively having to bear the cost of the remedy — although, as I said, not directly via higher contributions — several specific concerns were raised by relevant trade unions, which we went through in detail. Among those was the ability of the Assembly and its Committees to scrutinise any statutory instruments and regulations made under this Bill, given the initial pensions reforms that the issue flowed from were legislated for in primary Assembly legislation, namely the 2014 Act, which I referred to earlier and which the Minister mentioned. It was important to establish that the LCM does not, by itself, mean that the Assembly or the Finance Committee will have no further role. We have had clarification from the Department on that point, which I welcome. As was mentioned by my colleague the Finance Committee Chair, it is important that we reiterate today that any secondary legislation that flows from this must be able to be scrutinised by the Assembly and its Committees; for example, the Justice

Committee must be able to scrutinise judicial pension schemes.

If the LCM passes, it is critical that, in its implementation, we get the UK Government's approach to the McCloud remedy, but it is also critical that, in its implementation, the very specific circumstances of NI schemes are properly reflected. For example, we heard in oral evidence that local firefighters have a different retirement age to firefighters in Britain. There was also a specific query raised in relation to the treatment of employees of cross-border bodies, which have particular arrangements. It would be helpful to hear from the Minister on that. It would also be helpful to hear from the Minister on whether, as alluded to earlier by the Finance Committee Chair, independent financial advice on their options in the new transitional protection options will be made available to scheme holders at no additional cost. That was a reasonable ask from the unions, and it would be helpful to hear from the Minister on it.

The debate on this LCM gets into fairly detailed actuarial territory in which even the geekiest MLA — and I can get pretty geeky — is not especially well qualified to judge. The basic points before us are about the fairness of the remedy and the practical consequences of declining the LCM and asking that the Department proceeds via separate primary legislation. The Treasury told the Department of Finance, which in turn made it clear to us, that the cost of any more generous transitional payments would have to be borne from the block grant. Having said that, I am still unconvinced, in principle, that an LCM is necessarily the best route to make these changes. That is particularly true given that public service pensions are devolved.

As I said earlier, the initial pension reforms that were undertaken here, the reforms for which we are now introducing transitional controls, were done via primary legislation in the Assembly rather than via LCMs. As I said, many of the local schemes contain fairly specific local features. My party's view is that the discrete legislation would have been preferable in principle. Given the considerable time that the Committee spent scrutinising this LCM, we may as well, in some ways, have been scrutinising primary Assembly legislation. We almost did the job of scrutinising primary legislation. However, given where we are, and the fact that the relevant period for the new transitional protections expires at the end of this financial year, we will not be opposing this legislative consent motion today.

It would be helpful to hear from the Minister on the specific points that I raised. It would have been preferable to do this via primary legislation as it would have enabled local stakeholders, including the public service unions in particular, which have given fairly sincere and detailed evidence, to work through the issues in more local specificity, but I will not stand in the way of this LCM today. We would like clarity on the locally specific issues, and we would like assurances from the Minister and the Department.

Mr Muir: At the outset, I declare that I am a member of the Assembly Members' pension scheme and the local government pension scheme. I speak in support of this important legislative consent motion as spokesperson for the Alliance Party on finance but not as a member of the Finance Committee as we do not have a place on that Committee at present.

It is vital that our public servants, including devolved tribunal judges, are enrolled in to fair and non-discriminatory pension schemes, so it is welcome that this LCM ensures that regulations are revised. I am sure that we all agree that public servants in Northern Ireland who are enrolled in devolved pension schemes should have discrimination addressed in the same way and to the same timescales as in public-sector schemes across the rest of the UK. Pension schemes are, by their very nature, complex. In essence, the LCM will enshrine in law the right for affected members to receive a deferred choice of which pension scheme benefits they would prefer to take at the point at which they retire. I know people who are personally affected by this. The choice must be given. Everyone must be treated equally.

As I outlined, I am a member of the Assembly Members' pension scheme. As a member of that scheme and a previous pension trustee, I am acutely aware of the need to bring the scheme up to date and into line with the laws that we are debating today. It is, therefore, my sincere hope that the Assembly Commission progresses the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill. Failure to move the Bill to Second Stage and beyond risks real issues with regard to the pension scheme remaining compliant. Action is needed.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. Public service pension reform has been examined by me and the other members of the Finance Committee over the past number of months. It is important to remember that the issue arose as a result of the court ruling, about which we have already heard. The McCloud

judgement stated that transitional protections designed to protect older pension scheme members from pension reforms were discriminatory. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 reformed pension schemes by moving pension scheme members from final salary schemes, which are generally more lucrative, to career average schemes. The transitional protection was applied to pension scheme members who were within 10 years of retirement age and allowed them to remain in the final salary schemes. A case was brought against the British Government by members of the judiciary who were further away from retirement age and therefore did not qualify for transitional protection. The judge ruled in their favour and ordered that the Government must rectify that discrimination. That is what the Bill aims to achieve.

After concurrent public consultations in Britain and here, and engagement with trade unions, we now have a proposed solution that remedies the discrimination. Affected scheme members will be given a choice at the point of retirement of whether they wish to accrue their pension benefits from the legacy scheme or the reformed scheme for the duration of the remedy period. Having that choice will mean that the scheme members can make an informed decision at the point of retirement about which scheme is more beneficial to them and can act accordingly.

Although pensions are a devolved matter, and we have the ability, in principle, to construct our own legislation, our hands are somewhat tied. Pensions are not currently paid out of the block grant and come directly from the British Government. Were we to deviate our pensions policy from that which exists in Britain to a situation in which scheme members here had higher levels of benefit than those in Britain, there is no doubt that the difference in cost would have to be met from the block grant, which would put further pressure on our already strained resources.

We must also consider the cost of the remedy. The Department of Finance has estimated that the cost will be £97 million a year for seven years of the remedy period, totalling £680 million. During our Committee discussion with trade union officials, there was some confusion as to whether that cost would fall to scheme members in the form of increased contributions, as predicted by the unions. Some clarity on that point was given as the Treasury has announced its intention that there should be no reduction in members' benefits as a result of the McCloud judgement and that any breaches of the cost

cap floor resulting in increased benefits will be honoured.

The trade union reps, during their Committee evidence, stated their preference that the issue should be dealt with by way of bespoke legislation through the Assembly. There are many issues with that, and it is my belief that the LCM is the most practical way of achieving the preferred outcome. As I said, our hands are largely tied on this issue, and, therefore, there is virtually no scope to deviate from the approach taken in Britain. Furthermore, legislation would need to be in place no later than 1 April 2022, as that is when the remedy period comes to an end. That would be nearly impossible to achieve, given the time constraints. We know that already because we hear it in relation to all the other legislation as well.

The Bill that is passing through Westminster will deliver a remedy for the discrimination and will protect scheme members from the additional costs that are related to the McCloud judgement. Therefore, it achieves what we need to achieve, and I fully endorse the Minister's approach. I support the LCM.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Glaoim ar an Aire Airgeadais le críoch a chur leis an díospóireacht. I call the Minister of Finance to conclude the debate and make his winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and the representatives from the Finance Committee for their scrutiny of the legislative consent motion. I also thank the members of the Justice Committee for scrutinising the parts of the LCM that impacted on their remit. A lot of important points have been raised in the debate, including the cost of the remedy and the guarantees in relation to scheme members.

The Chair of the Finance Committee raised the issue of information and advice, and Matthew O'Toole raised the issue of independent financial advice. The Bill is clear in its requirements that schemes must take steps to provide all members who are eligible for the DCU remedy with remedial statements on legacy and reform pension, lump sums and survivor benefits that are available to them and any other information that is relevant to their DCU option.

The information in the remedial statement will be personal to the member, setting out their personal entitlements and allowing them to

clearly understand the benefits under the deferred choice process in order to aid their decision. That is over and above the existing requirements for the provision of a scheme benefit statement as set out in the Public Service Pensions Act 2014 and in related Department of Finance directions.

Schemes are already required to take account of and comply with the requirements for the provision of benefit information in those directions and best practice in the relevant codes and guidance from the Pensions Regulator. My Department will continue to work with schemes and with the Pensions Regulator on any additional codes and measures to ensure that appropriate tools and approaches are made available to scheme members, including on the design of remedial statements and the provision of remedy calculators that are relevant to each individual's decision-making.

On the question of independent advice, the decision-making on remedy benefits for the majority of eligible scheme members will be a relatively straightforward choice between two options. The Bill sets out requirements for schemes to provide clear and accurate communications and information to scheme members who are going through that process. For a smaller cohort of individuals, correcting their pension positions over the past 10 years and getting their tax liability correct is less straightforward, and additional guidance will be provided to complement the existing HMRC guidance and scheme processes in order to help individuals with their tax affairs.

Schemes will be able to provide additional support where they deem that appropriate, and they will be also be able to provide compensation where a member has incurred reasonable additional costs as the result of an agent — a tax adviser or accountant — having to resubmit information to HMRC.

4.00 pm

A question was raised about primary legislation as opposed to the LCM. I absolutely understand the preference for primary legislation and a full scrutiny process for the Assembly. However, given the time frame and where we are in the mandate, the LCM was the most practical way to resolve this issue. As the Member and others rightly said, further elements of this will come through the relevant Committees for further scrutiny, so we will endeavour to ensure that the Committees and the House get the opportunity for as much scrutiny as possible. However, there are time frame implications,

and, given where we are in the mandate, it was more appropriate to down the LCM route.

The Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill will implement a remedy solution to remove unlawful discrimination in a way that has been developed in a co-joined policy response between my Department and the Treasury, with input from the devolved schemes. The changes are designed to address the complex requirements of the McCloud ruling as it affects identically constituted and affected public service schemes here and in Britain.

The memorandum paper sets out the clear rationale to resolve this issue for all affected schemes using the same remedy design and to the same timescales. In the context of the targeted schemes that are required to remove unlawful discrimination from all similarly affected schemes, the LCM for the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill represents the most pragmatic solution to ensure that scheme members here now have time to access their correct legal entitlements under the deferred choice underpin. It also mitigates the risks to the scheme-responsible Departments of the cost delay and, if the remedy were to be implemented to a more protracted timescale or deviate from the core policy response that has been developed fully to meet the requirements of the courts for the removal of the unlawful discrimination, of a protracted legal challenge.

I invite Members to support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions to implement the remedy solution for age discrimination in public service pension schemes, and associated measures on scheme cost control, and judicial pensions and terms of office, in the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill as introduced in the House of Lords on 19 July 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease before we move to the next few items of business.

Committee Business

Climate Change (No. 2) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mrs Barton: I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mrs Barton: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak to the motion on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Our Chairperson and Deputy Chair are unavailable.

As the House will be aware, in recent months, the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has invested significant time and energy in considering climate change legislation. The Committee recognises that climate change is one of the most important issues affecting our society. It is essential that we have legislation in place that will allow us to contribute effectively to climate action and that takes account of the specific characteristics of our local economy. Climate change affects us all and will have profound implications for how we work, live and travel.

There are many complex and wide-ranging issues that need to be considered. To ensure that the Committee has the scope to give due regard to the specific aspects of the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill introduced by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the motion is submitted to extend the Committee Stage until 28 January 2022. Notwithstanding that request, and in the context of the limited time available in the mandate, the Committee will endeavour to complete its scrutiny as soon as is practically possible in order to allow the House ample time to consider the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 January 2022, in relation to

the Committee Stage of the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill.

Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

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

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 21 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Gildernew: The Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill passed its Second Stage on 20 September 2021 and was referred on to Committee Stage the following working day.

The Bill would change the current system in the North from one in which people can choose to opt in or opt out of the organ donation register to a new statutory opt-out system, in which consent is deemed or presumed, except in certain exempt circumstances or if a person has made a decision to opt out during their lifetime.

Although the Bill is relatively short, it provides a significant change in policy and includes a duty to promote transplantation. The Bill also requires the Minister to report at least once every five years on whether the Act has been effective in promoting transplantation.

The Committee has received a number of written responses to the Bill and will begin oral evidence sessions on 18 November. The Committee is seeking this extension owing to the extremely heavy workload that we have in front of us. On top of dealing with the problems that the pandemic has caused to the health and social care system, this is only one of six Bills that the Committee has at Committee Stage, and an additional one or two private Member's Bills could still come forward. That heavy workload means that the Committee has to meet twice a week to consider all the evidence for those Bills and to get them through Committee Stage before the end of January.

The Committee is requesting an extension until 21 January 2022. The proposed extension will allow sufficient time for detailed consideration of

the Bill while balancing that against consideration of other Bills. Although an extension until 21 January has been requested, I can assure the Assembly that the Committee will endeavour to complete Committee Stage earlier, if possible. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 21 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill.

Autism (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

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

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 14 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Autism (Amendment) Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Mr Gildernew: The Autism (Amendment) Bill passed Second Stage on 21 September 2021 and was referred for Committee Stage the following working day. The Bill has three main objectives: to enhance the autism strategy; to provide information on autism training for staff of public bodies and to set out details of an autism early intervention service and a new autism information service; and to require the appointment of an autism reviewer. Although the Bill is relatively short, with only five clauses, there is a lot of detail in those clauses that will need to be looked at during the Committee's consideration.

As I have mentioned previously, the Committee is seeking this extension due to the extremely heavy workload that is in front of it. Committee members are committed to getting the Bills that we have through Committee Stage. I will be back to request further extensions for the Adoption and Children Bill and the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill in the coming weeks.

The Committee is requesting an extension until 14 January 2022. The proposed extension will allow sufficient time for detailed consideration while balancing the Committee's consideration of other Bills. Although an extension to 14 January has been requested, I assure the Assembly that the Committee will endeavour to complete the Committee Stage earlier if at all possible. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 14 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Autism (Amendment) Bill.

Small-Scale Green Energy Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr O'Toole (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Small-Scale Green Energy Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit to the debate.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the opportunity to move the motion on behalf of the Chair of the Economy Committee, who could not be with us today, and to seek an extension to the Committee Stage of the Small-Scale Green Energy Bill. The Bill was referred to the Committee for Economy on 29 September for Committee Stage. Under Standing Order 33(2), it should complete its Committee Stage by 17 November.

The main objective of the Bill is to place a requirement on major electricity suppliers to provide an obligatory minimum price tariff for exporting microgenerated renewable power into the grid. The Bill requires the Minister for the Economy to establish a small-scale green energy microgeneration scheme, with powers that include setting the minimum price tariff and altering it depending on relevant economic conditions. It also provides the Minister with the power to determine what providers are eligible for the scheme by setting a minimum threshold for market share. The overall aim of the Bill is to

incentivise microgeneration through the establishment of a specified tariff system that is to be paid to microgenerators when they export their electricity to the grid. The major electricity providers or suppliers will be responsible for paying microgenerators.

At its meeting on 6 October, the Committee agreed to publish its call for evidence and survey and to write to key stakeholders to invite written submissions on the Bill. On 13 October, the Committee received an oral briefing from the Bill's sponsor, Mr John O'Dowd MLA, on the background and main provisions of the Bill. As is the case with all legislation that comes before the Committee, we wish to give detailed scrutiny to the Bill and allow time for meaningful engagement with all stakeholders.

To conclude, on behalf of the Economy Committee, I ask that the Assembly supports the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill to 28 January 2022. The Committee looks forward to using that time to engage at all levels with those who will be impacted by the legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Small-Scale Green Energy Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members should take their ease while we move to the next item of business.

4.15 pm

Private Members' Business

Ring-fenced Skills Fund for Northern Ireland

Mrs Dodds: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes investing in the skills and talent of our workforce is integral to the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; stresses the need to better equip those with low, or no, qualifications in order to tackle unemployment, inactivity and disadvantage in every corner of Northern Ireland; endorses the Department for the Economy's draft skills strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy, including plans to rebalance graduate and postgraduate qualifications towards STEM subjects and jobs of the future; highlights the potential benefits for growth sectors and levels of inward investment; supports the creation of a Skills Council for Northern Ireland to ensure businesses, education and trade unions have a strong voice; notes that delivering on the skills strategy will require the support of all Ministers as well as significant investment; and calls on the Minister of Finance to make available the necessary funding for a ring-fenced skills fund in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. As an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate.

Mrs Dodds: I am delighted to propose the motion. I know that this is an issue in which many in the House take great interest. Building the skills base is a sound investment for our economy and our people. It is the key to economic growth. It is also the key to highly paid jobs that will support families and see Northern Ireland prosper as a region.

We all know that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed our society to its absolute limits. We have each felt the strain, whether through ill health, the distance from loved ones or struggles with mental health. Recovery will be multi-layered. Our economy has suffered a massive impact, but, thankfully, due to the support of our national Government and local schemes, we are seeing economic recovery.

We now need to embrace the opportunity to build a truly world-class economy, focus on our strengths and build for the future.

The Department for the Economy's 'A 10X Economy' strategy document focuses on building an innovation-based economy in areas in which we have real strength: the digital economy, cybersecurity, fintech, advanced manufacturing, agri-tech, the green economy, the creative industries and health and life sciences. Investing in the skills of our people and tailoring our education and skills programmes to meet the emerging needs of the economy will be key to the success of all of this. That is vital and will help us to grow an inclusive economy that lifts individual aspiration and supports jobs and families across Northern Ireland.

Building an economy for the future will require a range of commitments from a range of Departments. The challenge is significant. Northern Ireland has some of the lowest levels of high-paid jobs, innovation and productivity of any region of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has the highest economic inactivity rate of all the regions of the United Kingdom. Seventy per cent of all young people aged between 18 and 21 are in roles that are below the real living wage, and 89% of employers report difficulties with finding suitably skilled applicants. In addition, investment in education and skills, as a proportion of all public expenditure, fell from 14.8% in 2010-11 to 12.7% in 2018-19. Only 30% of businesses in Northern Ireland have a dedicated training budget, compared with 37% in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's report on Northern Ireland's skills landscape noted:

"In recent years, Northern Ireland has made significant progress in strengthening its skills and economic performance",

but that the projected skills imbalances within the economy will present significant challenges for the labour market for some years to come.

There are significant challenges, but there are real opportunities as well. When I talk to many sectors across the economy about the need to invest in future skills, almost all of them say that they want to see a refocus in the curriculum right through the education system, so that the needs of the future economy, science and technology can be delivered.

The motion notes the need to "rebalance ... towards STEM subjects". Indeed, the Northern

Ireland skills barometer projects that, from 2018 to 2028, professional, scientific and technical jobs will see the greatest growth. The CBI survey reinforces that projection, with 83% of businesses expecting highly skilled roles to grow over the next five years, but 76% expecting that it will be difficult to fill those roles. The rebalancing must start with our primary-school curriculum and having a greater emphasis on teaching science as a separate subject. Since digital technology increasingly underpins our society, we also need to see the development of the digital spine of Northern Ireland and the incorporation of ICT as an integral part of the curriculum throughout our children and young people's education.

Building for the jobs for the future must have firm foundation blocks in the curriculum and in the way that young people view education. That will include greater flexibility and breadth in the curriculum at Key Stage 3, a partnership with business that will enrich and broaden experiences at school, and greater partnership and cooperation between formal education and further education. The constraints of the current system often pit those two elements of our skills system against one another, particularly in allocation of the available funding.

Growing the skills of the future must also be inclusive. Research by the Social Mobility Commission in the UK found:

"The poorest adults with the lowest qualifications are the least likely to access training".

Investing in skills in a tailored way will bring huge benefits to many of the most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland. We already see life-transforming work being done by organisations such as Impact Training on the Shankill, where young people are given the opportunity to gain skills that will help them to access jobs and to have stability in their lives. Community-based training organisations perform vital work, and community education reaches those who will never access formal education providers.

Inclusivity is not just about removing social disadvantage but about making sure that STEM subjects are attractive and available to all. The women in STEM action plan aims to make sure that, by 2030, 30% of all young people moving into STEM roles are women. Growing the skills base in Northern Ireland must also mean giving suitable guidance and advice to young people about the variety of career paths that they may follow. One of the barriers to achievement is the often regimented way in which young people

are advised about opportunity. There are many ways to a successful career, and innovative careers advice has never been as vital.

In a recent submission to the Education Committee, the think tank Pivotal reported that, among the 300 young people that it interviewed for its report, only 20% found careers advice helpful and that 25% found it not helpful at all. Seventy-nine per cent of those young people thought that careers advice could be improved. It was extremely concerning that 69% of the young people interviewed knew little or nothing of the growth areas or the areas of decline in the labour market. There is clearly a need for parents and young people to have a greater understanding of career options, including the need to raise the profile of vocational options.

A significant number of initiatives are already in place. The flexible skills fund, which was launched in September, is an investment of £23 million to address the skills imbalances in growth industries in our economy. Essential Skills aims to develop literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Assured Skills and apprenticeship programmes all aim to deliver a highly skilled workforce for the future of the economy, but we need more. We need to see an investment in skills that will boost research and innovation. It will mean driving increased participation in STEM subjects that are key to our future economic prosperity. It will mean ensuring that appropriate pathways are in place and that young people have access to the right advice. We need to break the cycle of the continuous funding deficit in skills and education, and that will need additional funding that is ring-fenced and available over the next three-year Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close, please.

Mrs Dodds: I will finish by saying that the amendment to the motion is merely a distraction. The economic recovery plan is a fully costed set of interventions, and the Finance Minister is aware that this is COVID money for one year for Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after the first "Northern Ireland;" and insert:

"notes the Department for the Economy's draft skills strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a

10X Economy, including plans to rebalance graduate and postgraduate qualifications towards STEM subjects and jobs of the future; highlights the potential benefits for growth sectors and levels of inward investment; supports the creation of a Skills Council for Northern Ireland to ensure businesses, education and trade unions have a strong voice; further notes that delivering on the skills strategy will require consultation with and the support of all Ministers as well as significant investment in the absence of European Union funding lost as a result of Brexit; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to include a ring-fenced skills fund as an element of the Department's economic recovery action plan; and further calls on the Executive to prioritise skills development as part of the new three-year Budget cycle."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you. You will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion and to move the amendment. It is worth noting that the Member who moved the substantive motion is a former Economy Minister and the author of 'A 10X Economy', which received a broad welcome. We have made much comment on and had much debate about that document.

The opportunity to ring-fence skills funding was within the proposer's gift at that time. Two previous DUP Economy Ministers had an opportunity to ring-fence skills funding, but, for whatever reason, they chose not to do that. The amendment highlights the fact that we have lost substantial funding as a result of our exit from the EU, and we have a motion before us today calling for that funding to be ring-fenced from elsewhere. If it is to be ring-fenced from elsewhere, there will have to be a reduction in budgets elsewhere. As I said, EU funding for skills was transformative from 2014 to 2020. EU funding allocated to the NI European social fund amounted to approximately £210 million, representing 46.7% of the total programme cost.

4.30 pm

With regard to funding the skills strategy, commitment 34 acknowledges that Brexit will create funding shortfalls in respect of the European social fund. While the skills strategy does not specify the exact shortfall, we know that the Finance Minister has already had to

allocate £22.6 million to the Department for the Economy last year so that the European social fund programmes could continue until March 2023. That is £22.6 million that we were unable to spend elsewhere. That is not to suggest for one second that the skills strategy was not an important investment, but we were already getting it funded from elsewhere until we were forced to exit the EU.

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

The disastrous Brexit policy will result in real funding shortfalls for skills providers and learners. The UK's Community Renewal Fund, which was designed to act as a stopgap and provide funding in the area of employability skills and investment in business, will provide only £11 million of funding to the North from a pot of £220 million. It is clearly a significant shortfall on the funding that was available through the European social fund.

It should also be mentioned that the Dublin Government, through their Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, guarantee that funding will be allocated to students from the North so that they can access the ERASMUS+ programme, which can improve their knowledge and research. If skills are a priority for the Economy Minister and, indeed, were a priority for the previous Economy Minister, why have three successive DUP Ministers made no effort to engage with the Dublin Government on that funding and their allocation to our students and education providers? As another real example of the futility of boycotting North/South Ministerial Council meetings, that is the sort of real work that goes on at such meetings, where cooperation between the two Administrations on this island benefits the people on this island, and, again, we see our young people losing out as a result.

With the block grant having been slashed over the past 10 years and remaining below pre-recession levels in real terms, despite much hype around the most recent Budget by Rishi Sunak, there is very little financial space for ring-fenced funding for skills. The latest spending review proves that there is not sufficient funding to ring-fence skills funding.

The Department for the Economy has been given considerable funding over the past year for skills and economic recovery. In a previous funding round, the Department's economic recovery action plan, to which I referred earlier, received £275 million ring-fenced funding: £138 million for economic support measures and £145 million for the high street voucher

scheme. A further £21 million is unallocated to protect against the high street voucher scheme overrun, which in itself is about 15% of the budget. The Committee for the Economy has already questioned why such a significant amount of money has been held over. Imagine £21 million being invested in skills.

Those were choices. As a former Minister, I accept that Ministers have to make choices — they are not always easy — but a decision was made to put £145 million into the high street voucher scheme. It is a very welcome scheme, and, it has to be said, it lifted the morale of the community. It is very beneficial for hard-pressed families, and its announcement was a change from the bad news that we receive almost daily. However, it will not change the economic outlook of this society. It will not change the economy. It will not increase skills. It will not increase economic development. A choice was made to ring-fence £145 million in that programme and not in skills, but I accept that choices have to be made. During the pandemic, the Department of Finance has made numerous allocations to skills, including £20.5 million for apprenticeships and £7.7 million for skills and youth training.

Upskilling and reskilling our population are key to helping our economy to recover and to addressing long-standing economic issues. That is accepted and a given. I welcome the fact that both the main motion and the motion as amended, should the amendment be accepted, refer to upskilling those with "low, or no, qualifications". I listened carefully to the analysis and statistical reports of the Member who moved the motion, and I am not here to argue against any of that. It is a concern, however, that a lot of our economic focus is on those who attend university and leave it with qualifications — what skill sets and jobs we can bring in for those people — and that there is not enough focus on those who do not go to university, whether they do not wish to go or do not have the qualifications, and what they bring to our economy and society.

Look at the economic activity around you. I often use the example of speaking, via StarLeaf, in meetings that the Economy Committee used to hold. When I looked out of the window of my constituency office during those meetings, the economic activity that I could see going on in the high street, the town and beyond did not always match what I saw in the papers presented to me by the Department for the Economy.

Yes, there are hi-tech and fintech jobs in my constituency. I can see them from my

constituency office, but I also see construction workers, hairdressers and people who work in catering. I see those who work in the caring profession. I see lorry drivers, shopworkers and others who, before the pandemic, were often thought of as unskilled. Now, we can certainly see their skills and the benefit that those people bring to our economy. They need support, and they need recognition of the skills that they have. Upskilling should always be an option, no matter what employment you are in. That part of our economy needs to be supported as well.

I will finish on these points. The Member who moved the motion talked about careers advice and vocational courses. That is a valid point. The main careers adviser in any family is a parent. If you are not aware of the economy and the careers that are out there, you will give the wrong advice. I am at the stage in my life of talking to one of my children about GCSEs and, perhaps in future, A levels. I hope that I am relatively well tuned in to what is going on in the political and economic world, and yet it is difficult to give a young person advice. If I, with my level of knowledge, find that, how do parents without such involvement do it? We have to ensure that careers advice and support are given to parents as well as young people.

We also have to change how we measure success in education. If we measure success in education simply by the number of people who go to university, we measure the wrong thing. We have to measure it by how many young people who leave our education system value themselves and become valuable members of society.

I commend the amendment to Members. Skills need to be supported and funded, and our amendment ensures that we look at this not only now but over the next three years.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the motion and the Sinn Féin amendment. To be honest, you could not put a blade of grass between the two but for the semantics and the fact that the DUP and Sinn Féin are trying to displace responsibility for the failed economic investment and skills strategy that has existed in this place for decades.

The problem, as I see it, is that funding for skills has always been ring-fenced in Northern Ireland; it has been ring-fenced around Belfast. The rest of the regions do not get much of a sniff of it. It is great to see both parties recognise the need to dramatically improve the skills base in the North of Ireland.

Although the South has focused for years on building up vocational skills as a driver for its economy, for far too long the North has been satisfied with often low-skilled and low-paid jobs and, indeed, the lowest productivity on these islands.

We need a big shift in our approach. As Mrs Dodds said, that has been recognised by outside bodies such as the OECD. It has taken far too long for that to be accepted by the two parties that hold the ministerial roles in the Department for the Economy, the Department of Finance and the Department of Education. We have a serious problem: far too many of our pupils leave school without the basic skills that they need. Around 30% of our school-leavers do not meet the minimum exam pass level objective of five good GCSEs.

We have a second serious problem, because there are shortages in a range of roles that are key for our society. Those roles include doctors and nurses but also construction workers, HGV drivers and a range of vocational skills that we do not have in our gift. We then have the madcap policy idea of the maximum student number (MaSN) cap, which strangulates our economy.

As an MLA for Foyle, I must stress that the third serious problem is the regional inequality of skills provision. Although skills drive the economy, it is investment in the production of those skills that will boost the economy in Derry and the north-west by creating jobs and correcting our unacceptably high levels of unemployment. We have an employment rate that is much below that in the east of the province.

In the past few days, the Irish Government have announced an expansion of their higher education provision in the north-west, and that includes Donegal. That expansion is likely to suck skills and economic development across the border. We therefore need to build our skills and economic expansion in Derry and Strabane. Although the city deal will assist in that, it is not enough, and it was never intended to be enough. Derry's One Plan contained a promise to expand the Magee campus to 10,000 students. That commitment was restated in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. At the moment, we have 46,000 higher education students in Northern Ireland: 40,000 are in Belfast and 4,000 are in Derry.

Yes, we need a much greater focus on vocational skills in the North, but we need to address the whole picture, not just part of it. We need to deal much more effectively with the

alienation felt by some of our pupils, particularly working-class boys. That alienation has led to a high number of school-leavers not having the skills and qualifications needed for employment. We need to ensure that our further education colleges have the courses that provide the skills that are needed by employers. We need to expand our university student numbers so that we no longer lose so many students to Britain, most of whom never return. We thereby lose many of the skills that our economy so desperately needs, and those skills are the lifeblood of the economy going forward.

We support the motion, but with this very big caveat: a regional skills balance must be at the heart of any ring-fenced funds. Levelling up means skilling up. For decades, skills funding has been ring-fenced in Northern Ireland, and it has been ring-fenced around Belfast. Here is a novel idea: why —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms McLaughlin: — do the DUP and Sinn Féin not ring-fence funding for the expansion of Magee university to up to 10,000 students?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time —

Ms McLaughlin: I would definitely be up for that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): — is up.

Mr Nesbitt: I suppose it would be strange, to the point of being perverse, if the Ulster Unionist Party were not to support a motion that puts a focus on resource and funding for the skills of our people. I therefore expect that we will support the motion. I am not so sure about the amendment. I have not heard anything yet that encourages me. Mr O'Dowd mentioned Brexit and ERASMUS, but it is my understanding that local students can still access ERASMUS, courtesy of the Government of Ireland, while also having the opportunity to access the new Turing scheme, courtesy of the Government of the United Kingdom.

I am no fan of Brexit — you know that, Mr O'Dowd — but there you are. Perhaps there is more choice and resource available to students because of it.

4.45 pm

I will tell you what my problem is. Is this about going into election mode? I read a motion that has the DUP pointing a finger at the Finance Minister with an ask, and then I read an amendment from the other side of the House in which Sinn Féin makes an ask back across the Floor of the Chamber at the Minister for the Economy. What happened to consociational government? What happened to the idea that, once the election is over and the votes are counted, we stop being rivals and start being partners? I see no great sign of it here. What of our commitment in what is, sadly, still a draft Programme for Government to change to outcome-based accountability government? I remember Mark Friedman coming to the Building and the enthusiasm around the idea of stopping focusing on doing things and putting our emphasis on outputs and outcomes: what are we achieving by our efforts and with our resources and budgets? We get out of these vertical silos, and yet we still make calls on Ministers.

Skills are important. When I saw the motion, I was reminded of a document that the Ulster Unionist Party published in March 2016, five and a half years ago, about the knowledge economy. We recognised that our great success industrially 100 years ago was based on the talents and ingenuity of our people. Queen's Island was, if you like, the Silicon Valley of its day. Today, still, it is human capital that is our greatest asset. If we can manufacture a pipeline of talented and educated young people, that is our best hope of success. We need to recognise that doing the same thing time and time again is not enough. The economy has changed over the last couple of decades. Businesses are created, run and developed in a different way. We are all now used to the idea of clustering, where companies work in partnership and cooperation, in workspaces that are shared and where ideas are equally shared.

The interesting thing for me, when I engage with business leaders across the border in the Republic of Ireland, is that they no longer put a great deal of emphasis on goods. That is interesting because we debate, almost on a daily basis, the movement of goods and the impact on it of the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol. Yet, if you speak to business leaders in Dublin, they say, "Do not worry about goods. That is not where our wealth or our value comes from. It comes from intellectual property, patents and innovation". Skills are clearly at the heart of that, and I could list a series of areas where the knowledge economy is important.

The Member who moved the motion quoted some stats from the CBI: I want to do that too, from a survey that the CBI did some time ago of the most important factors that employers considered in recruiting school- and college-age leavers. Academic results came fourth at 30%; qualifications third at 38%; literacy and numeracy were important; but the most important thing was aptitude towards work and character.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Nesbitt: What is your character? What is your attitude to getting up in the morning and going to work? If we are going to teach skills, we have to encourage that as well.

Mr Dickson: I support the motion and the amendment, because they push our efforts in a more sensible direction. It is important that we support skills funding. We should not just pay lip service to improving the living standards of people in Northern Ireland; we need to invest in the development of their skills and encourage and support people to reach their full potential if we are to create a genuinely fair, equal and inclusive society, which is what, I believe, all of us around the Chamber want to achieve.

The skills and talents of our citizens in Northern Ireland are the fundamental basics of our economic success. They are what attract industry, jobs and investment, so we must create a skills framework to secure future jobs. More than ever, we have the opportunity to invest in a green economy — an economic opportunity that prioritises the well-being of our people, our country and our planet. Before we do anything, we need to be able to finalise a new skills strategy and understand that there is a cross-cutting Executive responsibility, rather than cutting lumps out of one another. We need to be able to invest more in skills across the board; in fact, the Alliance Party believes that the Executive must and should invest at least a further £100 million per annum. A skills fund will have a role, but it is only one piece of a much larger offering.

Twenty years ago, many of the jobs that people in Northern Ireland do today simply did not exist. We must use investment as the key driver of economic growth and consider skills, research and infrastructure through a much greener lens. They are the building blocks of delivering a more sustainable economy. The Alliance Party's green new deal represents that and recognises that we must build a secure and thriving green economy — an economy that

delivers for everyone through a revolutionary shift in policy focusing on and promoting sustainability and reducing inequalities. Our green new deal has the potential to create new skills strategies for citizens through a reformed and employer-driven apprenticeship system. It will combat youth unemployment and present new, fresh and sustainable opportunities.

A decrease in economic activity has hit our young people, school-leavers and the lowest qualified the hardest. In the past year, employment for 16-to-24-year olds has faced the most significant drop. An ageing population and technological changes have created a two-tier labour market, providing those fortunate enough to have in-demand skills with flexibility, security and rising wages, while many traditional roles face uncertainty. We must address that by investing in skills and social development. More than that, we need to retain our students in Northern Ireland. However, the task is to prove to them that there are advantages in staying here. We must ensure that our further education colleges are a first-choice alternative for those who do not go to or do not want to go to local universities. The reality is that they represent a better alternative for many students, as we have an excellent further education sector, one that we need to continue to develop.

Overlooking the deepening disparities and inequalities in our society will lead only to more hardship. The Northern Ireland index of multiple deprivation measures reported that, in some of our communities, up to 80% of school-leavers are not gaining a level 2 qualification and over 60% of working-age people in those communities have few or no qualifications. It suggests that the impact of low employment and high deprivation rates and crime are detrimental to all of those communities. The skills strategy must place a focus on ending those inequalities. It must enable more individuals to have an opportunity to gain skills that will deliver a more balanced economy. We must engage with those who have missed out so far so that they do not miss out again. An all-encompassing skills strategy is needed now more than ever.

As I said, I have reservations about a ring-fenced fund. Ministers should be capable of managing their budgets across a range of headings. A ring-fenced fund provides a statement of intent, but it creates difficulties where underspends occur. Too often, long-term cross-departmental planning is a weakness in the Executive. The lack of engagement with other Departments on the economic —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Dickson: — recovery plan shows that and limits impact. It is time to emphasise action, not strategy, to focus on people, society and economy.

Mr Delargy: There are several glaring omissions in the motion, the starkest of which is around Brexit. Over the past number of months, we have seen that it has been transformative, particularly with regard to EU funding for skills. From 2014 to 2020, EU funding allocated to the Northern Ireland European social fund amounted to more than €210 million. As my colleague Mr O'Dowd said, that represents over 46% of the cost of the programme. The skills strategy does not specify the exact shortfalls brought about by Brexit. We already know that, last year, the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, had to allocate £22.5 million to the Department for the Economy so that the ESF programmes could continue until March 2023.

While I welcome the motion's premise and the notion that the Member has tried to do something to benefit young people in particular, I am rather sceptical of it for the following reasons. At the last Committee meeting, we had a lengthy discussion about ERASMUS. I raised the social, economic and political benefits of the programme, particularly for my generation and young people seeking to augment their skills. It does not suit the DUP narrative, and it is not good enough to throw it out purely because it does not suit your narrative.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for taking a question. I have engaged with many young people over many years about ERASMUS. Does the Member accept that ERASMUS only ever reached 9% of European young people and thus was quite an elite programme that was available to very few?

Mr Delargy: I do not accept that. The vast majority of people whom I talked to and with whom I went on ERASMUS were from working-class backgrounds. It costs £150 to go on ERASMUS for a week. That is an acceptable and affordable solution for working-class families. There are huge grants that are hugely subsidised by the EU, but, again, it does not suit your political agenda. It is not good enough to just throw that out.

There were 26,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who were not in employment, education or training. In Sinn

Féin's 'Principles for Economy Recovery' document, we called for a "Youth Guarantee", whereby every young person would be guaranteed access to employment, skills or educational opportunities.

Again, I welcome the premise that you are trying to do something for young people. However, several weeks ago, I raised with the Economy Minister the fact that 16- and 17-year-olds did not have access to the high street voucher scheme. Again, that did not suit the political agenda, so it was thrown out.

Education is not just about young people. The number of mature students enrolled in further education colleges has decreased by over 21,000 in four years. As part of the skills strategy, more needs to be done to remove barriers to education for mature students.

What I find most bizarre in all this is that, of the £275 million that the Economy Minister was allocated in the action recovery plan, £21 million is still sitting in the pot. I am concerned that an Economy Minister is not able to work out how that can be reallocated. We certainly agree with the notion that something needs to be done to improve our skills, but the Member and the Economy Minister must look at what solutions are already in place to make sure that you do not take away from another Department and that other Departments and projects do not fall by the wayside just because the Economy Minister cannot prioritise his spending.

Mr K Buchanan: I support the motion. Investing in the skills and talents of our workforce is essential to the workforce fabric of Northern Ireland, as the speed of change in working conditions continues to transform the future of work in a post-pandemic society. The creation of new opportunities that meet the evolving technological and economic context and demands is essential for a fully functioning working society. We need to invest and future-proof essential skills for the youth who are now entering the workforce and the employees and employers whose work is now in a transitional phase.

There are some existing initiatives. Essential Skills, which my colleague mentioned, aims to develop literacy, numeracy and ICT skills for employees. That initiative is free and can be delivered at the workplace or a local college. Job Start provides funding for employers to create new job opportunities for 16-to-24-year-olds who are at risk of long-term unemployment. Two main types of apprenticeships are available to bolster the workforce. The Skills Focus programme targets

small to medium-sized enterprises to support and facilitate collaboration between businesses and colleges. Small to medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of any successful economy, and supporting them is essential.

5.00 pm

As stated, the Minister for the Economy and his predecessor have already taken action to support learners during COVID-19, including the apprenticeship recovery package. As a party, the DUP is committed to ensuring that the shake-up and reform of local skills policies are at the heart of Northern Ireland's exit strategy from COVID-19. We need to put a higher value and emphasis on skills and the benefits that they present not just for our economy but for personal health and well-being and alleviating the subsequent pressures on public services.

Collaboration with industry and individual businesses is critical. We need to address the historical underinvestment by local businesses in training, upskilling and continuous professional development. If we do not back up the skills strategy with sustainable and long-term funding arrangements, including a ring-fenced pot, it would be a missed opportunity to reset our economy towards new growth and give the ensuing generation of young people a better foundation in our society to better themselves and the society that they will forge.

Other important factors that need to be considered as part of any ring-fenced skills fund include the need for clear accountability for how funds are allocated and the need to ensure value for money and a central role for businesses and employers in how policies are designed. Long-term investment decisions need to take account of the changing demographics in Northern Ireland. The current share of our population aged between five and 14 is the highest that it has been for decades. With sustained and targeted funding in place, we can allow that generation to fulfil its potential and take our economy to the next level. Targeted funding at already up-and-coming industries such as digital ICT, the creative sectors, agri-food, fintech, financial services and the growing engineering sector should be at the forefront of all our minds when it comes to a ring-fenced skills fund.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, as this is Aisling Reilly's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. However, if you choose to

express views that would provoke an interruption, you are likely to forfeit that protection.

Miss Reilly: As a newly selected MLA for West Belfast, I am delighted to make my first speech in support of the Sinn Féin amendment to the motion. Creating skills, opportunities and employment for our young people, particularly in areas of need like West Belfast, should be a priority for all of us. To that end, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Fra McCann, who did so much work in that regard for and on behalf of all the people of West Belfast. It is an honour to follow in Fra's footsteps, and I certainly intend to build on the solid foundations that he has laid by using my role as an MLA to deliver on the priorities for West Belfast, such as health, education services, housing, jobs and infrastructure investment.

The Black Mountain area of West Belfast, which I represent, has the worst health stats in the North. There is no full-time GP service or a dentist. Our local leisure centre is outdated and in serious need of investment. Our schools, in both the English- and Irish-speaking sectors, are at capacity. I learned in Portakabins some 25 years ago, and, today, children are still learning in Portakabins. Schools desperately need new buildings and additional funding for resources. We need better infrastructure and traffic-calming measures in places such as the Springfield Road, at the top of the Whiterock Road, where there have been fatalities and near misses in recent times.

Investing in skills is a key component of creating opportunities and futures for our young people. While I welcome the focus of the motion, it has to be pointed out that the Assembly's Research and Information Service found that West Belfast and North Belfast have the highest percentage of people with no qualifications, at a staggering 49%. Why, then, is the Department for the Economy pursuing its plan to move level 2 qualifications out of locally based training providers in places like West Belfast, North Belfast and beyond? That will create, not reduce, barriers to skills attainment. That flawed plan should be reversed.

Similarly, it is ironic that the DUP proposed today's motion, considering what we now know about the impact on skills providers and learners from the hard Brexit that it demanded. The motion is absent of any awareness of the irony that is brought forward under the name of former Economy Minister Diane Dodds, who, as Minister, could have acted decisively on the issue but failed to do so. Between 2014 and 2020, the European social fund contributed

approximately €200 million to the skills agenda here. That was a transformative investment, but it has now been lost due to Brexit. If anyone believes that the British Government, who have decimated our block grant over the past decade, will now replace that funding, you are only kidding yourself.

Brexit has made the job of improving skills and opportunities all the harder, but there is still an onus on us to do that work. Therefore, we need greater investment and ring-fenced skills funding, we need to rebalance qualifications to make them more relevant, and, as the Sinn Féin amendment states, we need to create a skills council and work with businesses, educators and trade unions for the betterment of the economy and our young people. Investing in skills is an investment in the future. It is not only crucial to the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic but vital to ensuring that we redress the legacy of unemployment, inactivity and disadvantage that still persists and ensuring that families, workers and communities have a real chance of a better future. I support the amendment.

Mr Durkan: I support the motion and the amendment. Recovery from the COVID pandemic will shape and inform all policy in the time ahead, as will the impact of climate change. Both have had and will have a profound effect on the local economy and on how we do business. The current climate demands that we do things differently and do them better. As the old adage goes, insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. The system here has failed people, from political instability to the failure of successive DUP Economy Ministers to address obvious regional imbalances in university provision and economic investment in the north-west.

The entrenched inequities did not happen overnight, and I am under no illusion that the policies to resolve them will be a quick fix either. This is about setting our sights on long-term and innovative strategies, which will account for the historic problems that are plaguing the economic framework here as well as tackling the impact of COVID on unemployment figures and the outworkings of Tory austerity. In terms of a green economy, it is fitting that today's motion coincides with COP26, which is a pivotal moment upon which not only our direction of travel but everywhere else's will be determined. The ring-fencing of funds towards investment in our workforce and its skills and in the economy of the future is a necessity and offers a chance to make green recovery our primary focus.

Rather than sounding the death knell for industry, Northern Ireland should grasp the opportunity firmly with both hands. Since 2010, we have developed world-leading management techniques in wind power. As a result, not only did we reach the target to have 40% of our electricity generated from renewable sources ahead of time but we overachieved and hit 47% by 2019. We could be a global leader on renewable energies. Work here has already shown others what can be achieved.

Any future skills strategy must invest in educating for the jobs of the future, and special focus must be placed on incentivising and equipping small businesses to seize the opportunities that are presented to them by the green transition. The rapidly growing renewable sector has the potential to create thousands of jobs here, guaranteeing both the improved health of our economy and our environment. The financial and practical benefits of a shift towards clean energies are clear-cut and are the reason that Governments everywhere are investing in renewable industries. New markets in, for example, solar energy and electric vehicles have witnessed massive growth worldwide. There is no reason, therefore, that we cannot invest in those areas, ride the wave of the demand for energy efficiency and be at the forefront of change to the benefit of the planet and the economy; it is, effectively, a win-win scenario.

Mr O'Toole: I apologise for missing the start of the Member's remarks, but does he acknowledge that, particularly in relation to the green transition and green new deal, Northern Ireland also stands to benefit from being at the crossroads, via the protocol, of the UK's green deal and the European Union's green deal? We could have green manufacturing at the heart of our strategy and benefit from our crossroads position with access to dual markets under the protocol.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that intervention. I recognise our unique circumstance and the unique advantage that it gives us; it is important that we work around that and see what more we can do with it.

I will turn briefly to the matter of regional imbalance, which my party colleague Sinead McLaughlin spoke about at length. I lament the fact that the DUP motion omits that crucial narrative; it is more than just a tired narrative. The historical economic neglect of the north-

west, which has now been perpetuated for over a decade by DUP and Sinn Féin leadership, is proven and recognised by the OECD. The Executive must work harder to ensure that the north-west is no longer the poor cousin. Sustainable job creation and substantial investment to tackle regional inequalities must form a core part of any ring-fenced skills fund, as well as any future economic policy. Derry has not only suffered decades of underinvestment; the piecemeal approach to university provision beggars belief. That the mover of the motion, and a former Economy Minister, should express her disappointment at 850 undergraduate places being moved from Belfast to Derry's Magee campus instead of Coleraine earlier this year, after almost six decades of us fighting for investment in Magee, confirms what we already knew: regional imbalance has been a political choice. However, we will continue to raise our voices and advocate for our constituents until Derry gets its fair share.

Foyle, alongside Newry and Armagh, has among the highest unemployment levels across the UK, standing at more than double the regional average. The removal of the universal credit (UC) uplift and the end of furlough will place upward pressures on those figures. The TUC has shown that the UC cut will impact heavily on low-income workers. That fact does not bode well for citizens here. We know about the pride that comes with coming out of unemployment and the sense of purpose that that brings. It is high time that Derry was given some of that pride back, but that cannot happen in a vacuum. To tackle long-term unemployment and the challenges posed by a post-COVID and post-Brexit society, there needs to be a cross-departmental framework —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Durkan: — to strengthen the government of skills policies. We have been given an opportunity to build back better. That means doing things differently. Let us do it together.

Ms Armstrong: As my colleague Stewart Dickson indicated, Alliance will support the amendment and the motion today. As the amendment confirms, we need a cross-departmental approach to skills development in Northern Ireland. For example, we need to review our education system and the type of courses being offered. Are they delivering the skills that we need to develop a future workforce? When was the last time that our GCSE courses were reviewed in partnership

with our businesses to consider whether we are enabling our young people to have the skills needed for a future workforce?

We have a false system here, where newspapers promote as the best the schools with pupils achieving A*s, but where do those young people go? Many of them leave Northern Ireland, never to return. We need an education system that is celebrated for delivering access to employment and life opportunities here at home. The DUP's underachievement piece is betrayed by the commitment to the transfer test. We need to get real with our education system. We also need to consider how the Department for Communities identifies skills gaps and other development opportunities through the Job Start scheme, or, indeed, any future employment schemes, or how work coaches —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: In a moment.

— in jobs and benefits offices identify and help people not in employment to access training and develop their skills.

I give way.

Mr Dickson: Does the Member agree that the European social fund played a crucial role in the courses and schemes that were being delivered by the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy? We are moving into a very uncertain future with regards to the UK's Shared Prosperity Fund, which has still not been delivered and which the Assembly is in the dark about. It is highly unlikely that any local Minister or Assembly will have an influence in how those funds are spent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you.

I absolutely agree. I am extremely concerned about the Shared Prosperity Fund. The Committee for Communities has heard time and again that Supporting People, for instance, could fall by the wayside. We do not know how that is to be funded. This is about not just young people but people of all ages. The Economy Department needs to bring forward the skills strategy to collate all that work and ensure that there is a joined-up approach. I look forward to the Budget-setting process for cross-departmental bids to ensure that skills, which is a cross-cutting issue, is funded and headlined in the Departments that I have mentioned.

Earlier, my colleague Stewart Dickson spoke of the published Alliance green new deal, which confirms that we need a realignment towards sustainability, reducing inequalities and an employer-driven apprenticeship strategy.

All of that can be delivered, but we need an improved impact assessment process, whereby all Departments have to align their policies to ensure that improved equality, sustainability and carbon-impact assessments are carried out before a scheme is brought forward. It is time for all our Departments to stop working in silos and move to deliver effective actions that will help achieve what the proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment seek to achieve.

5.15 pm

I have a concern about the amendment where it seeks:

"to include a ring-fenced skills fund".

I am not 100% certain how a ring-fenced budget can or would work. As we all know, there is a structure to how a budget is developed and delivered. How can there therefore be a ring-fenced skills fund? If a skills fund budget is limited to the Department for the Economy, how can we effectively scrutinise the other Departments that have a role to play in delivering the skills strategy? I hope that the proposers of the motion and the amendment can explain that, because it is one of the aspects of today's debate that has not been clearly enough explained.

There is also no mention of the apprenticeship levy in the motion or the amendment. When they make their winding-up speeches, I ask the Members to confirm what their thinking is on the apprenticeship levy, given how many companies pay into it but do not receive an effective return.

Investing in skills is, of course, integral to economic recovery, following the fallout from Brexit and the pandemic. I agree that we must improve the number of people qualified in STEM subjects, but I also ask that we are mindful that, with an ageing society, we do not forget the growing need for social care provision, including an increase in the skilled social care workforce, to deliver care in the community. There needs to be real consideration of how we pay people properly and how we provide them with training to ensure that they have the skills to look after our older and vulnerable fellow citizens. For

example, I am aware of a company that was refused access to the Department for Communities' JobStart scheme because the Department did not believe that the jobs were skilled enough. Those jobs were in the service sector, yet coffee houses were allowed to join the scheme.

We need to support the skills of all businesses in Northern Ireland. We need to come forward with a skills strategy that reviews the needs of all businesses that deliver for what Northern Ireland needs now. If we are to have an effective skills strategy and prioritise the delivery of skills over the next number of years, the Assembly needs to set aside party political Budget segmentation and design a Programme for Government and a work programme to deliver for this place that we call "home" and for the citizens who live in it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy, to respond to the debate. The Minister will have up to 15 minutes.

Mr C Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I very much welcome the focus on skills in the debate. I spent a lot of the summer and, indeed, much of the past 18 months talking to businesses, primarily about finding support. Over the summer, however, I had the opportunity to visit a lot of sectors, including manufacturing, retail and hospitality, and a consistent theme was the shortage of workers with the right skills. That has been raised time and time again.

At the outset, I should say that, as most Members have acknowledged, policy responsibility for skills rests with the Department for the Economy and not with the Department of Finance. I am responding to the debate with a focus on my role as the Finance Minister.

Last year, the Department for the Economy received £644 million of COVID funding. A significant proportion of that was for schemes to help businesses to cope with the restrictions, but it also included approximately £80 million to support students, apprenticeships and further and higher education, in recognition of the impact of the pandemic on the skills sector. In March 2021, when she was Economy Minister, the proposer of the motion brought the economic recovery action plan to the Executive. That action plan set out several of the points raised in the motion, such as a skills strategy, STEM subjects, jobs of the future and the creation of a skills council and a skills fund. As

Finance Minister, I made a recommendation that the Executive should fully fund the economic recovery action plan. That was agreed, and allocations of £275.8 million of resource and £11 million of capital were announced as part of the Executive's 2021-22 Budget. Some £145 million of that was for the high street stimulus scheme, leaving £130.8 million of resource and £11 million of capital, over which the Economy Minister has discretion.

The amendment to the motion rightly calls on the Economy Minister to ring-fence part of that money for skills. I look forward to an update from Minister Lyons in the Assembly on the actions that his Department is taking forward in that regard. I can tell Members that the Economy Minister has advised the Executive that the funding provided for the economic recovery action plan will be used to build a higher-skilled and agile workforce in order that we might pursue and secure better jobs and produce a more regionally balanced economy.

Furthermore, the British Government have made available £15 million over a three-year period in support of skills as part of the new deal arrangement. The Economy Department has advised that that will be used for a skills fund, and that it intends to contribute a further £8 million over three years.

Now that we have received the outcome of the British Government's spending review, the Executive are considering their Budget for the next three years. This is the first opportunity in 10 years for the Executive to agree a multi-year Budget, which will enable Departments to make long-term spending plans to deliver on the Executive's priorities. Those priorities include sustainable economic development and tackling inequality, both of which are underpinned by the skills agenda. While health will be the top priority, I therefore expect Budget 2022-25 to include a focus on skills.

Unfortunately, as has been said on a number of occasions, as a consequence of Brexit we will no longer have access to the European social fund, which was worth, on average, £26 million per year. That money was used by the Department for the Economy to address skills imbalances and create a culture of lifelong learning. It was also used by the Department for Communities to support disadvantaged people into employment and to reduce economic inactivity. That money is not being replaced by Whitehall, and whereas we had control over how the European social fund was spent, the Shared Prosperity Fund, as I think Ms Armstrong said, is to be delivered by Whitehall

via the financial assistance powers of the Internal Market Act 2020, into which we have very little input.

On a more positive note, however, Brexit has not impacted on the PEACE PLUS programme, which is to receive €1.1 billion over the next seven years. The Department for the Economy will benefit by £300 million to £400 million of that. One of the investment areas for theme 2, delivering economic regeneration and transformation in skills, has an indicative budget of €50 million.

Of course, investment in skills is key to helping our own people to avail themselves of new and better employment opportunities and to have the necessary skills to contribute economically. Setting up a ring-fenced skills fund is not for the Executive as a whole, nor for me as Finance Minister, to lead on. Rather, it is for the Economy Minister to implement. I believe that that has been correctly reflected in the amendment.

Recently, Minister Hargey, Minister Lyons and I launched a new operational delivery apprenticeship scheme for the Civil Service that offers the opportunity to develop skills and gain a recognised qualification, with a guaranteed permanent role within the Civil Service on successful completion of the apprenticeship. Where I and my Department have been able to play a part in bringing forward opportunities to develop skills in the workplace, I have done so.

Funding for the economic recovery plan has been provided for the 2021-22 year. As for 2022-23 and future years, the Executive will be considering that as part of our 2022-25 Budget process. I am sure you will agree that the Department for the Economy has been given significant funding by the Executive to take forward plans for economic recovery, including investment in skills. It is for the Economy Minister to use the funding already allocated to his Department to set up that fund and use it for the purposes set out in the economic recovery action plan.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call on Jemma Dolan to make a winding-up speech on the amendment, and she has five minutes.

Ms Dolan: I have notes everywhere, so please bear with me if I lose my place.

I thank everyone for their comments. I am not going to repeat or recap what everyone said. It seems we are all in agreement that upskilling and reskilling are important and need support and investment for any economic recovery. One

DUP MLA said that there has been historical underinvestment in the Department for the Economy, yet the DUP has held that ministry for over 10 years. If this was not so serious, it might be amusing that you just admitted to that.

I welcome my colleague Aisling to the Chamber and congratulate her on her maiden speech.

The needs of the workplace are changing at a fast pace, and that has probably been accelerated by COVID. Digital skills are becoming more important, with the majority of jobs requiring a certain level of expertise. Investing in skills will mean that all our people can feel that they are part of the changes happening in the global and local economies. It should also mean that businesses have the right people with the right skills at the right time. Adopting this approach will be key to attracting businesses to invest and supporting companies to start up and scale up.

Having said that, I cannot help but address the fact that the skills strategy ignores the skills shortages in areas like the care sector, which will need 4,000 more workers in the next 10 years, while construction will need over 2,000 more tradespeople. As my colleague John O'Dowd pointed out, it occurred to him, when he was looking out of his constituency office window, that there is not enough focus on those who do not go to university and what they have to offer to our economy and society.

Our further and higher education institutions need to be at the heart of this. In my constituency, we have the top-class South West College, which has the state-of-the-art Erne campus. That matches the existing and innovative South West College skills centre. At this point, I want to celebrate the fact that representatives from the college have been invited to host a keynote address and panel discussion as part of COP26. The South West College panel discussion will use the Erne campus as an innovative international demonstration of how to successfully design and implement cutting-edge energy efficiency processes in the delivery of new buildings.

I will return to the motion and amendment. As I have outlined, it takes numerous cogs to turn in tandem to allow us to come back stronger and help to address long-standing economic issues. One massive cog that is fundamental to that, as we have spoken about, is funding. It has become a bit of an elephant in the room for the DUP at this stage, but EU funding for skills, as we have spoken about several times during the debate, has been transformative. The British Government's Brexit policy will result in real

funding shortfalls for skills providers and learners, providing only £11 million of funding to the North. Where does that leave the 26,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 in the North who are not in employment, education or training? Where does it leave our older and mature learners, who experience barriers to upskilling and reskilling?

Our people do not deserve dilly-dallying or responsibility shirking from successive DUP Economy Ministers. They deserve better jobs with better wages in a more flexible working environment and a better overall quality of life, but, then again, the DUP does not exactly have a good track record of being on the side of workers. I commend the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Robin Newton to wind up the debate on the motion. You have 10 minutes.

Mr Newton: First of all, I thank the Minister for being here today. Indeed, I thank everyone for taking part, even though the motion and the amendment had a different emphasis. However, there is a recognition across the Chamber that action is required, that something has to be done and that we need a skills agenda for all our people, not just for one sector or one type of employment. Indeed, the importance of a recognised skills base to the Northern Ireland economy cannot be overestimated, and we must recognise the potential growth sectors and develop a strategy to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to exploit all the opportunities in either identified growth sectors or those sectors where there is a shortage of skills. I note that the Minister had discussions, over the holiday period, with employers, who said that there are not enough people with the necessary skills at all levels to fill the jobs.

I recognise that the Department for the Economy cannot address all the issues on its own. Indeed, the Minister of Finance has a vital role to play, particularly around the funding, but the Minister for Communities also has a vital role to play. Her job skills programme, Job Start, delivers against the need for an economic revival and, indeed, against the need for our young people to get the skills and qualifications that they need. This is not the first time that I have expressed disappointment in the Chamber about the Job Start scheme. The last answer that I got, which was dated 13 September, said that the Minister's Department and officials had approved 2,002 Job Start opportunities, but only 192 people were in place in the Job Start scheme. Less than 10% of the places had been taken up. That is not really addressing the

needs of a section of our young people who really do need to be invested in.

5.30 pm

I note that 'New Decade, New Approach' states:

"The Executive will invest strategically in ensuring that NI has the right mix of skills for a thriving economy."

That statement, in itself, confirms the holistic approach that is required to tackle all the issues. There was a time when the Northern Ireland economy and Ministers were supported by the Northern Ireland Training Authority (NITA). In addition, each important industry sector had a sector skills council. The motion calls for one skills council for Northern Ireland, but the strength of the NITA and the sector bodies was the make-up of the organisations involved. They were made up of members of the business community, trade unions, further and higher education and those with acknowledged expertise in a particular field who wished to contribute. The sector skills councils were statutory bodies, but they offered a constructive approach, a representative role on behalf of the sectors and a lobbying role with government.

I have no wish to look back on what happened previously. We are in a different set of circumstances and different economic conditions. Today, we face the challenges of a global economy in which there is an easy movement of investment from one country to another or, indeed, from continent to continent. It is a massive subject, and today's debate can only be an opener for discussions that must come in the future.

Some of the comments made by those from other sides of the Chamber were to the effect that those with qualifications are in an OK position and that we need to delve into those without qualifications. I do not disagree wholly with that. However, I have done a wee bit of research, and it is worth mentioning that inward investment is frequently brought to Northern Ireland because of the qualifications and qualities of our young people. It is also worth mentioning that there is a wide gap across constituencies in qualifications at level 4 and above. I would not have expected anything less from our Members from the north-west than for them to speak up for that area. However, while South Belfast tops the league table with 70% of those in employment with qualifications of level 4 and above, East Belfast has 53% or 54%, Lagan Valley has 46% and North Belfast has

30%. We need to level up even within greater Belfast.

Those figures highlight the actual and potential skills of employees across Northern Ireland and, indeed, the skills and knowledge gaps in education. We talk about costs and budgeting very often, but we seldom talk about investing in education. Until we start to consider investing in education and then invest in it, we will not see the true picture. We want an economic investment in our young people and a return on that investment at all levels.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recommended that "a ring-fenced skills fund" should be established to lever greater opportunities for trainees and employees of all levels, all ages and all backgrounds. A building block on which the skills strategy could be built is encouraging more and more of our school pupils to embrace STEM subjects and to open up opportunities to go into STEM subjects, particularly for young women, as the proposer of the motion, Mrs Dodds, said.

I note that the Finance Minister said that the Economy Minister is working on and taking action on a skills fund, which is welcome. However, if we are to develop a strategy, it must embrace all sectors of our community and economy. It must be a strategy to encourage and enable businesses to implement and sustain change and that recognises and acknowledges employees as an asset. Perhaps employees are our greatest asset — in fact, I am sure that they are — and they are worthy of investment. It must be a strategy that drives values, not one that views employees as a cost to be minimised.

To succeed, there is an important and prime need to develop a partnership ethos between the Executive — specifically the Department for the Economy — the business community and others, outside the business community, who will make a positive contribution. High-level skills are critical as Northern Ireland attempts to shape its economy for the future.

I will comment briefly on what Members said. I have to say that I was disappointed when I saw the amendment, because I do not think that it adds anything to the motion.

Mrs Dodds indicated that a strategy is key to investing in all our people and said that employers are seeking suitable applicants. She confirmed that only 30% of Northern Ireland companies have a training budget, which does not stack up with other parts of the UK. She

stressed the challenges and opportunities and emphasised the STEM subjects again.

Although Mr O'Dowd took a negative approach — I recognise that Mr O'Dowd does not always do so — he recognised that STEM is important. He supports the idea of a skills council, accepts the need for a skills strategy and recognises that all Ministers need to buy into it. He also made reference to low skills, so I find it difficult to understand why he could not —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his comments to a close?

Mr Newton: — agree with the motion as a whole.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes investing in the skills and talent of our workforce is integral to the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; stresses the need to better equip those with low, or no, qualifications in order to tackle unemployment, inactivity and disadvantage in every corner of Northern Ireland; notes the Department for the Economy's draft skills strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy, including plans to rebalance graduate and postgraduate qualifications towards STEM subjects and jobs of the future; highlights the potential benefits for growth sectors and levels of inward investment; supports the creation of a Skills Council for Northern Ireland to ensure businesses, education and trade unions have a strong voice; further notes that delivering on the skills strategy will require consultation with and the support of all Ministers as well as significant investment in the absence of European Union funding lost as a result of Brexit; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to include a ring-fenced skills fund as an element of the Department's economic recovery action plan; and further calls on the Executive to prioritise skills development as part of the new three-year Budget cycle.

Adjourned at 5.38 pm.

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