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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 2 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

Inter-ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Mr Speaker: Members, I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement. Bear with us just for a moment.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am sorry. I nipped out for a glass of water. I did not realise that I was going to be called first.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the meeting of the inter-ministerial group for environment, food and rural affairs that took place on 17 February 2020. The group provides central coordination and promotion of greater collaboration in areas of shared interest between portfolio Ministers who lead on agriculture, fisheries, the environment, forestry and rural affairs in the UK Administrations. The meeting considers policy, delivery, and technical and legislative matters on which the Administrations have determined to engage multilaterally. There are well-established and good working relationships with UK Departments, and my Department continues to ensure that NI issues are recognised and fully understood at UK level to help inform UK-EU negotiations. I therefore welcome the opportunity to update you on the discussions of the meeting that I chaired here in Belfast.

The participating Ministers were: from the UK Government, George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and from the Scottish Government, Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, and Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform. Lesley Griffiths AM, Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs, was unfortunately unable to participate because of the floods, so the Welsh Government were

represented by Mr Tim Render, the Welsh Government's director of environment and rural affairs.

In preparation for the EU and rest-of-the-world negotiations, DEFRA officials presented a paper that reflected the broad context for trade negotiations in 2020, along with an overarching summary of UK Government trade priorities in EFRA areas, highlighting known devolved Administration priorities. Ministers from each of the Administrations highlighted their priority sectors and issues, noting the risks of not reaching a trade agreement with the EU.

I indicated to the meeting that a deal that consisted of zero tariffs and zero quotas would be highly desirable and highlighted Northern Ireland's unique position in relation to regulatory alignment with the EU. I emphasised the huge and fundamental problems for Northern Ireland agri-food businesses that would be caused by imposing tariffs from GB to NI.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Mr Eustice, recognised the unique Northern Ireland issues in relation to the protocol, east-west trade, tariffs, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks and market integrity and agreed that those issues would require a bilateral meeting for further discussion.

I also indicated that it was important to agree the maintenance of a high level of standards in Great Britain to minimise unfair competition from third-country imports that are produced to a lower standard and cost and to build a reputation for the UK as a safe and reputable source of food supply to global markets. In particular, I asked how the UK would protect the integrity of the food industry. I was informed by Mr Eustice that the UK would adopt an intelligence and risk-based approach to import control.

I, along with the Ministers from the other devolved Administrations, emphasised the importance of meaningful engagement in the negotiation of new trade agreements. DEFRA

agreed to share documents as early as possible and to encourage other Whitehall Departments to do likewise.

The meeting then considered the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol and agreed a cross-Administration technical work plan to progress that constructively. I raised concerns regarding the significant tariffs that could be incurred by the fishing industry. I also sought clarification on what "unfettered access" to GB would mean for Northern Ireland.

To ensure domestic preparedness for December 2020, the group also agreed to produce a shared set of planning assumptions to prepare for broad scenarios at the end of the transition period and discussed border preparations and business engagement. I emphasised that devolved Administrations need absolute clarity on roles and responsibilities and that confirmation of that should be provided at the next meeting on 23 March 2020.

In closing the meeting, we noted the progress of the DEFRA primary legislation programme and acknowledged the highly ambitious programme of secondary legislation that will be required to ensure a fully functioning statute book by the end of the transition period. Following the meeting, I requested that several bilateral meetings take place in Belfast in the very near future with Mr Eustice, Mr Ewing and Ms Griffiths to discuss in more detail some of the issues of mutual interest in relation to EU exit, such as the Northern Ireland protocol, tariffs, SPS issues, GB-NI trade, the integrity of the GB market and risk-based surveillance, along with policy in relation to agri-food, environment and fisheries and the operation of the UK internal market.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I thank the Minister for his statement. One of the issues that was raised in Committee and on the Floor last week is the importance of migrant labour to the industry here. I note from the DEFRA minutes of the previous meeting, on 13 January, that the Scottish and Welsh Ministers had raised the issue of migrant labour. Given the importance of labour from other countries to the agriculture and food-and-drink industries, will the Minister outline what representations he has made to the British Government on the points-based immigration system that was recently announced by the British Home Office?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Labour is of key importance to agriculture. We have done some background work, and, as

things stand, only around 9% of those who are engaged in the agri-food sector would qualify under the proposed scheme. That indicates that the people who are here would be fine, but there would be a substantial challenge if those people were to leave and we try to bring new people in. Consequently, we have raised this issue with the Executive, and we have also raised it with the relevant Minister, the Business Minister, who was over here. The Executive are going to take this and write to Her Majesty's Government to highlight the concerns that we in Northern Ireland have. It is a particular issue for my Department, and for the Department of Health in providing social care, but much of our agri-food industry is reliant on labour that is sourced from outside the United Kingdom. Consequently, for the continuation of many of our businesses, we need to have the opportunity to source the appropriate labour. We will continue to lobby and press upon that, because I do not see what is proposed as adequately meeting our needs in the agri-food industry.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does the Minister have a sense of how the other devolved Administrations will approach future trade agreements?

Mr Poots: The other Administrations and ourselves will all be lobbying the UK Government to get a deal that is best suited to us. The Scottish and Welsh, for example, will be quite concerned about the lamb trade; they are high producers of lamb and export quite a lot of it. Ideally, we will all get a zero-tariff, zero-quota deal, but that is going to be difficult to achieve. My fear going forward is that the level playing field will be the significant issue and the Northern Ireland protocol will be a less significant issue for the UK Government. and, therefore, whatever arrangements come to us will be more about the level playing field and what suits the UK Government on that front and less about the Northern Ireland protocol. That could have a really serious impact for us here in Northern Ireland.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister, for that statement. This is important, given the size of our agri-food industry and its impact on our economy. Can the Minister give his assessment of the British Government's commitment to upholding food standards, following the Secretary of State's comments last week that he would give no assurances about maintaining alignment with safety standards following Brexit?

Mr Poots: I am of the opinion that the United Kingdom has better food standards and will want to have better food standards than many other parts of the European Union. For example, the horsemeat scandal a number of years ago kicked off not in the United Kingdom but in other European countries. I believe that we will have high standards on the environment, animal health, animal welfare and food. The question that has to be asked, and the question that Europe has to recognise, is: do they want equivalence and find equivalence acceptable, or do they want Britain to rigidly adhere to standards set by the European Union?

Going forward, I believe that British standards on food will be high, but they may not be exactly the same as European standards. Consequently, does that open the door for a series of tariffs to be applied that will not be applied to Canada by the European Union? We need a bit of common sense to apply here and not to have some sort of punishment of the UK because Europe does not want it to be seen that the UK has too good a deal as this may be attractive for other countries to exit the European Union.

12.15 pm

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree that the Northern Ireland protocol places Northern Ireland at a disadvantage in the UK internal market?

Mr Poots: There are around 380,000 HGV movements between Northern Ireland and GB, and GB and NI. Consequently, any new export health checks and movements that are then applied, from GB to NI in particular, will have a detrimental impact. Roughly 50% of our trade goes to Britain and, indeed, comes from Britain. That is very significant because Great Britain is our most important trading partner, so any barriers placed between us and Great Britain will have a greater impact than any barriers elsewhere. The trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain is absolutely critical and essential, which is why the proposed protocol is hugely damaging. That is why I welcome the UK Government looking for further changes to the protocol. We were told that it cannot be changed. Well, it needs to be changed because, if it is not changed, there will be a consequence for every business in Northern Ireland, and there will be a consequence for every consumer in Northern Ireland. That will make life harder for our consumers, with higher prices being imposed as a result of the protocol,

not as a result of us leaving the European Union.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his statement. In some of his responses so far, he used the words "worrying", "consequences", "detrimental impact" and "serious concerns"; far away from the sunny uplands of Brexit. In his last statement, he said that the protocol is damaging. I contend that it is Brexit that is damaging. It is Brexit that is causing serious concern to our farmers and our agriculture industry here.

Boris Johnson, in his recent speech in Greenwich, said:

"There is no need for a free trade agreement to involve accepting EU rules on competition policy, subsidies, social protection, the environment, or anything similar any more than the EU should be obliged to accept UK rules."

Does the Minister agree that that contradicts paragraph 12 of his statement on the circumstances that Mr Eustice outlined on the protocol?

Mr Poots: The decision on Brexit has been made. We have now left the European Union, so that argument is done and dusted. There is no point in going over that further. It was well enough argued for three years. It is now about our future trading relationships with the European Union. It is in our interests to get the best trading relationships with the European Union. It is in our best interests to get the best trading relationships with our key trading partner — Great Britain.

Leave all the politics to one side. You do not have to like Great Britain. You do not have to like the United Kingdom. You may have a preference to be in a united Ireland. Set all that to one side. Who do we do our business with? Most of our business is done with Great Britain. Anything, therefore, that damages that trade will cause problems for the people who live in Northern Ireland. Consequently, we need to minimise any damage. It is hugely unfortunate that the damage that is being done to Northern Ireland businesses and consumers is being enforced on us by the European Union, which is demanding the following. Consequently, we need to rail back on that. If the European Union is good to its word that Northern Ireland is really important, that peace in Northern Ireland is really important and the people of Northern Ireland are really important, we need it to rail

back on creating barriers between Northern Ireland and its number one market for goods.

Mr Givan: I welcome the Minister's commitment to look forward and to set aside the old debates of the past when it comes to Brexit and the constitutional argument. I appeal to Members, particularly those opposite, to embrace that forward-looking perspective. It would appear to many of us that the protocol is being used as some kind of instrument to inflict a punishment beating on those who supported Brexit. Northern Ireland cannot afford to endure that kind of punishment as a result of the decision that was taken.

Will the Minister reassure me that he will confront the Tánaiste, the Foreign Affairs Minister, Simon Coveney, who is putting in jeopardy the trade talks that are starting today through his insistence on putting infrastructure down the Irish Sea that will create a burden on our trade with GB? Will he give us his assessment of the damage that Simon Coveney is inflicting on us?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. In the infrastructure that is being sought by Simon Coveney, we are looking at tens of thousands of checks on goods coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, which will create a huge pressure on business. Let me explain. Just-in-time food supplies include fresh strawberries and fresh food of any kind. If those have to be delayed at a port, be it in Scotland or Northern Ireland — I should say that neither the Northern Ireland Minister nor, indeed, the Scottish Minister have expressed that they are willing to accept any checks at any ports. Scotland was as firm as I was on that: we would not put infrastructure in our ports to facilitate that. If Mr Coveney had his way, there would be tens of thousands of checks, damaging those just-in-time goods coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. That would be hugely detrimental to the shops, convenience stores and supermarkets that provide food that has been produced in Great Britain and comes to Northern Ireland. Again, that will have a huge impact on our consumers.

Mr Coveney will also impose on us, as a consequence of his reading of the protocol, huge damage on our fishing industry in that the European Union's current position is that all fish that are caught in British waters and landed in Northern Ireland would be subject to tariffs. The Union might say, however, "We might be kind and allow you to catch fish that are under quota and tariff the rest". That is totally unacceptable.

Simon Coveney wants to damage our fishermen. Simon Coveney wants to damage our consumers and our businesses. Simon Coveney could not get a majority in the election just past. He came third. Boris Johnson got an 80-seat majority in the House of Commons. I do not think that Simon Coveney has much clout when it comes to the talks. The clout lies with the UK Government, which will go into the talks to fight and to fight hard to ensure that Northern Ireland is not damaged as a consequence of this protocol.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ennis: The Minister is speaking about the fishing industry and the tariffs that may be imposed. Will he elaborate on those tariffs and the impact that they could have on our fishing industry, which is already under severe pressure? Will he give us a bit more information about the tariffs that he is proposing?

Mr Poots: I know that the Member will have a particular interest in the issue, given that two of our main fishing ports happen to be in south Down. The fishing industry has been emasculated for the last 40 years as a result of the European Union. Thankfully, I was able to raise a proposal that created the opportunity for fishermen to fish for haddock last week, which they had not been allowed to do as a consequence of the European Union for many years. Nonetheless, they have been emasculated and have been prevented from fishing in their own waters, while fish that they should have been entitled to fish were being caught by boats from other European countries.

We can have a very good relationship with the Republic of Ireland when it comes to fishing. There are plenty of fish in the Irish Sea for Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland fishermen. However, we cannot have a situation in which the European Union comes in and says, "That fish was caught in British waters. We will apply a tariff to it." That would apply to Irish boats as well. It is wholly unacceptable. Fish caught in the Irish Sea and landed in Kilkeel, Ardglass, Portavogie or Belfast must be tariff free, and we must be enabled to land it tariff free. European Union officials told our officials in DAERA that a tariff will apply. I have impressed upon George Eustice that it is totally unacceptable and we cannot contemplate it.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to give his statement. He referred to food standards. Before I comment on that, I welcome his comments on the fact that, through

a democratic process, we have now left the shackles of the European Union, which decimated, as he said, our fisheries and the many other businesses that had draconian rules and regulations imposed on them.

The Member for Lagan Valley mentioned food standards and protecting the importation of foods into Northern Ireland. Can the Minister ensure that the high standards that we have in Northern Ireland will not be jeopardised by the importation of any foods that fall short of those standards?

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland has food of a very high standard. The chicken and meat that we produce and the fish that we catch is all of an excellent standard. We have much higher standards than many other parts of the world from where cheap imports are available. People in our country, and the people who receive our exports, deserve to know that they are receiving the best quality products; that our animal health is excellent; that we have good environmental conditions; and that the food itself is of top quality. Therefore, it is often the case that people pay a premium for it.

We need to ensure that, in free trade negotiations, that continues to be the case. Origin of food and other labelling is very important. Free trade negotiations may end up with us importing food of a different standard from another country. If people buy it, that is their choice. However, it needs to be up there in lights that it is food that has not been produced to the same high standard as ours. If people want to buy it for a lower price, that is entirely up to them, but they will be buying something that does not meet the same quality standards we currently have.

Mr O'Dowd: As the question-and-answer session flows back and forth, it is clear that Members on the Benches opposite do not want us to talk about Brexit, but we are dealing with the consequences of Brexit and the consequences of those who supported it promising us sunny uplands.

This follows on from Mr Storey's question: is it not the case that the Irish protocol protects us from the very scenario that Mr Storey talks about? I assume that he was talking about the Moy Park workers in his and my constituency who, if our market is opened to the chlorinated chicken previously referred to, face losing their job. Will the Minister confirm that the Irish protocol protects our environment, industries and consumers from low-quality, cheap imports?

Mr Poots: The Member makes a fair point about the chicken that would come here if a free trade deal were done with the United States of America. Chicken there is more subject to salmonella. Consequently, it is chlorinated. I do not see millions of people coming back from America having been badly affected as a consequence of eating it.

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

Nonetheless, we produce our chicken to a higher standard. It does not need to be chlorinated in the first instance. That is why labelling of food origin is absolutely critical, and it is something that I have sought for years. Loads of chicken currently comes into the European Union from south-east Asian countries that produce chicken to a lower standard than ours. Much of it ends up in the catering industry, and it is not well labelled for the people who buy it. Therefore, it already happens. It is not something that will be new; already it is happening. We need to make our argument forcibly. I do not care whether the chicken comes from America, Thailand or elsewhere: we need to identify where it comes from and the standards that it has been raised to so that consumers can choose whether they want to buy locally produced material that is produced to the highest standards or something of a lower standard for which they will pay a lower price. It is a decision that consumers will make, not us.

12.30 pm

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the work that he is doing on matters pertaining to Brexit on behalf of the Assembly and the Executive, in particular his vocal opposition, alongside his devolved colleagues, to barriers and infrastructure at our ports. It is fair to say that we must hold Boris Johnson firm to his commitment of there being unfettered free trade east-west, given the fact that the Assembly voted unanimously against the Brexit Bill when it came before the House.

If the protocol is implemented in full, as the EU would suggest, at what cost would that be to the Northern Ireland agri-food sector?

Mr Poots: We have a circumstance in which Northern Ireland is a leader in food production and food processing. Consequently, food that is produced by primary producers in Great Britain is brought to Northern Ireland for further processing, adding value to that food. Most of it ends up back in Great Britain's supermarkets. We have a situation in which literally thousands

of jobs are involved in adding value to food, the primary producer of which is a producer in Great Britain. For example, if the EU were to add a tariff to beef, which currently is around 40%, importers of that product would have to pay the tariff and would not be able to reclaim it until 100% of the beef had left the particular factory. Whenever a beef carcass comes in that large form, it is divided into many other forms. The steaks and the stewed beef and all of that may all go back into the market, but elements of minced beef etc may not have. Until 100% of the carcass goes back into the GB market, the tariff cannot be reclaimed. Consequently, a production system that works to very fine margins would, all of a sudden, have massive tariffs to pay and have to wait many months — maybe more than 12 months in some instances — before they could reclaim the tariff. That would do huge detriment to those businesses. We need to get to a circumstance in which we do not have those tariffs applied in the first instance.

The application of tariffs within a country has not happened anywhere else in the world. It is just unacceptable. We need to press home over and over again the unacceptability of tariffs within a country and tariffs between key trading partners, in this case Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr Harvey: Given the importance of the GB market to our agri-food business, can the Minister detail what discussions he has had on the term "unfettered access"?

Mr Poots: "Unfettered access" is great terminology, but I want to know exactly what the British Government mean by it. "Unfettered access" appears to mean any goods going from Northern Ireland to Great Britain — there is no issue there — but I am not absolutely clear that it is the same for goods coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. I have pressed repeatedly that it has to be the same. Unfettered access cannot be one-way; it has to be a two-way flow, because the consequences of not having that unfettered access, some of which I have laid out, would be damaging to our consumers and our businesses, and we cannot accept that. We cannot have a circumstance where something that has been imposed on us costs our consumers, many of whom live in areas of deprivation and for many of whom food is one of their biggest spends. As a result of what Leo Varadkar, Simon Coveney and the European Union have sought to impose on us — creating separation and division between Great Britain and Northern Ireland that is damaging to consumers — people in west Belfast, Fermanagh/South Tyrone, South

Down, the Member's constituency of Strangford and my constituency of Lagan Valley, many of whom need every penny that they have, will have to spend more.

Mr Stalford: Mr O'Dowd referred to the Benches opposite: now, perhaps, I can. The Minister will agree, I am sure, that unity of approach is important going forward. Given that Sinn Féin opposed entry into the Common Market, opposed the Single European Act, opposed the Maastricht Treaty, opposed the Lisbon Treaty, opposed the Nice Treaty and were on the anti side in every European constitutional referendum in the Republic of Ireland, does the Minister agree that it is time that they returned to their original Eurosceptic principles?

Mr Poots: I would not want the Member to suggest that Sinn Féin is a flip-flop party when it comes to the European Union. That would not be very pleasant of the Member, but, of course, he did not say those words, so we will refrain from that. Nonetheless, over the years, Sinn Féin has reflected that the European Union has not always been about the local worker, the local consumer or local solutions. It is a large, amorphous body that seeks to bring together people from south-east Europe, western Europe and northern Europe, and, often, the circumstances that prevail in all of those places at one time are hugely different. Applying a single solution to places that are hugely different does not always work. That is a major problem for the European Union. The European Union has not always worked for Ireland, be it Ireland North or Ireland South. Folks in Ireland South are beginning to wake up to a reality that they will be forking out, probably, over £2 billion to the European Union, having been a net receiver for many years, and that the tables are being turned on them. It will be interesting to see how they will move forward.

The one thing that Ireland South needs to be concerned about is its trade with Great Britain, because Great Britain takes huge amounts, particularly of its food product, from the Republic of Ireland. Irrespective of all of the growth that is taking place in the Republic of Ireland, the food industry is still crucial to its economy. I want to see a sensible arrangement between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and between Northern Ireland and the Republic. The protocol does not deliver, and, therefore, we will argue with the United Kingdom Government that there needs to be changes — substantial changes. That will be in the best interests of consumers here, and I hope that we will do something that will be in

the best interests of the people of the Republic of Ireland. I do not believe that the outgoing Government in the Republic of Ireland served the best interests of their community in their negotiations. We could have had and should have had a circumstance in which the Republic of Ireland had very favourable trading conditions with Great Britain and Northern Ireland had very favourable trading conditions as well, but that opportunity was thrown away by the outgoing Government.

Mr Allister: I welcome the Minister's firm declaration that he will not accept any infrastructure at our ports and look forward to him holding to that. In consequence, he was right to call out Simon Coveney in respect of what he has been saying. In that vein, does he not also need to call out three of the parties that he shares the Executive with? The Alliance Party, Sinn Féin and the SDLP have all been adamant that the protocol must be fully enforced and implemented, so do they too not need to be called out for seeking to damage the economy of Northern Ireland?

In that context, can he explain a little more the paragraph of his statement where he said that there will be:

"a cross-Administration technical work plan to progress"

the protocol? What does that mean:

"a ... technical work plan to progress"

the protocol? Is that taking us in a direction that he does not want to go? How can he ensure that it will not do so?

Mr Poots: Of course, people have a democratic right to express a political position. The three parties that the Member named are pro-Remain parties, and it is their absolute right to be pro-Remain parties. I am in a pro-Leave party. In due course, when all this is done and dusted, we will all know who was right and who was wrong and whether we have a successful economy. I think that we can have a much more successful economy; others may think differently. Time will tell. Even within some of the parties, we have had a difference of opinion. In the Assembly, Sinn Féin voted against it, whereas, in the European Union assembly, Sinn Féin voted for it. We had that little dichotomy in Sinn Féin's voting positions when it came to the deal that was put forward.

On the Member's question, the protocol is a reality as things stand. We want to see the

necessary changes applied to it. That will be part of the discussion that takes place between the member states of the United Kingdom. We will look for changes to the protocol and will be part of the course of work that the Member refers to.

Mrs Barton: Is it likely, if trade deals are agreed by the UK for the import of agri-food products from countries with lower quality standards, that those deals will include a requirement for Northern Ireland to be part of them?

Mr Poots: They will, yes, because, in the current circumstance, we are part of the single market, but we are also part of the UK customs arrangements, so we are in a slightly different position from everybody else. Some elements of that give us an advantage. Having the ability to sell with zero tariffs to both the EU and the UK gives us an advantage, even in terms of businesses that wish to settle in Northern Ireland. We also have disadvantages, because there is the potential for tariffs between us and our main trading partner. We need to try to take advantage of the advantages and reduce the disadvantages. That is a course of work that we will do.

If the UK agrees to acquire food from various countries as part of a free trade arrangement, Northern Ireland will be part of that. After all, we produce about five times as much food as we eat and the majority of that ends up in Great Britain, so it is absolutely critical that, irrespective of whether that food is coming to Northern Ireland or Great Britain, labelling of the food's origin is done in a very good way. The United States of America is probably one of the best countries at labelling foods. That will be less of an issue when it comes to having that discussion, because it is good at labelling food. It is absolutely critical that consumers know what they are getting, know what they are paying for and are satisfied to be acquiring that product.

12.45 pm

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for the statement and the information that it provides. However, some of the outflow from the statement and the toing and froing here compels me to say — I hope that he will forgive me for not resisting the temptation — that never has there been less temptation or opportunity for an "I told you so" moment. The Minister and others will be aware that some of us did not want the uncertainty. Some of us did not envisage the prospect of a cliff edge but — the Minister referenced it — the

protocol is an international agreement, and there is some detail for all of us to get across between now and the implementation of the protocol.

Rather than protracted pro- or anti-EU conversations, we should now move in that direction. Paragraph 17 of the statement mentions that a cross-Administration technical work plan is tasked to deliver the protocol. Is there any detail or timetable around that delivery, given that the clock is ticking, and we are moving closer to December?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Ultimately, I can agree with some aspects of what he says. Uncertainty is not good. We are looking towards the end of June to wrap up negotiations to close off that uncertainty. However, the fact that we did not proceed with the people's instruction for over three years created more uncertainty and damage to business than what the next three months will create. Let us get this done. Let us honour the will of the people, spoken by referendum and in the more recent Westminster election, and do what the people instructed to be done, which is to leave the European Union in a way that does least damage to business and creates the greatest opportunity for business and the community.

If you want to see failure as a result of leaving the European Union, that is not a good position. You might not agree with the decision or the fact that we are leaving, but we should all be looking for success, because success is to the benefit of all the people whom we represent. Failure will damage all the people whom we represent. Let us work together on getting success and not on looking for failure to prove a political point.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I recognise the importance of unfettered access to the British market, given that 75% of our agri-food products go there. Does he agree that the failure to include minimum food standards in the Agriculture Bill and plans to phase out farm support payments mean that the British Government are opening the door to cheap food imports, which will suppress the market and price our local farmers and agri-food products out of the British market?

Mr Poots: On the question of phasing out farm support payments, I can only go by the Conservative Party manifesto, which indicated

that a Conservative Government would sustain them for the lifetime of the current Parliament. That is all that a manifesto can commit to. I am not aware of any phasing out of support for agriculture. I see huge benefits in governments supporting agriculture, especially for the environment. Abandonment of land has proven to be very detrimental to biodiversity, the environment and all of that. I do not believe that the UK Government are going down that route. I would be opposed to that, and I think that the House would be opposed to it. We will seek to ensure that that is the case.

As it stands, we will be distributing the single farm payments this year ahead of what we did under the European Union. We are capable of delivering everything that we need to by October this year as opposed to waiting until December, which was imposed on us through the European Union. I would say that much of the Agriculture Bill is Englandcentric, and England will phase out over the seven years some of what they are doing and will alter it. One thing that England is doing and is proposing to do is to reduce the larger payments and redistribute them. That may be something that we will want to do as well. We will have a discussion with the Committee about whether some of the larger payments coming for some single farm payments is appropriate or whether we invest in young people who want to come into farming and reduce the larger payments as a result.

We may want to do some of the same things as England; we may want to do some things that are completely different. I will want to do what is best for the people I represent, irrespective of what people do elsewhere.

Ms Bailey: It was good to hear the Minister say that if the EU was good to its word, it would act in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. Does he agree, then, that if the Conservative Government were good to their word, they would uphold the international treaty that they negotiated and signed off rather than threaten to break it?

Can I also ask the Minister whether he has sought assurances from his ministerial group given that we saw reports at the weekend that Brexiteers are now recommending to the Government that our food sector is not critical to the country's economy and that agriculture and fisheries certainly are not?

Mr Poots: On the protocol, I would be very surprised if the Green Party wanted higher food prices and have businesses detrimentally impacted as a consequence of that protocol,

because, as things stand, they will be, and it is very clear that they will be. It is also clear that every household in Northern Ireland will be worse off as a result of the protocol, and all I hear from the Green Party is more protocol —.

Ms Bailey: We would abide by the law that was made.

Mr Poots: I think that we are —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Excuse me, Minister. I advise Members that there should be no commentary from a seated position, please.

Mr Poots: I do not mind, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not need any protection from the Green Party or anybody else from sedentary positions or elsewhere. A bit of heckling does not really annoy me, but I thank you for your care and interest.

We need to get to the best position. A further negotiation is to take place, and I will be imploring the UK Government to make the necessary changes to the protocol so that our consumers are not hurt. I trust that the Green Party will stand with the UK Government in getting the best deal for the people of Northern Ireland and will not accept a bad deal.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes questions on the statement. Before we hear the next statement, I advise Members that I have received notice from the Minister for Health that, owing to changes resulting from his meeting with his UK colleagues, he is unable to make a statement on coronavirus until 3.30 pm, immediately after Question Time. If questions on the statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, which we are about to hear, concludes before Question Time at 2.00 pm, business will continue with Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill and the debate on the Executive's legislative programme.

However, as the Finance Minister will not be available to move his business until 1.30 pm, we may have to suspend the sitting until that time. That will depend on how we move with the next statement.

Afforestation Programme

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to talk to the House about a new programme of

afforestation. I trust that it will have widespread agreement across the House and there will be a little less conflict. Who knows? We will be up for it if there is some.

As Minister, I have asked for sustainability to be placed at the heart of everything that my Department does. That includes the sustainable management of the trees and woodlands of Northern Ireland, which are one of our key natural assets, with an estimated 100,000 kilometres of tree-lined hedgerows and 113,000 hectares of woodland within which approximately 2,000 kilometres of forest tracks and paths are available for public access and broader health benefits.

It is clear how much people value our forests, and I share that appreciation. There are around five million visits to the Department's forest parks each year. However, the level of forest cover in Northern Ireland is currently 8% of land, compared with 13% in the UK, 11% in the Republic of Ireland and 43% in the European Union. They are ahead of us on that. There is a clear case for expanding forest cover here to support a thriving environment, strong economy and healthy, active communities. This will not be without its challenges. It will require partnership working across the Executive and wider public sector and, importantly, the support of rural landowners and communities. However, that does not mean that it should not be done. It will need to be achieved through a coherent policy framework within which agricultural, environmental and afforestation policies clearly complement one another. This will be a key focus of the Department over the coming months.

Planting more trees and increasing forest cover would bring a number of benefits to Northern Ireland society. There is clear evidence to show that tree planting contributes to a healthy, quality environment. It can help to mitigate climate change by removing carbon from the atmosphere. On average, one hectare of woodland captures 1,200 tons of carbon dioxide in its lifetime. It would also improve the landscape and biodiversity, and it would enable more people to improve their health, well-being and life chances through their enjoyment of this quality, natural resource. Furthermore, it would make a significant contribution to Northern Ireland's sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The gross value added by the forestry sector is around £60 million per annum from timber production activity, sustaining approximately 1,000 rural jobs. A further £60 million to £80 million is generated in the local economy from forest-based recreation and tourism.

To date, the forestry strategy has been delivered mainly through successive rural development programmes encouraging private landowners to convert agricultural land to forestry. This has resulted in the creation of small, predominately broad-leaved woodlands providing health benefits for the woodland owner, low levels of carbon sequestration potential and biodiversity benefits. The current rates of afforestation, if projected, represent only a modest rate of woodland creation — short of 1% by the middle of the century. The Committee on Climate Change called tree planting a “simple, low-cost option” to remove carbon from the atmosphere. Its 'Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland' report noted that the current 200 hectares of tree planting falls “well short” of the Committee’s recommendation of 900 hectares of woodland a year.

The UK Government are committed to achieving net zero carbon by 2050. Climate change is a significant challenge, not only for the UK but globally. Northern Ireland can make a significant contribution to addressing these challenges at a local level through a number of innovative environmental policies, including increased afforestation that is managed sustainably and better integrated with other land uses. Increasing afforestation at the rate necessary to make a meaningful impact on carbon capture will require a strong partnership approach and the support of my Executive colleagues and Members of the House. Existing publicly owned land, including local government land, has the greatest potential for woodland creation in the short term. I have written to ministerial colleagues and to the chief executives of councils, seeking their support and commitment to make public land available for tree planting and to provide an initial assessment of the scale and extent of land that may be available.

The quality, accessibility and environmental sensitivity of the land will be key considerations in the sustainability of tree planting. I plan to establish an afforestation forum to work collectively across the public sector to coordinate the assessment of available public land and develop an action plan for increasing afforestation. I will oversee this work personally, and the forum will report to me regularly. As Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I am committed to leading by example. I take this opportunity to advise Members of an afforestation event on 9 March at which 1,000 trees will be planted by local children on my Department’s land at Loughry College, Cookstown. Similar legacy events will follow. I will continue to play a lead role in increasing

afforestation and creating a sustainable environment. Importantly, this enhanced afforestation programme must encourage tree planting and create opportunities to incorporate trees and woodlands into farms and other businesses in a realistic and viable way, with the necessary reskilling programmes to enable landowners to refocus their land use.

1.00 pm

With the leadership, commitment, skills and willingness available to us, we should seek to increase forest cover significantly over the next decade. Over the next 10 years, my Department will lead a programme of afforestation called Forests for our Future. By 2030, it will have planted 18 million trees to create 9,000 hectares of new woodland, which is equivalent to 10 trees per person in Northern Ireland. The programme will improve the resilience of Northern Ireland's forests and woodlands and increase their contribution to a sustainable, healthy environment; increase the contribution of forests and woodlands to Northern Ireland's sustainable and inclusive economic growth; and increase the use of Northern Ireland's forest resources to enable more people to improve their health, well-being and life chances.

The purpose of the statement is to set out my intentions to increase afforestation to support climate change and maximise individual, community and societal benefits for the citizens of today and for generations to come. I hope that it sets out the direction of travel and receives the support of Members, because, as I have previously said, we must seek to achieve those benefits together.

Mr McGuigan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I thank the Minister for presenting his statement today. It is a welcome announcement, given the fact that the North has only 8% of tree cover, and particularly when compared with 43% tree cover across the European Union. Something did need to happen, and I welcome the announcement. I am sure that its ambition will be widely welcomed, particularly the ambition to plant 18 million trees by 2030.

The statement refers to the Committee on Climate Change and its report from February 2019 on reducing emissions in the North. The Minister will be well aware that tree planting is only one aspect of the complex equation of dealing with climate change. He will be aware that 30% of greenhouse gas emissions in the

North come from the agriculture sector. Is his Department preparing an overarching response to the Committee on Climate Change report, and, if so, when will it be given?

Mr Poots: The Member anticipates the next stage, and I hope to be in a position within two or three weeks to be able to come back to the House and develop further aspects of the green economy that we look forward to utilising to ensure that we reduce our carbon footprint.

Northern Ireland has never benefited from oil, gas or coal, so I have no issue whatsoever with moving away from fossil fuels to a much greener economy. I believe that the opportunity exists for Northern Ireland to be a seller of green energy. We should be looking to get to the point of making such a contribution. The Member is right that the trees will help. We cannot remove all carbon, but, if we want to meet this challenge head-on, reducing carbon is the biggest element, and we will identify and move forward with a course of action over the coming weeks and months. There is work to be done there. I have talked to my Executive colleagues about it and am getting great support from them. As an Executive, we will need to embrace a greener economy and move forward together.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the vast areas of land that government and local councils own, what steps can his Department take to encourage planting on that land?

Mr Poots: The Member is right that there are vast areas. DFI and Minister Mallon have been very willing to cooperate with me. Northern Ireland Water and Transport NI have large swathes of land that we could use, and, all being well, that will be the case. Local authorities also have large swathes of land, as, indeed, do many of the arm's-length bodies.

The actual planting of trees is not expensive: it is the acquisition of the land that is expensive. If we in Northern Ireland were to acquire 700 hectares of land each year, at roughly £25,000 per hectare, that would be a huge cost to us, so the logical thing to do is to use the land that is already available to us. We want to work on that with other Departments. I trust that other Departments, and local authorities, will do that and I believe that they will. Aside from that, we need to work with and develop the relationships that we have with the rural community in order to encourage further tree planting on privately owned land.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister. I agree with what he has already said; that the management of forests and woodlands is an undervalued area of the economy and is also critical to managing our climate impact. Can the Minister outline the contribution that the farming community can make to forest management, carbon storage and floodplain management as a public-good contribution?

Mr Poots: The Member raises important points. The Department is looking currently at how it can actually have a better land-mapping base in Northern Ireland and the opportunity to identify, through the LIDAR scheme, where significant run-offs take place. Those are areas of land on which we would particularly encourage farmers to plant trees. We have also been looking at the areas that are closest to waterways, because, currently, farmers are not allowed, for example, to spread slurry within five metres of a waterway. We need to work with them and encourage them to plant trees around those waterways. That will be beneficial to the farmers because it will reduce opportunities for pollution of those waterways. It will lift a pressure off them that they do not need. We need to support them to do it.

Having a good assessment of land quality, various pH levels of the soil, and so on, will allow farmers better opportunities to acquire fertiliser, slurry and all that, and apply it appropriately. Planting trees on key areas of land will also assist farmers to do things in a more environmentally friendly way. This is an area where we can develop win-wins with the farming community, whereby they get appropriate support and the public get a reduced carbon footprint, better and cleaner waters, and better air quality.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for his statement. He quoted that £60 million to £80 million is generated in the local economy from forest-based recreation and tourism. Where did he get those figures? Have they been tested for accuracy?

Mr Poots: The figures come from my Department, which has done a course of work on the matter. There are just short of 5 million visits to forest parks each year. Those who use them include walkers, cyclists and the film industry. There are splendid waterways in forest parks. We have some real gems in Northern Ireland. I think of the forest parks at Castlewellan, Tollymore, Hillsborough and Gortin Glen. There are many more. I will probably offend people by not mentioning the

beautiful forests that they have in their constituencies.

Mr Stalford: Belvoir.

Mr Poots: Belvoir is an inner-city one, which is a real asset to the city that many cities do not have. There are many forests, which are a huge asset to the community and economy.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his statement. He has guessed already — of course, correctly — that some of us are more enthusiastic about this statement than the previous one. In that regard, he is right. It is commendable that the Minister's personal interest in and commitment to the Forests for our Future programme are clear from the text of the statement. We genuinely thank him for that. I add a very swift follow-up to a question that I asked as a supplementary. It may have been the Minister's first Question Time when he promised us an announcement soon on afforestation. We look forward to future timely delivery on environmental protection and other matters.

Action plans and working groups have been referred to, but how best can we ensure that the plans are future-proofed and wildlife-proof with regard to broadleaf species, for example, and local wildlife?

Mr Poots: I certainly think that, particularly for the small plantings that local farmers do, you would give them support only in instances where it is broadleaf species as opposed to commercial species. We have a very successful commercial arm in our Department that grows trees that are harvested and replanted. That still has significant benefits, but nonetheless we want to increase the amount of broadleaf trees that are being planted. Much of the work that we will do with, for example, local authorities and private landowners will be very much based on broadleaf trees.

The Member mentioned sustainability. There are some soils that we will not want to plant on. The more peat-based soils already have a lot of carbon sequestration. Consequently, we do not want to plant trees on that, because it could have less sequestration in that instance. We need to plant trees in the appropriate soils to ensure the sustainability that the Member referred to.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important to highlight, as the Minister has, the important role that landowners play already in this area. Does the Minister

believe that more could be achieved through the environmental farming scheme?

Mr Poots: The environmental farming scheme has been a good success thus far and has had good uptake. As we move forward, we will seek to make amendments and changes to it to deliver further success. One of the things that I really want to look at is what are termed riparian boundaries, which are the boundaries along the rivers. I indicated earlier that that will reduce run-off towards rivers from the land; where the land is rich in nutrients, more of those nutrients will be kept in the soil. It is important to keep those nutrients in the soil and away from the waterways. Appropriate tree-planting may be something that could assist us in doing that.

Dr Archibald: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. I also thank him for the response to my question for written answer on the issue. I am pleased to see that plans for an afforestation strategy are being progressed as one of the measures to tackle carbon emissions, and also the commitments around broadleaf native trees to support our biodiversity.

Following on from a previous question, tackling the climate emergency requires a framework for climate action, which would be underpinned by legislation. Of course, the Assembly has voted to declare a climate emergency and to implement the measures on climate in New Decade, New Approach. Will the Minister advise of the time frame for bringing forward a climate change Bill, please?

Mr Poots: That is a course of work that my officials are looking at, but we are not in a position at this stage to give an outline of that programme. I will bring forward other issues that will demonstrate our commitment to having a quality, enhanced environment in Northern Ireland, where we will have cleaner waterways, cleaner air and a reduced carbon footprint. All of that is achievable by taking necessary steps. Some of those will be small steps and some will be larger, but nonetheless we will take them. This is one of the important steps that we are taking. I trust that the BBC, for example, will recognise that this is an important step and not a waste of money; there was a programme that went out, I think, last week that slammed the Assembly for wanting to plant trees.

I think it put the cost of planting at something like £10 per tree; we can actually acquire whips for around 50p per tree. It is not a huge expense to the public purse; it is a benefit to the public purse. I trust that the BBC will reflect on

the stupidity and the fallacy in a lot of the issues that it raised with the New Decade, New Approach deal and our commitment to planting more trees and making a better environment in Northern Ireland.

1.15 pm

Mr Givan: I welcome the Minister's statement and the announcements in it. It is vital that we enhance the natural habitat because of the benefits that that will bring to the environment and to people by getting them out of their workplaces, off their technological devices and embracing the natural habitat around them. The Minister's statement is very welcome.

I am surprised that the Minister did not mention Hillsborough forest park in his constituency when he named a number of others. I welcome the ongoing work at Hillsborough forest park. The community is looking forward to the improvements and the greater accessibility that they will provide. Will the Minister indicate whether he has any plans to widen community accessibility to Forest Service's assets so that, when it comes to the organisation of events, we maximise the number of people who can avail themselves of the facilities and reassure the community that Forest Service is not just about trees?

Mr Poots: In recent years — predating me — the Forest Service has been engaging better with the community. For years, it was just about the trees and not about the people who were benefiting from it.

The Member mentioned Hillsborough, and the biggest problem in Hillsborough is that we are attracting twice as many people as was predicted. The number of people who want to come to those facilities is phenomenal. I was recently in south Tyrone — Brantry — and saw the wonderful new paths that have been created there, which are being well utilised by members of the public. One thing that really encourages me is the number of disabled people who previously could not use the paths but now can, as the paths have been made disabled-friendly so that people can travel around those forests. That has been a huge success.

Many people engage in mountain biking in forests, and, while it is a sport that I would not necessarily recommend, because people sustain a lot of injuries, people get real enjoyment from it, and Forest Service has been more facilitating in recent years on that front.

In the summertime, there are youth camps in some of our forest parks, and young people spend a number of days there. What better place could they be in than in that natural environment, enjoying the biodiversity and the beautiful rivers that run through our forest parks and seeing all the wildlife. I want to encourage that so that more young people get out into our forest parks. They need to be a resource for all of our community. We are building towards that, but there is more work to be done.

Mr McAleer: The last Member to speak referred to something that I was going to mention. I note and welcome the fact that we have some five million visitors to forest parks each year, who generate £60 million to £80 million through forest-based recreation and tourism. There are some good examples, and I am glad that the Minister mentioned the Gortin Glen forest park in my area, which is a fantastic example of partnership working between his Forest Service and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, which delivered an absolutely fantastic product.

Just last week, I facilitated a group of people from the Cappagh Village Regeneration Group to meet Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to look at realising the potential of the Altmore forest, which covers 597 hectares and straddles the Fermanagh and Omagh and Mid Ulster council districts. As part of the Minister's Forests for the Future strategy, will he give a commitment to build on the excellent work that he and his Department have been engaged in with councils and local communities? Will he commit to bringing back a report on his plans to build, develop and grow that partnership working?

Mr Poots: I am happy to give the Member the assurance that we will seek to build on that. We could not do it without the assistance of local government, which has really stepped up to the plate in providing additional funding and resource to make better utilisation of the facilities. That is partnership working, and that is how things should work. We have a wonderful asset that is not being utilised quite as well as it could be, and local government is coming in and assisting us in opening up that utilisation. I want to continue to work on those types of programmes to ensure that the public can enjoy that rich asset that belongs to them.

Mr O'Toole: Unfortunately, I did not get in quickly enough to ask the Minister a question on his previous statement, but, perhaps, for both of us, in the interests of agreement, it is a

little better that I am asking him on this one because there is probably more consensus.

I welcome his statement and the sentiment behind it. What conversations has the Minister had or does he intend to have with Belfast City Council? One of his colleagues — I think it was my constituency colleague behind him — mentioned Belvoir forest. This is not just about rural areas. Last year, Belfast City Council passed, with, I think, cross-party support, an initiative to plant a million trees. It would be useful to have an indication from him about what conversations he has had with Belfast City Council about supporting that million-tree initiative and ensuring that urban forests are developed in a way that is beneficial for everyone.

Mr Poots: Current practice is to engage with council delivery practitioners. It has proved very successful, and we have signed a series of memorandums of understanding. Some 85% of those recent memorandums have led to real beneficial change in our forest parks. We have engaged with Belfast City Council, and that engagement will continue to see how we can further enhance that. Belfast, I believe, wants to plant one million trees, and we are more than happy to work with, support, lend expertise and facilitate it in how we can do that. That takes us one eighteenth of the way there; we have another 17 eightenths to go beyond what Belfast City Council wants to do. If every constituency was to plant a million trees, we would be there, so that would put four million in Belfast. We understand that there is less land availability there, and a million trees would certainly be a huge asset to the city of Belfast. We are happy to work with the council on that.

Mr Harvey: Will the Minister outline what schemes his Department has in place to encourage afforestation?

Mr Poots: There are a number of schemes with the local farming community. The Forest Service has been constantly and steadily planting trees and seeking to acquire land to plant trees. Acquiring land is so expensive that it holds back the work that you can do on afforestation, so I am looking at a change of focus and at how we can identify pockets of unutilised land in a range of Departments other than DAERA to see how we can quickly get wins on afforestation. Some of those land portions could be substantial, particularly lands relating to Water Service. We need cooperation from all those organisations, and I trust that we will get it. We will continue to introduce

schemes that will encourage and support the planting of forests.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome it. Will the Minister expand a bit on whether he intends to use councils to encourage local community groups and schoolchildren to roll out this programme? Obviously, this would give them a bit of ownership, and I think that it would be a better programme if he looked towards rolling it out in that way.

Mr Poots: We want to encourage young people to become engaged in tree planting, so we are working with the Department of Education and, because of the colleges, the Department for the Economy. We ought to encourage young people to participate. Young people have a real interest in environmental issues and in having a cleaner, greener environment. Tree planting is one element of that in which young people can get involved. We will encourage that, and we will encourage communities to get involved. Local authorities are much better placed than we are and can assist us in doing that. I am surprised that the Member did not mention the Ring of Gullion forest park, which is another fantastic asset that is used by many, and it is good to see it opened up in that way.

Mr Buckley: I, too, pay tribute to the Minister for this positive statement. I can think of no better place than this beautiful, wood-inspired environment in which to announce positive action on afforestation. I draw particular attention to the Department's forest parks, which he mentioned, and I note that, in my constituency and the surrounding area, we have Peatlands Park and Loughgall Country Park. The Minister quoted visitor numbers of five million and the positive lifestyle and fitness regimes that those parks can provide. In many areas, the biggest obstacle is access, particularly in the winter months. Will the Minister commit to looking at potential ways of opening up parks to provide better access, thereby boosting the numbers who can benefit from those tree-inspired environments?

Mr Poots: We have been able to deliver on that work through engagement with local authorities. I understand that, particularly after the month of weather that we have just had, some of our assets may be a little trickier to access than others. We want to create a facility that is available 365 days of the year. We will be happy to work with local authorities to create opportunities for them to maximise the usage of the wonderful assets in their community.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for this positive statement. It brings to mind the old proverb that was quoted here recently upon the passing of Seamus Mallon:

"A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they will never sit."

We have quite a long way to go before we can be considered great, and, of course, the Minister has a wee bit to go before he can be considered old. He spoke about working with local authorities and other Departments. In particular, what work can be done with the Department for Infrastructure (DFI) on planning policy and with councils as they form their local development plans on enshrining a requirement that some planning applications have to include planting?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for not accusing me of being old yet. It is all relative. To an 80-year-old, I am young; to a 20-year-old, I am old. Given that the Member is closer to my age, he probably does not see the old bit, but young people probably see us as not being young. That is all an aside.

On planning policy, trees are more challenging in built-up areas. I suspect that most Members have been lobbied about getting trees taken away and so forth because of roots growing through footpaths or leaves shedding on people's roofs and causing problems. Tree planting in urban areas and, especially, identifying it through planning need to be done with the appropriate trees, and it needs to be done in a way that causes good impacts as opposed to negative impacts on the people who live there. I do not want to insist on trees being planted, only for somebody to have to whack them all down with a chainsaw in 20 years' time. We need to get it right, and we are happy to work with the Department for Infrastructure on the planning side to ensure that local authorities' planning divisions look at the issues appropriately.

Of course, green areas are left in new-build areas nowadays. It is about how we can plant trees appropriately in those areas.

1.30 pm

Nothing beats driving through a city with a broad avenue that has trees lining either side of it. It looks fantastic. We need to ensure that we can have appropriate planting of trees in our urban areas.

Mr Stalford: I associate myself with the Minister's remarks about the appalling cynicism that we heard on the BBC last week. It was disgraceful. What assessment has been made of the long-term health benefits for the population, particularly in urban areas, as a consequence of planting more trees?

Mr Poots: Everybody knows that trees have major benefits. Trees, as does grass, suck carbon out of the atmosphere and into our soil through photosynthesis. That is of real importance to us.

Getting people out into forested areas, where they can get activity and the air is cleaner, is a real health benefit. Belvoir Park forest in the Member's constituency is such a massive asset to have in any city. Most cities do not have the opportunity to have a forest park contained within them. Some would see that as being valuable development land. We see it as valuable environmental land that is being utilised appropriately in an urban setting.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be delighted to know that, to end on a happy note, I will bring the subject back to Brexit. In his statement, he refers to the successful implementation of rural development programmes. Those programmes will not be successful without European funding. How will the Minister replace that funding?

I have to say that the statement is very welcome, and I welcome the fact that the Minister will take a lead role in the programme, but everything requires money.

Mr Poots: We have argued for £340 million that was associated with the European Union to come directly from Westminster. We have argued that it should not go into the Barnett formula but should be separately apportioned. I understand that the Finance Minister will also make that argument, and I will be working closely with him to ensure that we maximise what we can get. I trust that we will be able to move forward together in the best interests of all the people whom we serve.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is welcome to see him move so swiftly to take action on reforestation across Northern Ireland. As somebody who lives on the boundary of Belvoir Park forest and who spent the weekend in Cregagh Glen, I have to say that the work done by many agencies to look after our spaces is to be commended. It was great to hear that you could plant another

million trees in Belfast, because everybody benefits from having such spaces.

I was going to ask the Minister about the land that has been identified for planting, but I think that he addressed that when he spoke about not planting on land that can release more carbon than the trees would capture. Can he therefore give us any updates on how his Department is working to establish an independent environmental protection agency, as was voted for in the House a few weeks back?

Mr Poots: It is slightly off subject, but it is work that we are looking at. In particular, an Environment Bill will come forward that will, for example, identify the need for replacing the work that the European Commission does. An Office for Environmental Protection will be established as a result of that legislation, and it will be wholly independent of government. That is one of the areas that we are looking at when it comes to the hasty establishment of an independent environment agency.

Mr Allister: While there may be much that is laudable about this proposal, I have heard little reference to costing. Is there a business case for this policy? Does it involve taking any land into public ownership? Is there any assessment of the husbandry costs involved? Those are the sorts of things we have not heard about. If it is, in part, about incentivising farmers to grow trees, what is the nature of that incentivisation and will it have any adverse impact on food production? Finally, is this statement and its proposal, linked to what has been grandly called the Great Ulster Forest, which was in 'New Deal, New Approach', supposedly something to do with the centenary? Is this what the Great Ulster Forest is, or is there are some other proposition and, if there is, what is the relationship between them?

Mr Poots: Certainly, all afforestation will be contained in this, so that we can have a significant planting to mark 2021. I hope it will be there in 100 years' time, still in Northern Ireland, for people to enjoy and celebrate.

The Member asks what benefit there is to the farming community. There is already grant aid for woodland creation. That can be integrated into the whole farm management programme. It complements the agricultural value of the land. In many instances, farmers like sheltered places, for example, for young calves. That can be a real benefit. Providing buffer strips reduces the risk of accidental breaches of water pollution and biosecurity standards. We can

reduce the ammonia loss to the atmosphere from point sources and, in some areas, it will convert steep slopes, which are hazardous for farming on, and areas that are unproductive and currently just growing bracken and gorse, into forest.

Those are all areas where we can work with the private landowners in developing. We can work with our own government bodies in developing some of those areas where land is not well utilised at present. I am sure that the Member would welcome us planting trees on such land and improving the opportunities for capturing carbon and providing environmental improvements as a result.

There is no real dispute that trees are a benefit to community. We can appropriately deliver a better-forested Northern Ireland, in line with our network of hedgerows, and create a really beneficial place, environmentally and aesthetically. By encouraging tourists to come to Northern Ireland, major benefits may be had from a programme like this.

The estimated cost is around £80 million over the 10 years.

Mr Carroll: The Minister stated correctly that removing carbon from the atmosphere is essential. Afforestation obviously provides an opportunity to do so. Does he agree that re-wetting drained bogs and bogland is also essential to tackling climate change, so that they will act as a huge carbon sink?

Mr Poots: It is certainly something that will capture more carbon. It is a little controversial in that it may involve other people's lands and therefore it is something that we need to look at, and we need to work with other people in doing that and exercise due caution in that respect. There is a carbon benefit in further wetting our wetlands, but there are challenges in relation to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes questions on the statement.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it still a rule of the House that, in respect of ministerial statements such as we have just had, when calling Members to speak, priority is given to those who have sat through the debate and that those who flit in and out of the debate go to the end of the queue? Is that still the rule of this House, and if it is, how was Mr O'Dowd called at the point at which he was called?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): You have raised a valid point. It will be referred to the Speaker's Office for further investigation. If it is in breach of any protocol or standard, we will get back to you through the Speaker's Office on that matter. If not, likewise.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is worth pointing out that I was in the House for the entirety of both statements.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is a record kept of Members coming and going. Members will be aware that, in order to ask any question about a statement, they need to be here for the statement itself. Thank you.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Iarraimse ar an Aire Airgeadais Conor Murphy an Bille a mholadh. I call the Minister to move the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): No amendments to the Bill have been tabled. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the eight clauses of the Bill for question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Legislative Programme

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Executive's legislative programme as presented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in their statement of 11 February 2020.

On 11 February, the First Minister and I made a written statement to advise the Assembly of the legislation that Ministers of the Executive Committee intend to introduce in the remainder of this 2019-2020 session. In doing so, we fulfil the obligation placed upon the Executive by the New Decade, New Approach deal to publish a legislative programme within one month of their operation. Within that statement, we also committed ourselves to table a motion for debate on its contents.

It might be useful to Members for me to begin my setting out the principal considerations that informed the preparation for government. The context in which this programme is being presented differs significantly from that of previous years. The continuity in policy and

legislative development, which could normally be maintained between different mandates and sessions of the Assembly, has undoubtedly been disrupted by the hiatus of the last three years.

Ministers have inherited responsibility for a wide range of issues that may ultimately require the enactment of legislation. Departments have not, however, in the absence of Ministers, been able to develop policy, in many cases, to a point where it can yet be translated into firm proposals for Bills. Therefore, there is a great deal of work to be done across Departments in reinvigorating the policy development process, and Ministers are now actively doing so.

Since 11 January, Ministers have been briefing themselves not only on outstanding issues, but also on the commitments arising from the New Decade, New Approach deal and from the Programme for Government, when it is agreed. These are, therefore, still early days, and whilst the Executive is committed to restoring the work of this Administration to full capacity as soon as possible, the situation will obviously determine the size and content of a legislative programme at this time.

We are also, unlike previous years, not at the beginning of a mandate, but over halfway through. That has both advantages and disadvantages. The two years remaining to us obviously place a constraint on the number of Bills that will be able to complete their passage before the end of the mandate. As the mandate progresses, this factor and the risk of nugatory activity will be important considerations.

At the same time, those constraints will place a discipline on all partners in the legislative process — Departments, Ministers, the Assembly and its Committees — to progress legislation efficiently and accord the progress of Bills due priority.

1.45 pm

As we usher in a new kind of politics, we want this legislature to make laws that benefit our people. For the purposes, therefore, of the legislative programme that we have published, the Executive have focused on those legislative proposals that we believe can be introduced as Bills before the summer recess and that, with some degree of certainty, can consequently complete their passage before the Assembly is dissolved in 2022.

I recognise that the programme is focused on a number of Departments and that some

Members with an interest in a particular issue may be disappointed at the absence, at this stage, of legislation relating to those. However, we believe that it is of no benefit to the Executive or the Assembly to include proposals at this time, the timescales of which are still speculative. However, I take this opportunity to assure the Assembly that this programme does not represent the last word on legislation during the remainder of this mandate. It is in no way an exhaustive programme. We are aware that Ministers wish to bring forward additional legislative proposals, which will be admitted to the programme when they have reached a state of readiness and have obtained Executive agreement.

The programme will be monitored regularly to assess progress and to identify emerging legislation. We anticipate, therefore, providing the Assembly with an update and, if necessary, a revised programme at an appropriate point later in the year.

I turn now to the programme. I will briefly set out the purpose of each Bill as set out in our statement. The Minister for Communities wishes to introduce four Bills. They concern welfare mitigation, housing, pension schemes and liquor licensing respectively. Considerable urgency attaches to the welfare mitigation Bill, which would extend the mitigation for the social sector size criteria, otherwise known as the bedroom tax, and the housing (amendment) Bill, which is needed to reclassify housing associations to the public sector in accounting terms and thus remove a potentially considerable financial impediment to the funding of social housing. The pension scheme Bill will provide overdue protection to those who are saving for their pension in master trusts.

Members will recall that a licensing Bill had previously been introduced in the Assembly but fell on dissolution in 2017. That Bill will introduce a number of reforms to address alcohol misuse and support our growing hospitality sector, which plays a vital role in our economy, and acknowledge the role played by licensed premises and private registered clubs in their local communities.

The Minister of Finance has already introduced the first of the two Budget Bills — an essential part of the annual financial cycle.

The Minister of Justice intends to introduce a criminal justice Bill to reform the committal process by abolishing oral evidence at the traditional committal hearing stage and providing clarity regarding the operational outworking of direct committal. A domestic

abuse Bill will create a new domestic abuse offence, which will capture patterns of controlling and coercive behaviour against a partner, former partner or family member. This is a very important issue in our society, and the Executive are firmly committed to confronting it without delay.

Finally, we, as First Minister and deputy First Minister, will introduce three Bills to implement commitments given in the New Decade, New Approach deal. They will make provision for an office of identity and cultural expression, an Irish language commissioner, and official recognition of the status of the Irish language, and a commissioner to enhance and develop the —

Mr K Buchanan: Deputy First Minister, clarity is required regarding "make provision to appoint" and "make provision". There seems to be an administrative error with regard to the three aspects of the Bill. Will you confirm that there will be no difference in the handling of those aspects and that the three items will go through together with the same degree of importance?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, Minister, you have been moving along very efficiently, but it was remiss of me not to say that the Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate, with 10 minutes in which to move and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs O'Neill: To clarify, that is an oversight in the written statement that was previously produced. I am happy to confirm that the three pieces of legislation will move together through the legislative process.

As I said, we will introduce three Bills. They will make provision for the office of identify and cultural expression, an Irish language commissioner, and official recognition of the status of the Irish language, and a commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster-Scots/Ulster-British tradition. Those Bills represent important milestones as we move forward together as a society on the basis of mutual respect and parity of esteem for each other's traditions, national identities and cultural difference, whether British, Irish or newcomer communities.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: Those legislative proposals —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: Go ahead.

Mr Allister: Right. The deputy First Minister said that the three Bills will move forward together. Can she be clear that we should nonetheless expect a separate vote on each at the Second Stage and the Consideration Stage of each Bill, there being three separate Bills? Is that correct?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, three distinct, separate pieces of legislation will come through the House and move together.

The legislative proposals will be subject to the established procedure for Executive referral and consideration before their introduction, and they will, of course, also be subject to consideration in the Chamber and in Committee.

On behalf of the Executive Committee, I commend the legislative programme to the Assembly as a positive start to our engagement and that of the Ministers responsible for the Bills with it on legislative matters and as a framework for the delivery of our shared obligation to improve and protect the well-being of our community. We look forward to providing the Assembly with a report on progress in due course.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I want to make a few comments as Chair of the Committee for Communities. I welcome the Executive's legislative programme. The Minister for Communities attended the Committee meeting last week to discuss her priorities, which include the introduction of a number of Bills before the summer recess. The Assembly will already be aware of the need for a Bill to extend social sector size criteria or bedroom tax mitigation measures. The need for that to proceed via accelerated passage was explained to the Committee by the Minister just a couple of weeks ago. The Committee supports the Minister in that approach, and we hope to see the Bill introduced to the Assembly very soon. As the Minister herself said, it is essential in order to support the 38,000 households that would otherwise be subject to additional housing costs.

The housing (amendment) Bill is yet another priority. Every Member knows only too well the myriad issues on housing. Along with the

extension of the bedroom mitigation measures, a most immediate housing issue facing us is the need to legislate in order to redesignate housing associations as private organisations. We need the Bill to ensure that our housing associations can continue to build social homes and to give the Department the ability to access funds through financial transactions capital. The Committee acknowledges that accelerated passage is, again, a likely approach, and we look forward to the Minister coming to the Committee with her proposals.

Just last week, the Committee received a request for Committee support for a legislative consent motion (LCM) relating to the Westminster Pension Schemes Bill. That is a complex and quite technical piece of legislation. We will hopefully receive a briefing from the Department on that next week and reach a decision on that request soon after.

Liquor licensing reform is also a legislative priority. The Committee will receive a briefing at its meeting this week on the outcome of the most recent consultation on the proposed licensing and registration of clubs (amendment) Bill. I understand that there were over 1,500 responses to the consultation, indicating the level of interest in the legislation. We expect the Bill to be introduced within the next few weeks, and the Committee looks forward to making progress in its scrutiny of the Bill soon after that. There is an eagerness in various sectors to get the Bill progressed through the Assembly as soon as possible, particularly as the previous Committee had made significant progress on similar legislation. However, I caution that there will be no shortcuts in the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. Due process will be followed, and we will take as long as we need, within statutory time limits, to do the job properly.

We know that, on a slightly more distant horizon, the Committee will also be presented with a Bill on gambling reform. The consultation on proposals has just ended, and the Committee will hopefully get a briefing on that soon.

It is encouraging that the Executive have laid out their initial legislative programme. After all, the Assembly is, first and foremost, a legislature, but we have only two years left in this mandate, and the Executive need to exercise caution in their legislative priorities. In doing so, they need to consider the capacity of the Assembly and its Committees to process the legislation. Loading Committees with two or even three Bills at the same time is not good practice. It will not lead to good scrutiny and could lead to bad legislation. I, therefore, urge

Ministers to consult with their respective Committees on the logistics underpinning the timetabling of legislation.

The Committee for Communities looks forward to providing advice and assistance to the Minister on her proposed legislation so that we can get the best outcomes for all the people whom we represent.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Over the past number of weeks, the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has been engaged in discussions on the Agriculture Bill and the Environment Bill. Those two chunky pieces of legislation are going through Westminster, and we are operating according to its timetable.

We have been scrutinising the schedules that relate specifically to here. There are quite a number of challenges. We note, for example, that Scotland has moved ahead with its own agriculture Act. We aspire to that and would prefer to have our own Act here. Given the timescales, however, it might not be realistic to achieve that by the end of the mandate. The Committee will look at the LCM route, which is the option that the Welsh have chosen. The Welsh Assembly inserted a sunset clause into an LCM. That will apply until it gets to the stage where it can introduce its own agriculture Bill.

Last week, we looked at the Environment Bill and heard from a number of stakeholders. Indeed, over the past two weeks, we have had all-day meetings with stakeholders from across the sector. There are quite a number of challenges, particularly in relation to the proposed office for environmental protection in Britain and how that will interface with the proposed new independent environment agency here and the NIEA.

A lot of work is going on. This week, we will begin scrutiny, at a fast pace, of the Fisheries Bill. I want to stress how important it is — Paula mentioned it just now — that the Minister continues to engage very closely with the Committee and the sector as we roll out our legislative work programme.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. This debate will continue after the statement from the Health Minister, which will be taken after Question Time. The next Member to speak in the debate will be Colin McGrath.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Bill of Rights: Panel of Experts

1. **Ms Mullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the panel of experts to assist the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights has been identified. (AQO 222/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): The motion to establish an Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights was agreed by the Assembly on Monday 24 February. The Committee is to submit a report to the Assembly by 28 February 2022. Officials have been liaising with the Assembly authorities and are working up options for the appointment of the five expert panel members to facilitate an early ministerial decision.

Ms Mullan: Will the First Minister set out the areas of expertise that they will cover?

Mrs Foster: It is important that the bill of rights group sticks to the areas specific to Northern Ireland. Other bill of rights processes did not come to fruition, because they became expansionist. It is therefore important that we deal with just the issues. The Belfast Agreement refers to human rights issues that are particular to Northern Ireland. We hope that the appointed experts very much take that into consideration in any work that they undertake.

Dr Aiken: In the discussions about reforming the petition of concern, the First Minister was rightly against the expert input from the Human Rights Commission. Why are you supportive of its expert input in this case?

Mrs Foster: It is not the case that the Human Rights Commission will be the experts. The Executive Office is asking for people to register their interest. We will then choose, probably by a public appointments process, five experts to advise the Ad Hoc Committee. It will then be for that Committee to bring forward a report in 2022.

Mr Durkan: Is all-party consensus a precondition for the bill of rights?

Mrs Foster: I hope that we will be able to reach consensus on that important issue. It is right to go forward on that basis. Many issues can be discussed in the Ad Hoc Committee. The Member will know that, as I said, unfortunately, there was not that consensus in the past, mainly because we looked beyond the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, and it became an expansionist piece of work. There is more than enough that can be done on the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, and I hope that the Ad Hoc Committee will be able to bring its report forward in due time.

Ms Bradshaw: I was on the original bill of rights body in 2008 and met my husband on it, so one good thing came out of it.

What contingency will be in place if there is not that consensus? Will it then fall to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to veto or agree the proposals?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that we are looking down the road at vetoing proposals. We are hopeful that there will be consensus on the Ad Hoc Committee after the consideration of expert advice. I am sure that it will take advice and evidence from a wide range of interested parties on the important issue of rights, issues of poverty and issues that affect people across Northern Ireland.

The Ad Hoc Committee has a lot of work to do. We hope to be in a position to appoint the expert panel in the near future, once we have received guidance from our officials.

Northern Ireland Centenary 2021

2. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made on preparations to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021, as referred to in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 223/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Member will be aware that the United Kingdom Government made a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach deal to work with the Executive to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021 and to make available funding to mark that centenary. This will include facilitating national recognition and international awareness of this significant anniversary, as well as exploring projects such as a shared history fund, the

restoration of Craigavon House and the Great Ulster Forest.

Mrs Cameron: Does the First Minister agree that the centenary in 2021 could be used as an opportunity to better promote Northern Irish businesses and local tourism on the international stage?

Mrs Foster: I very much hope that that is the case. We know that Scotland has made great use of its Homecoming event to promote Scotland as a place not just to visit but to invest in. Like many, I am sure, I look forward to marking the centenary. I recognise, of course, that there are different views and narratives around the centenary of Northern Ireland, but it is an opportunity to do as the Member said and encourage investment to build our economy and do more on the tourism product.

Mr McCann: The Minister is aware that there are many different narratives around the formation of the Northern state. That difference of experience will extend to the occasion of its centenary. How will the Minister ensure that all perspectives are affirmed, accommodated and acknowledged?

Mrs Foster: The Member will recognise that, during the decade of centenaries, there has been appropriate recognition of the different narratives and views, sometimes through lectures and sometimes through symposiums. It is an opportunity. Of course, he will view the centenary in a different way from how I will view the centenary. I will view it as a time of celebration, but I recognise that there are different views and narratives around it. I am sure that there will be events planned to reflect and look back on all those issues.

Mr Allister: Does the First Minister agree that the extent to which the Executive Office is permitted to optimise the celebrations of the centenary will be a telling test of the platitudes of her partner in government when they talk about respect and a shared future? In that regard, will the Executive Office lobby for the proclamation of an additional public holiday to recognise the centenary? Will the Executive Office seek and support a visit by Her Majesty to address the Assembly on the occasion of the centenary of the formation of the Northern Ireland Parliament? Can the First Minister deliver on those things, or will she be thwarted by the Sinn Féin veto?

Mrs Foster: There are a number of questions in there. On the issue of respect, I hope that, as a joint office, we will be able to show respect to

all the communities in Northern Ireland. Of course, a lot of us in Northern Ireland will want to mark the centenary in a meaningful and celebratory way; that is acknowledged. Having said that, I acknowledge that there are others who take a different view. I, personally, would very much welcome a visit from Her Majesty The Queen. I welcome many royal visitors to Northern Ireland. It is a great privilege of my office to do that. I recently welcomed the Duchess of Cambridge to Northern Ireland. I would be absolutely delighted if Her Majesty The Queen were to grace us with her presence during the centenary year; I would be hugely supportive of that.

It is important that we use the centenary in a meaningful way, that we allow it to unite rather than divide us and that we look to the next period of time in Northern Ireland, when, I hope, we can build a stronger Northern Ireland economically and move forward for all of our people.

Mr Butler: How far behind does the First Minister think our preparations are when compared with those for the centenary of the Ulster covenant?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that we are behind at all; in fact, the fact that the United Kingdom Government made commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' indicates that they want to work with us to make sure that we mark the centenary in an appropriate, inclusive way that makes a difference for people in Northern Ireland. As I have said in all my answers, I recognise that, for those of us who value Northern Ireland and its place in the United Kingdom, this is a time of great celebration but there are other narratives and views on that, and I am sure that there will be appropriate mechanisms through which everybody in Northern Ireland will be able to have their voice heard.

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Executive Commitment

3. **Mr Muir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what commitment they can give that the Executive, and all Ministers, will act to implement the revised protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. (AQO 224/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Our priority is to ensure that the needs of Northern Ireland are understood and reflected as we move forward. Although political differences exist, the Executive are working together to ensure the best possible outcome for people living here. We are working to ensure

that our businesses do not face increased costs, especially in terms of movement of goods North/South or east-west. We are in a unique position here, and we have concerns that the interdependencies between the protocol and the trade negotiations are not fully recognised. We have requested a meeting with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, where we will raise those concerns. We will also wish to ensure that our economy can flourish. That will require that the United Kingdom Government uphold their commitments to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the whole of the United Kingdom internal market and to engage with us on measures to protect and strengthen the UK internal market.

Mr Muir: As the First Minister will be aware, Europe is watching carefully to ensure that everyone lives up to their obligations arising from the protocol, which is not a backstop but, indeed, a full stop. How does the First Minister reassure the European Union that there will be no bad faith in the context of the view most recently expressed by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, when he stated that he would resist pressure to implement checks at Northern Ireland ports and had no intention of putting infrastructure in place?

Mrs Foster: I am sure that the Member is not suggesting that we should fetter the trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and from Northern Ireland into Great Britain, because that, of course, would mean that we would not have a border on the island of Ireland but would have a border between different countries within the same United Kingdom. That would be wrong, and it is important for us to engage with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster so that we can find out what he means when he says that there will not be any barriers and then work through all of that. We are, of course, aware of what the European Union says about the matter, but we are very interested to hear what the United Kingdom Government have to say on the issue because they are the negotiating power in terms of Northern Ireland. Therefore, we need to hear what they propose in relation to the protocol and, indeed, in relation to our free trade agreements.

Mr Robinson: What is the First Minister's view of the United Kingdom mandate for negotiation that was published last week?

Mrs Foster: I am sure that the Member has read in great detail the United Kingdom's

mandate for negotiations. It is very high-level. The deputy First Minister and I noted, when the mandate was published, that it is crucial that we are involved in the decisions that affect directly the people and businesses of Northern Ireland, and, although political differences exist on the issue of leaving the European Union, we are working together as a whole to ensure the best possible outcome for the people living here. We need to have our voice heard, and the deputy First Minister and I have requested an urgent meeting with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster so that we can raise our concerns and so that we are heard to make sure that there is not a cost put on our businesses — indeed, costs that could then be transferred to our consumers. We want to make sure that we have the answers to that, and that is why that meeting with the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP is important.

Mr O'Toole: First Minister, we have heard conflicting and contradictory things from different parts of the UK Government regarding unfettered access for Northern Ireland to Great Britain markets and contradictory things about the upholding of the protocol that was signed and is now binding in a treaty that is legally held at the United Nations. Given that, will the First Minister agree with me that by far the best outcome for Northern Ireland from the trade talks between the UK and EU is the closest possible relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, and will she and the deputy First Minister make those representations on behalf of Northern Ireland?

2.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. The best possible outcome, of course, is a free trade arrangement between the United Kingdom Government and the European Union. That would do away with the current protocol and mean that there would be free trade with the European Union right across the United Kingdom. We will work with the Government to try to achieve that. Whether the European Union will be interested in it is another matter. Certainly, that is where the Government wish to go, and I, for one, will support them in so doing.

Ms Sheerin: North/South trade is vital to the economy. It is worth billions of pounds in goods and services. Will the Minister outline how the protocol will address concerns about the cross-border provision of tradable services and the sharing of data across the island?

Mrs Foster: Services are not covered by the protocol. We very much want that area to be

dealt with so that east-west and North/South services can continue. The Republic of Ireland is an important destination for our goods and services, but the Great Britain market is by far the largest market for those goods and services. In 2017, it was worth £24.6 billion to the Northern Ireland economy, compared with £6.5 billion for the Republic of Ireland. It is very important that we have all those relationships — North/South and east-west — dealt with in a way that does not damage the economy and helps businesses that want to grow.

Mr Nesbitt: Does the First Minister agree that it is matter of regret that we do not have a Northern Ireland-specific shortage occupation list, as recommended by the Migration Advisory Council as early as May 2019? Will she call on her colleague in the Department for the Economy to rectify the situation as a matter of urgency?

Mrs Foster: As I understand from the recent announcement by the Home Secretary, she has agreed to a Northern Ireland shortage occupation list. That will come forward now. As the Member will know, that announcement was made very recently. We support the fact that there is that shortage occupation list. We will want to ensure that it is populated in the most timely manner possible. We would like it to be an iterative list so that it can be changed over time as opposed to being stuck in time. Certainly, the Department for the Economy will work with the Home Office to ensure that that list is put in place.

Refugee Integration Strategy: Update

5. **Dr Archibald** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the refugee integration strategy. (AQO 226/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Work to develop the refugee integration strategy is under way. We are drawing on the excellent work, knowledge and experience that has been gained from successfully resettling a significant number of people under the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme. A two-day innovation lab on the long-term integration of refugees is being held with stakeholders next month, and the outcome will inform the final strategy, which will, of course, be consulted upon fully.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. Organisations such as the Red Cross and Barnardo's have done excellent work to support refugees and asylum seekers. As the Minister outlined, the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme has really informed the work

that is being undertaken. Will she further outline the expected time frame for the consultation?

Mrs Foster: As I said, an innovation lab will take place, which will inform the strategy as it moves forward. That is a new and innovative way in which to look at the strategy. I welcome the fact that that is being done.

The Syrian scheme has worked very well. I will remember the very first Syrian refugees who came to Northern Ireland in October 2015. The then deputy First Minister and I went to welcome them to Northern Ireland. It is great to see that so many have integrated right across Northern Ireland, not just in pockets. To date, 1,818 refugees have been received here. The two-day innovation lab will look at how we plan for the long-term integration of refugees and interact with stakeholder groups that help them. The Member mentioned the Red Cross. There are many other groups as well. That outcome will inform the final refugee integration strategy, which, as I said, will be consulted on fully. It is a new way in which to do things, and it is one that I welcome.

Victims' Payment Scheme: Funding

6. **Mr McGuigan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to identify the source of the funding for the victims' payment scheme. (AQO 227/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The victims' payment scheme policy and legislation was designed in Westminster. We are jointly of the view that the scheme should be funded from Westminster, and we continue to make that case. The Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme will provide much-needed support for those who have been left with life-changing injuries as a result of a Troubles-related incident. It is not possible for the costs of the scheme to be absorbed into existing budgets. The Finance Minister has met Her Majesty's Treasury and noted that the source of funding must be confirmed urgently.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that answer, what discussions has she had with the NIO to ensure that it meets its obligation for the victims' payment scheme?

Mrs Foster: This will be a continuing conversation with the NIO. I met the new Secretary of State for only about 20 minutes on a party-to-party basis; it was not through the joint office. We will seek to meet the new Secretary of State about the matter. Normally, a

business case that sets out estimated costs would be developed alongside the policy and legislation. As that work has not been undertaken, the Executive Office now has to work on it to develop the likely costs. I know that some colleagues in the Executive Office Committee are questioning and asking about the costs, but we have to try to work out the costs without a business case and are trying to make guesstimates about where we are going to be on those issues. We will continue to engage with the NIO.

Ms Armstrong: I, like the First Minister, share concerns about where the money is coming from. Have there been any discussions about which Department will take forward the scheme, given that it is, effectively, a pension scheme?

Mrs Foster: Yes, it is effectively a pension scheme. There have been some initial discussions involving, I think — I do not have the briefing in front of me — the Department for Communities and the Department of Justice; those two Ministries have been involved in the initial discussions. Those are the sorts of issues that we really have to get to grips with very quickly if we want the scheme to be up and running within the appropriate timescale.

Mr Clarke: I am sure, First Minister, that you share my enthusiasm that we have, at last, got something for innocent victims and survivors. Some of the questions have focused on budgetary aspects. When do you think that the first payments to the innocent victims will start rolling out?

Mrs Foster: We have a timescale; I think that the aim is to implement this by the end of May of this year. That is a very challenging timescale. Of course, officials will work to try to deliver on that. We anticipate about 2,000 recipients, but, again, we will not be clear until people start coming forward when the scheme opens. The payments will be between £2,000 and £10,000 per annum, but, due to backdating, costs will be initially high and then will taper off to a certain level. We have a lot to do on the scheme, but, as I said in my substantive answer, we jointly take the view that, because it is a Westminster policy — it was designed at Westminster — the funding should come from Westminster to deal with it.

Mr Beattie: Minister, as you know, many of the innocent victims and survivors suffer psychological injury. Some of them have been told that they will not be eligible for the scheme because they were not present when their loved one was murdered. Will you engage with the

Victims and Survivors Service to clarify that and ensure that the information that it is giving out does not meet that?

Mrs Foster: Again, the eligibility was set by the Westminster Government. My officials are working through the eligibility issues at the moment. The Member mentioned one that I know will be of concern to many. Indeed, we are looking at whether that is something that can be dealt with in a discretionary way by the board. It is all at a very early development stage. I am sure that the Victims and Survivors Service will be happy to engage with any of the groups or, indeed, individuals who want to make representations about the matter that he raised.

T:BUC: New Strategy

7. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their commitment to developing a new Together: Building a United Community strategy to replace the current strategy when it ends in March 2021. (AQO 228/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Together: Building a United Community strategy, published in May 2013, reflects the Executive's long-term commitment to building a more united and shared society. The New Decade, New Approach deal reaffirmed our continued support for the strategy.

Ms Flynn: In my West Belfast constituency, the Colin area has benefited greatly from the Urban Villages initiative in the T:BUC strategy. Does the Minister believe that the delivery of the T:BUC strategy is improving community relations?

Mrs Foster: I absolutely do. Sometimes, it is hard to quantify the impact that the T:BUC strategy has had, because it is difficult to measure when people are integrating in a more serious way than they did in the past. We have made significant progress on a range of headline actions. The Member mentioned Urban Villages. Colin is one Urban Villages area. The others are EastSide; Ardoyne and Ballysillan; the Markets, Donegall Pass and Sandy Row; and the Fountain and Bogside in Londonderry. All have had a lot of funding, and much progress has been made in all of those areas.

We have the T:BUC camps programme, with over 20,000 taking part in 570 camps since 2015. That has been a huge success with all of those young people. We also have 10 Shared

Neighbourhoods, which is a housing project; Uniting Communities through Sport and Creativity; and the Peace4Youth programme. One of the areas in which we would like to see more progress is the shared education campuses programme. That has taken a little bit more time than we would have liked, but we hope that progress will be made in the near future.

Mr McNulty: A few weeks back, I was lucky to be at the T:BUC Uniting Communities through Sport and Creativity event in the Armagh City Hotel. It was attended by Ulster GAA, the IFA, the IRFU and the PeacePlayers, amongst others. Will the First Minister give her assessment of how successful that programme is? Are there any plans to continue or increase funding to that programme?

Mrs Foster: We intend to continue with the programme. I am very pleased that the Member had the opportunity to see it for himself. Sometimes, Members hear about programmes in the House but do not experience the ways in which they make a difference, particularly to young people. I am pleased to hear that the Member took the opportunity to go down and see what goes on.

Uniting Communities through Sport and Creativity uses sport, physical and creative activity to break down divisions and deliver good community relations. It is not about people saying that something is not for them or that something does not belong to their community, so they will not engage. It allows people to be proud of their sport and to share that pride with young people who might have never engaged in it. That is really positive and really good, and we hope that it will continue.

Mr Speaker: I call John Blair, with one minute on the clock.

Mr Blair: Given the need to address the needs of all communities, not just two communities, will the previous T:BUC strategy be subject to independent audit and assessment?

Mrs Foster: I am sure that, like all of our programmes, it will be subject to independent audit. It can be difficult to put into value-for-money terms the impact that such schemes have had on different communities. I agree with the Member, of course, that it is not just about the two communities. It is also about our newcomer communities and making sure that they feel integrated and that there is an increase in respect for each other. It is about an increase in shared space that people feel

comfortable with and an increase in reconciliation, which is what we all want to see.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions. Question 8 has been withdrawn.

2.30 pm

Maze/Long Kesh Development

T1. Mr Catney asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that they recognise the potential of the Maze/Long Kesh site, as stated in their written answer to his question, whether, albeit that there is no agreement on the site's future, they have had any conversations with each other to try to come to an agreement. (AQT 161/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As the Member said, we absolutely recognise the potential of the site. Previous Ministers in this Office recognised the potential of the site as well, and we hope to see a resolution so that the site can be developed. I know that the issue is something that the Member's city council is keeping a very tight eye on, and it will want to see the site developed. Of course, the timeline for development will depend very much on whether we can reach resolution around the huge issues with the site. He will be aware of the history of the site and of what happened there, but it is important that we try to move forward.

Mr Catney: First Minister, is it fair for me to ask that both you and the deputy First Minister make a commitment to having a conversation about the future of the site and the economic corridor where it is situated? Yes, that conversation should take into account the site's historical significance.

Mrs Foster: Yes, we will be having conversations about the site, because, as we have acknowledged, it has huge potential. It is a question of whether we can find a way through what are very difficult issues. It is important that all the stakeholders be brought along with us. On the previous occasion, people felt that they were not involved in discussing the site's development. They felt excluded and were concerned about what was going to happen at the site. There is very much a case to be made for the discussion being an inclusive one, and, if we can, one that brings everybody along with us.

NDNA: UK Government Commitments

T2. **Mr M Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what actions have been taken to ensure progress on the UK Government's commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. (AQT 162/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, the United Kingdom Government made a large number of commitments in New Decade, New Approach. We have mentioned some of them today around the centenary, and there are also commitments around previous agreements, economic commitments and financial commitments. We will be engaging with the Northern Ireland Office to take forward those commitments to make sure that they are delivered on.

Mr M Bradley: Does the First Minister share my view that early delivery on those issues will build confidence and help to stabilise the Assembly and the Executive?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I absolutely agree with that. We as an Executive have tried as far as we possibly can to deliver on what was allotted to us in New Decade, New Approach. We have later today a debate on the legislative programme, which was to be brought at a particular time, and we tried to make sure that that happened. It is incumbent on the United Kingdom Government to make sure that they follow through on the various commitments that they made to Northern Ireland, which are contained in annex A of 'New Decade, New Approach', so that we can all move forward and stabilise the Assembly and Executive.

Coronavirus

T3. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work in the Executive Office and the other Departments in relation to coronavirus and how it has developed over the past few days. (AQT 163/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I am very pleased to tell the House that we have had a very close working relationship with the Minister of Health since coronavirus became an issue. On Saturday, the deputy First Minister, the Health Minister and I held a conference call with the Taoiseach, his Minister for Health and the Chief Medical Officer in the Republic of Ireland, because, of course, our designated case came through Dublin Airport. We therefore wanted to make sure that the protocols that were put in place are working, and they are. It is very good to hear that. The conference call was also to make

sure that we have close cooperation and continued conversations about the issue as times moves on.

Mr K Buchanan: Can the First Minister give us an update on how the joined-up approach between the Northern Ireland Assembly, other regions and COBRA all link together?

Mrs Foster: As well as speaking to colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, the deputy First Minister and I joined a COBRA conference call today with the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly, the Chief Medical Officer and the Minister of Health. I am sure that when the Minister of Health gives his response to the question for urgent oral answer later, he will give more details of that, but suffice it to say, it is important that we continue to support the Health Minister and all our Executive colleagues because this is becoming an issue not just for him but for the whole Executive as to how we move forward. Earlier today, our civil contingencies were put in place. They are now being called together and are in operation because we want to make sure that the Executive are ready to deal with whatever comes to us in relation to the coronavirus, COVID-19.

RHI Report

T4. **Mr Muir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to address the Assembly about any issues that arise from the renewable heat incentive (RHI) report, which is to be published on Friday 13 March. (AQT 164/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, the report will go to the Department of Finance on the Thursday or Friday, I am not sure which. I understand that Mr Justice Coghlin will make an announcement on the afternoon of 13 March. We will then consider that report, and I further understand that the Minister of Finance will come to this place and answer any questions in relation to that.

Mr Muir: Does the First Minister not agree that it is important that the first comments and response from the leaders of our Government will be in this place and that they will be able to answer questions from MLAs in this Chamber?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, it is a public inquiry entirely independent of government. The Finance Minister in post at the time gave the terms of reference and asked for

the inquiry. Therefore, it is important that he is given his place. The report will come back to the Department of Finance. I am sure that there will be ample opportunity for me, the deputy First Minister and, indeed, anybody else to answer questions in relation to the inquiry, as it is quite a long report, I understand, although I have no knowledge of what will come forward in relation to a wide range of issues. I am sure that we will be before this House to answer questions in relation to that matter.

Veterans

T5. **Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions and consultations they have had with the British Government to determine the time frames and processes that need to be set out for the provisions for veterans in Northern Ireland. (AQT 165/17-22)

Mrs Foster: There is a wide variety of matters that are not the responsibility of the Executive but are the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government in relation to the issues that the Member raises. Therefore, we will want to ensure swift delivery. We welcome the commitment by Her Majesty's Government and, indeed, the Ministry of Defence to work with us, but we will need to see timescales and structures put in place, and we will work to ensure that those come forward as quickly as possible.

Mr Frew: As the military covenant and other provisions talked about have to be implemented by Departments, and given the public utterances by some Sinn Féin Members that they do not support the implementation of the armed forces covenant, how can the Executive assure me that the armed forces covenant will be implemented and that the veterans of Northern Ireland will receive the provisions that they deserve?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, the veterans' commissioner will be appointed by Her Majesty's Government. It will be part of the work of the veterans' commissioner to make sure that veterans' voices are heard at the heart of government here in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom. I see that as a very important appointment to give veterans a voice. We look forward to that appointment being made in the near future.

Irish Language Legislation: Cost

T6. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to look the people of Northern Ireland in the eye and tell them why, in their view, they need Irish language and other such legislation, at a cost of £11 million a year, more than they need the extra 275 nurses that such expenditure would obtain. (AQT 166/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Of course, it is not an either/or situation. The Member well knows that New Decade, New Approach was come to by the Government and was a basis for moving forward. The costs that have been set out, which have been the subject of much discussion here and in Committee, are only a marker. Of course, I expect that the actual costs will prove to be much less. The reason that those costs have been put forward is that they are an estimate. They have been arrived at by looking at other commissioner offices to see in what way things can move forward. Officials have been working on the basis of comparisons with bodies such as the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission, and I do not think that it will necessarily be reflective of the offices that we are talking about putting in place. Therefore, I think that his worst fears will not be realised, and maybe he will be very disappointed about that.

Mr Allister: The First Minister said that they are only estimates, but they are her estimates. They are estimates that her officials, on her behalf, placed before the Executive Office Committee, and they are the only estimates that we have. It is surely not true to say that it is not an either/or situation. It is resource money, and therefore a choice is made. Do you spend £11 million on extra nurses as a resource, or do you squander it on the Irish language? That is the choice that the First Minister is making.

Mrs Foster: I have to say that there are many things that I would not spend money on in Northern Ireland, but unfortunately we have to spend it because there is a commitment to do so. I have to say that it is not just about the Irish language. There is also a British commissioner, and I am disappointed that the Member does not think that it is worthwhile having a commissioner to enhance British identity in Northern Ireland. I certainly think that it will be a good thing for those of us with a British identity to have that put in place. There is also the office of identity, which will be there to try to deal with some of the issues that have developed over the past number of years and to help newcomer communities to come into Northern Ireland.

I remind the Member that it was a Minister from this side of the House who brought about more nursing places for Northern Ireland over that period. More nurses were put in place. He should not play politics with nurses. It is very, very poor form indeed, but the Member will continue to do what he always does.

Victims' Payment Scheme: Cost

T7. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an indication of the estimated cost of Westminster's victims' payment scheme and to state who will carry the burden of that cost. (AQT 167/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Member may not have been in the House when I answered the question earlier, but it is, again, a guesstimate, and is based on the fact that we have been unable to develop a business case alongside the policy and legislative development, because it was policy and legislation that was developed at Westminster. We are now trying to put in place a guesstimate for the Committee. We are doing that as best we can, but recognise that it will only be a guesstimate at this stage.

Mr Sheehan: The First Minister could take account of previous payouts and use them as comparators. For example, the PSNI hearing loss claim is running somewhere between £160 million and £180 million, and the estimates for the historical institutional abuse compensation scheme are upwards of £600 million. Does the First Minister agree with me that the payout for the victims' payment scheme is likely to be much more than that?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated to the Member, our estimated costs are high-level at present. We need much further refinement, but we have based it on 2,000 recipients coming forward in 2020-21, which will amount to between £25 million and £60 million in implementation costs. For the purposes of financial planning, we have assumed a cost of £109 million, including implementation costs, over the three-year budget period.

We have put that forward to the Committee. I know that it is frustrating for the Committee that we do not have actual costs based on a business case, but that is the best we can do in the circumstance.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move to questions to the Minister of Agriculture. I call Emma Sheerin.

Sorry, it is the Minister for Infrastructure.

Infrastructure

Speed Limits: Rural Primary Schools

1. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the review of the part-time 20 mph speed limit introduced outside seven rural primary schools. (AQO 237/17-22)

11. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the recent pilot scheme, what are her Department's plans for the implementation of reduced speed limits outside schools. (AQO 247/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will address questions 1 and 11 together, as both relate to lower part-time speed limits outside schools.

As the Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. The targeted reduction of speed that traffic can travel at, particularly near schools, can go a long way to making our roads and communities safer; indeed, some of the key findings of the most recent Northern Ireland continuous household survey indicated that the majority of respondents — 53% — thought that a 20 mph speed limit should be more widely used, with 82% of respondents believing that a 20 mph speed limit should be applied outside schools and three quarters thinking that it should also be applied to an area where children play.

My Department is trialling an arrangement of signs that is intended to allow the introduction of more part-time 20 mph limits at schools. The trial has been under way since September 2018, and my officials are drafting a report on the findings of their review. I am expecting receipt of the findings of the trials in the next month or so, and I fully intend to see what potential there is to build on the work already undertaken.

Ms Sheerin: Given the anecdotal evidence that the Minister pointed to and her expectation that she would have findings within a month, can we expect to see the part-time signage implemented across all schools in the North that are on national speed limit roads, particularly given the safety concerns of those schools?

Ms Mallon: The trial is analysing the effectiveness of the signs and looking for a more economical way of introducing signage that would allow us to extend the roll-out. I am keen to see it. Members of the public want to see it, as do Members across the House. As soon as I assess the findings and take cognisance of my budget, I would be keen to see it rolled out to many more schools,

Mr Clarke: I am sure that the Minister is aware that some schools have come up with their own imaginative ideas, such as school courts in conjunction with the PSNI, to bring in some of those speeders. Some of them speed within the 30 mph limits. The pilot scheme has been running for almost 18 months. Does the Minister share the frustration of others that that is a long time to get to the conclusion of what many of us see as a common-sense approach?

Ms Mallon: It is one of many areas where we are not, perhaps, as progressed as we would like. A lot of that has to do with having no Assembly or Executive in place to drive things forward. I have asked officials to bring to me the findings of that review.

The 20 mph limit is a good bit of the answer, but, like the Member, I agree that there are many initiatives in schools, such as the cycling proficiency scheme, the Active School Travel programme that my Department funds with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and that is rolled out by Sustrans, the learning resources that we apply in schools and the engagement with the PSNI that you reference. If we can bring all those things together, we can absolutely enhance the safety of children at school, and I think that we would all like to work towards that and to see it happen.

Miss McIlveen: Signage is clearly important, and I will continue to lobby for it in my area. However, to effect real behavioural change, we need to be much more effective in visible detection and enforcement. To do that, we need our police on the ground. What discussions has the Minister had with the Chief Constable on road safety?

Ms Mallon: I have requested a meeting with the Chief Constable, because, as Minister for road safety, I take my responsibilities for this very seriously. I will meet him in just a couple of weeks, and among the items we will discuss will be issues around detection. I want to have a discussion with him about drink-driving and drug-driving as well. I am keen to work with all partners, including the Chief Constable and the PSNI, on making our roads much safer.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the Minister's commitment to additional signage and, indeed, to road safety. The Minister may have seen alarming dashcam footage over the weekend of a tourist travelling on the wrong side of the road for a number of minutes along the north Antrim coast. In light of that and other accidents in my constituency, does the Minister intend to place signage in tourist areas alerting drivers to drive in the left lane, as is the case in the South?

Ms Mallon: I have not seen the footage that the Member referred to, but I am keen to work with councils to put in improved signage to enhance road safety where and when it is needed. I am also mindful that the road safety strategy runs out in December this year. I have already asked officials to start bringing me information, because I want to make informed choices so that we can have an effective road safety strategy with actions that not only are deliverable but can bring about a real change in road safety. For that, I mean issues from signage right up to, perhaps, legislative change and changes in penalties for very dangerous driving. I want to take a comprehensive and holistic approach.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for making road safety so important, and I welcome her commitment to be a road safety champion. Will the Minister prioritise the reform of policy on requiring statistics on accidents and injuries before changes can be made to main arterial routes?

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am happy to look at that, and, certainly, I can add it as an agenda item in my engagement with the Chief Constable. I am also happy to follow up with the Member afterwards if there are particular issues, aspects or solutions that you want to bring to my attention for me to try to progress.

Mr McNulty: I applaud the Minister for her efforts to improve road safety for all road users. Will the Minister join me in sending condolences to families from my constituency: the Faxton family, where a mother and son tragically lost their lives, and the Magill family, who were so tragically bereaved at the weekend?

Ms Mallon: I completely send my condolences and thoughts to the families of those who so tragically lost their lives on our roads this weekend, as I do to all families who have lost loved ones in that tragic way. Immediately on taking up office, I had the privilege to meet Mr and Mrs Heaney, whose son Karl tragically lost his life on the A1. Once again, I was struck by

the dignity of those families, who have suffered horrendously, yet strive with such compassion and energy through their pain to prevent any other family going through what they have. That is why, for me, road safety is not just a priority on paper; it is something that I want to work hard at to make a difference.

MOT Exemptions

2. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's plans to introduce MOT exemptions for vehicles of historical interest, similar to recent exemptions in Great Britain. (AQO 238/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member may be aware that, in 2014, the EU Commission published an EU directive that set out the standards for roadworthiness testing across the European Union. It included a number of compulsory provisions that had implications for motor vehicle testing across the UK. As part of that directive, member states were authorised to exempt vehicles of historical interest from roadworthiness testing if they were at least 30 years old, no longer in production and had not had substantial changes made to them. Before that, across the UK, only vehicles manufactured before 1960 were exempt from periodic testing.

In 2018, Great Britain, following a public consultation, introduced an exemption for vehicles that were manufactured or first registered no fewer than 40 years ago. That has led to a difference in how vehicles of historical interest are treated in GB and in Northern Ireland. My Department ran a consultation exercise in 2019 seeking views on whether the exemption should be introduced here, and I will consider all aspects of the issue, including the consultation responses, to help me decide how best to proceed. It is clear, given the volume of correspondence that my Department has received recently from political representatives and historical car enthusiasts, that there is significant support for a similar exemption here to the one introduced in GB in 2018.

I am aware of the Member's passion on the subject. He is a strong advocate for change. I assure him that I will examine the issue closely, and I hope to be in a position to update Members relatively soon.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for her answer and for the correspondence and conversations that we have had to date. Now that we have a Minister in place and assuming that she has

looked at the scheme and considered the completed consultation, will she advise the House of the timeline to implement the scheme, knowing the benefits of it?

Ms Mallon: As I said, I am going through all of the consultation responses. I am mindful that the majority of them are supportive of change, as are many Members. Members will be aware of the ongoing situation in our MOT centres and that I have said that we need to improve our MOT system. I am mindful that, in doing that, I should take cognisance of this issue. While I cannot give the Member a definitive time frame, I reassure him that I am actively considering it, and I want to be able to bring proposals to the House as soon as possible. I am also happy to meet the Member and any other enthusiasts he wishes to bring with him.

Mrs D Kelly: I have no doubt that the Minister will take the same swift action on that issue as she displayed in ordering lifts for MOT centres. I commend her for keeping drivers on the road through temporary exemption certificates (TECs). Is the Minister considering biennial testing, as is the case in the Republic of Ireland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question and her long list of compliments. Yes, I want to consider all options on how best to deliver vehicle testing services. No decisions have been taken, but I am looking closely at that option.

Mr Lynch: The Minister answered my question, which related to a timeline. She has no timeline at this stage.

Mr Speaker: Well done.

Mr Muir: Action on this will help the MOT situation. The MOT situation that Northern Ireland has endured over the past number of weeks has been nothing short of a debacle. Is the Minister prepared to ensure that all reports — investigatory and audit — are published in full so that the public can understand exactly what happened?

Ms Mallon: I was very clear when I became aware of the scale of the MOT situation that I would make four commitments to the public: to ensure the safety of DVA staff and customers; to do what I could to minimise the disruption to customers; to conduct two independent reviews to understand what happened and to best advise me, going forward, on how to get our MOT centres back and fully and safely operable as quickly as possible; and to look at what we

could do to make sure that such a situation never happened again. The first of the independent reports was conducted by external independent engineers. The executive summary of that report is on my Department's website. The second independent review is an audit review. It is to help me to understand what happened, who knew what when and what action was taken. It is being completed. Once it is complete, I will publish it on the departmental website. It is important that, as Ministers, we have full openness and transparency and that we clearly set out how we arrived at the situation and what steps we are putting in place to make sure that it is never allowed to recur.

Infrastructure Priorities: NDNA Commitments

3. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will ensure commitments made by the UK Government in New Decade, New Approach are reflected in her Department's priorities. (AQO 239/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since taking up post, I have made it clear that modern and sustainable water, drainage and transport infrastructure are key enablers of ensuring regionally balanced growth, improved connectivity and improved well-being for all. The projects highlighted in the New Decade, New Approach agreement will be transformational, and I intend to progress each of them as far as possible within my two-year tenure. However, in doing so, I must be mindful of the immediate need to invest significantly in our waste water, public transport and road infrastructure, which have suffered from a legacy of years of underinvestment.

Those are the building blocks that need to be in place if we are to take forward the Executive's wider commitments on health, housing, the economy and climate change.

3.00 pm

The extent to which I can progress the important projects is largely in the hands of the UK Government and the Executive's Budget. To that end, I met Minister Robin Walker and had a positive, helpful conversation with the Secretary of State for Transport. That is in addition to making several representations to our Finance Minister. In all those engagements, I sought reassurance on the priority of investment in our critical infrastructure. I am hopeful that the UK Government step up to meet their responsibility and commit the necessary funding required for the delivery of the New Decade, New Approach

agreement. I hope that my Executive colleagues realise the need to show the public that we can deliver in this place and that they can help me to secure the funding required to invest in our critical infrastructure that will allow us to meet our ambitions collectively, delivering for people right across Northern Ireland.

Ms S Bradley: Does the Minister recognise that a critical piece of infrastructure for the South Down constituency is the delivery, finally, of Narrow Water bridge? Will she commit to visiting me and members of the Narrow Water Bridge Community Network, who are eager to see the project delivered as soon as possible?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. I certainly recognise the local support for a bridge at Narrow Water to link the communities on both sides of the lough and to take full advantage of the tourism potential in that cross-border area. I thank the Member for her invitation. I can confirm that, following her request, I will be coming to South Down on 18 March, when I will be delighted to meet her and members of the Narrow Water Bridge Community Network to discuss the progression of the Narrow Water bridge project.

I know that the Member has been advocating for her community for some time and that she is determined to see progress made. I am keen to discuss the project with the incoming Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, and I am also keen to continue engaging with local communities as we firm up a proposal. It is very important to me that I fulfil my commitment to addressing regional imbalance, and it is important that we as an Executive deliver for the people of South Down.

Mr Dunne: Will the Minister commit to making the maintenance of our roads a priority in the forthcoming year? Maintenance is an ongoing issue, especially resurfacing, weed control and street lighting. I extend my thanks to the Minister for her efforts to restore the 12,000 lights that have been out across the Province. That work is in progress, and I understand that contractors have now been tasked with getting on with the job.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I firmly believe that, if we as an Executive do not get the basics right and do not show that we can make a change to people's daily lives, from fixing potholes to switching back on street lights, we cannot genuinely and with any validity ask them to have confidence in us to deliver on the strategic, visionary projects that we are all committed to. Going forward, I

have been making representations to get right the big visionary stuff that is needed, but I also need to be able to maintain, and keep investing in, our public assets. That means our roads and our street lights. I am keen to work with Executive colleagues to make that happen.

Mrs Barton: Minister, we have an inadequate infrastructure maintenance budget for roads and street lighting and insufficient funds to provide a sewerage system that meets the current demand. Of course, public transport is, as you know, also under stress. Do you accept that it is irresponsible of politicians to make flagship capital commitments whilst failing to ensure that the basic infrastructure needs are addressed?

Ms Mallon: What we have to do is absolutely have ambition to deliver flagship projects that will transform lives, tackle regional imbalance and tackle the climate emergency, but, as I have said, we also need to do what people consider to be the basic things right. What I am keen to do, and I have made a number of representations to the Finance Minister on this, is to get the right resource budget and the right capital budget to be able to do both. I look forward to 11 March in Westminster, because we hear a lot from the British Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, about "turbocharging" infrastructure across the water. There is also a reference to "turbocharging infrastructure" in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which the British Government have signed. There are many projects that I could be investing in, from roads maintenance to the modernisation of the public transport network. I look forward to the Barnett consequential that will come across so that I can try to do all those things to make a difference to people's lives.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Minister acknowledge that the projects that are identified in New Decade, New Approach do not represent an exhaustive list of the Department's priorities, as it should also strive to progress other vital projects such as the A4 southern bypass and the upgrades to the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen road?

Ms Mallon: I recognise the very strong local support for a number of roads projects and the many benefits that they can bring. Ideally, I would like to be able to do all those things, but I have to operate within the practicalities and realism of a budget. I encourage the Member to make as many positive representations as possible to the Minister of Finance to help me deliver on many of the projects that he has

cited. He is right; New Decade, New Approach contains a very ambitious infrastructure programme, but there are many other projects that are maybe not seen to be flagship but could make a difference in communities' lives, particularly in connecting them and addressing years of historical neglect. I am keen to work with the Finance Minister and all my Executive colleagues as we deliver on our Programme for Government.

Mossley West Railway Station: Parking

4. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for additional parking at Mossley West railway station. (AQO 240/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since 2013, my Department has delivered an additional 3,400 bus and rail park-and-ride spaces across Northern Ireland. Those have proven to be highly attractive and have played a central role in the growth of passenger numbers on our rail services. In October 2018, my Department approved the business case for an additional 235 spaces at Mossley West. However, following a request from Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, it became necessary to review that plan in order to incorporate links to the council's greenway strategy. While that has delayed the project, it should ensure a facility that better meets the needs, not only of those who drive to our park-and-ride sites but of those who walk and cycle.

It is exactly that more holistic and joined-up approach that I believe is essential if we are to encourage and enable more people to travel sustainably. The revised plans for Mossley West are now well advanced, and the land purchase is due to be completed by 31 March 2020. However, while I recognise the importance of park-and-ride facilities, the fact is that severe constraints on budgets over recent years have resulted in significant pressures across my Department. I have already stressed the need for investment in infrastructure to my Executive colleagues, and, as the Member will be aware, infrastructure is key to connecting our communities and it is the bedrock on which we should build our ambitions for the delivery of radical change to improve lives.

Mrs Cameron: The Minister will be aware of the very serious parking issues around the Mossley West area, especially at The Glade. It has been like that for many years and the extent of the problem is so serious that there are pensioners' bungalows that the emergency services cannot get access to. There is a real

issue around parking and access to those homes. I very much welcome the additional parking spaces, for which I have been lobbying for many years. Will the Minister come and visit the area to see the situation for herself and take into account that any proposal coming through planning may have a detrimental effect on the residents and cause further traffic congestion, given that the area is also on a bus route?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. It is my understanding that, following representations from local councillors and MLAs, waiting restrictions were introduced in the immediate vicinity of Mossley West station in 2016, the purpose of which was to discourage all-day parking by commuters and, it was hoped, improve access for residents. I was not aware that there are continued significant issues there, so I am happy to take the Member up on her invitation, see it for myself and meet some of the residents. I suspect that the planning application will go through the local council, so I encourage the Member to keep an eye on that, and, hopefully, any issues can be resolved there.

Ms Anderson: Car parking is an issue for many across the North. I want to talk primarily about the train station in Derry and the north-west transportation hub phase 2. I know that you have budget limitations, and we all know that there is a £600 million hole in the Executive budget because of British cuts. Notwithstanding that, as the Minister, will you prioritise the train station in Derry for phase 2 of the north-west transportation hub that has to be completed by the summer?

Ms Mallon: One of my priorities is tackling climate change. I have been very clear that I believe that investing in the public transport network is key to that. I am on record saying that our rail network has been underestimated and underinvested in. I have also talked about the need to tackle regional imbalance, so I very much see rail projects in the north-west as hitting a number of those priorities. I am keen to get to the north-west to engage with local communities and see for myself. I want to do what I can within the two years and within the budget. I reassure the Member that, for all the priorities I have set out, I recognise the importance of this and want to do what I can.

Dr Aiken: I declare an interest as vice-president of Mossley Hockey Club. I would like her Department to ensure that, in the expansion of Mossley halt, a full consultation is carried out with the community, including the hockey club,

on how traffic management will be conducted and, while expanding this great facility, how disruption to a long-suffering community will be diminished.

I would be delighted, along with Pam, to extend an invitation for you to visit both our club and our electric charging unit at the railway station, which you can plug your vehicle into, but it would be better if you came by train.

Ms Mallon: I am happy to take the Member up on his invitation when I am out in that direction, and to meet the hockey club. Of course Translink, in bringing forward this plan, should absolutely engage with and involve the local community to get a solution that meets the needs of most people in the area, if not the needs of everyone.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for her answers in relation to this additional provision in my constituency, and for her reference to sustainable transport. Is this not the ideal opportunity, therefore, to look at expanding our railway provision, where that is achievable and sustainable, like, for example, at the Knockmore line to serve Crumlin in south Antrim and the international airport?

Ms Mallon: I am very much aware of the interest in rail generally, but also in the particular lines and routes that you referenced. Again, this comes down to, "Am I prioritising public transport?". Yes. "Do I see the huge potential in our rail network, not just in tackling the climate emergency but as a tourism offering?". Absolutely. If we are serious about the modal shift of getting people out of their cars, we need to recognise that having a vibrant rail network is key.

As with all these things, the reality of having to operate within a budget that I have not caught sight of yet, but will, hopefully, have a clearer picture of in a few weeks' time, will necessitate that I have to have priorities and make difficult choices. I see our public transport network as about connecting people and tackling the climate emergency and regional imbalance. I genuinely want to do what I can to push that agenda forward.

Narrow Water Bridge

5. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Narrow Water bridge project is a priority for her Department. (AQO 241/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the New Decade, New Approach deal, the UK Government committed to providing additional financial support for infrastructure delivery to enable the Executive to invest in a range of potential capital projects, such as Narrow Water bridge. As I said earlier, I met Minister Walker and our Finance Minister to discuss the issues that we face here and to seek reassurance as to the priority of investment in critical infrastructure. The Irish Government stated their readiness to jointly progress consideration of options for the development of the Narrow Water bridge project at the North/South Ministerial Council. As I said to Ms Bradley, I recognise the local support for a bridge at Narrow Water to link the communities on both sides of the lough and maximise the tourism potential of that cross-border region, whilst also protecting the area's natural environment of historic and ecological significance.

I will press to ensure that we can unlock the tourism potential of this cross-border region. I look forward to engaging with my counterpart in the South to discuss how best to achieve this in the Newry/Carlingford area.

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

3.15 pm

Flooding: Boho, County Fermanagh

T1. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to address the flooding in bad weather in Boho in his constituency. (AQT 171/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Flooding in the Boho area of County Fermanagh usually occurs when water levels in the river there rise after prolonged and heavy rainfall. In the past, officials have considered a flood alleviation scheme for this area, which would involve the diversion of the river and improving the gradient in what is a flat and slow-flowing river. Unfortunately, the costs of this proposal far outweigh any flood alleviation benefits that would be gained. However, my Department has established a community resilience group in the Boho area to help residents to be more resilient to the impacts of flooding. Officials have also developed strong links with other response organisations and the voluntary sector to provide coordinated multi-agency support to individual properties or communities that may be cut off by floodwater and require access to essential services.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for her extensive answer. Does she understand the impact that it is having on day-to-day lives, particularly those of care workers?

Ms Mallon: I do indeed recognise the importance of that. Multi-agency coordination has been ongoing at a local level in relation to the impacts on residents, and as recently as Friday 28 February. A watching brief is ongoing and further calls will be held as required with participants from right across a number of sectors and partners. The Member will know — he has been advocating on the issue — that Fermanagh and Omagh District Council initiated a welfare assistance line to advise that, if there are instances where a carer is unable to access a client's home, they should contact their social worker. I am advised that no calls have been received to this helpline to date, but I am very conscious of the impact on carers.

School Bus Legislation

T2. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of his recent lobbying of her, whether she has considered introducing legislation that would prohibit vehicles from passing stationary school buses when children are getting on and off, and to note that, since he started lobbying her, he has been contacted by teachers from as far away as the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Canada where such legislation is in place and by a school attendant who helps children to cross the road. (AQT 172/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Yes, the Member has written to me on this matter on a couple of occasions. He has been examining best practice from across the globe and sharing that with me, which is very helpful. I also understand how important this is to you as it almost affected your two children, so the issue matters to us as parents as well as elected representatives. I can understand why schools are getting in touch with you about it.

I am reviewing the best practice that you shared with me. You will be aware of the number of road safety teaching resources that we apply to schools. We spoke earlier about the reduction in speed limits and so forth around schools. It is about seeing what more we can do on the issue. I intend to review the range of pressures across my Department and will consider my legislative programme accordingly. I want to consider a range of proposals to see what is doable within these two years. I am keen to continue engagement with the Member.

Mr McAleer: Earlier in Question Time, the point was made that we need to take steps here that improve people's lives. This is one such step, at minimal capital cost, which could be very important. Has the Minister had, or is she planning to have, any correspondence or communication with the Minister of Education on the proposed legislation?

Ms Mallon: To reassure the Member, yes. I have not had engagement with the Education Minister as yet, but I will engage with him and other ministerial colleagues as I start to formulate the road safety strategy. This is an area that I would like to consider as part of that, so, as well as engaging with Members, I reassure him that I will engage with the Education Minister on it.

Permitted Development Rights

T3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will make a decision soon about the removal of permitted development rights for gas and oil exploration. (AQT 173/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This is an area of policy that has been impacted because we have not had an Assembly or a Minister in place. In June 2016, in response to a motion calling for the protection of Woodburn forest, the then Minister, Mark H Durkan, announced the intention to remove permitted development rights for petroleum exploration and to consult on proposals for legislative change. In December 2016, the public consultation, which was informed by responses received in an earlier call for evidence, proposed a number of options. I reassure the Member that I will be considering the responses to the consultation over the coming weeks.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister outline how many sites are operating under permitted development rights?

Ms Mallon: I do not have that information to hand, but I will follow up in writing to confirm the number of sites with the Member.

A26: Junctions

T4. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she may be aware that the A26, especially the junction at Woodgreen, has blighted the lives of many, with death and serious injury due to road traffic accidents, whether the work that has been completed towards Ballymena at the Cromkill junction has

been successful and could be replicated at the Woodgreen junction. (AQT 174/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A new regional strategic transport network transport plan, as it is very succinctly known, is being developed by my officials, and that will include proposals for future road improvement schemes. I will consider that in due course along with the other competing priorities. The Member referred to a particular road and junction, and I would be keen to have my officials meet him on-site and then they can feed back further information to me on it.

Mr Frew: That would be very helpful, Minister. I thank you for that commitment and I will contact your staff about that. There were plans to implement work at the Woodgreen junction, but that did not go forward because of legal challenges, or challenges that could have become legal. Can the Minister assure us that whatever is implemented or whatever is proposed to be implemented will be robust enough to be successful?

Ms Mallon: I absolutely support and defend people's right to challenge. I think, though, that we need to make sure that, when we are completing all the statutory processes on road schemes or junction work, everything is carried out as robustly as possible so that the decision-making process is robust and we can then get to a point where we are able to progress schemes. It is something that, as Minister, I am mindful of, and, as an Executive, we are mindful of it. I reassure him that there is thinking going on in the Department about those issues, and I am very clear that we need to make sure that all statutory and due processes are always completed to the highest standards to help protect against that.

Glider: North and South Belfast

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that he understands that the business case for the extension of the Glider route to include south Belfast and north Belfast will be submitted in the spring, when the consultation will begin to allow the purple Gliders to be extended across their constituency other than when they are coming or going to their station. (AQT 175/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I know that many in North Belfast are frustrated at the lack of progress on the extension of the Glider. The Member is correct that, as part of the Belfast regional city deal, the Gliders are being progressed. There is a business case being submitted, as he says, in the spring. I am keen to move to public

consultation in the latter part of this year. That is where we can scrutinise a potential route in order to ensure that we make the right decision. I reassure him that, as I said, public transport and connectivity are important. Not many constituencies are as fragmented as North Belfast. We need to work together to change that.

Mr Humphrey: Connectivity is important. The Minister mentioned tourism in an earlier answer. Over the weekend, I visited the great city of Glasgow. The Minister will be aware of the difficulty with road connections between the ports of Stranraer and Cairnryan and Glasgow, and how that impacts on football supporters, travel, tourism and trade. Has the Minister met, or does she plan to meet, her Scottish equivalent in order to address those issues, which are so important to Northern Ireland plc?

Ms Mallon: I have engaged with my Scottish counterpart. We have begun a discussion on a number of areas. I look forward to meeting him in the not-too-distant future to discuss a range of shared concerns and a number of areas where we can work together. I am keen to add that item to our agenda when we meet.

Park and Ride: Moira

T6. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed car park at Station Road, Moira. (AQT 176/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The first business case to build a new park-and-ride facility at Moira station was approved by my Department in June 2016, but it could not proceed because negotiations to procure the land were unsuccessful. A new process was, therefore, undertaken, and a new business case that identified a new site was received in October 2019. It is anticipated that, when complete, the scheme will provide an additional 340 spaces. However, the procurement process to appoint a main contractor cannot commence until full funding is secured, planning approval obtained and lands acquired. Translink is preparing a full business case for the project. When the land purchase has been finalised, it will be submitted to my Department for approval. I will consider it in line with the budget and a number of competing priorities.

Mr Catney: There is no lighting for around three quarters of a mile along Station Road. Will the Minister give an update on lighting for that stretch of road?

Ms Mallon: I am aware of concerns about the lack of lighting along the stretch of road to which the Member referred. The difficulty is that the criteria on rural lighting, which I inherited, are very clear. Unfortunately, that stretch does not seem to qualify. I am, however, keen to engage further with the Member to see whether there are other things that we could do to try to find a resolution. I hope that we are able to progress the extension of the park-and-ride facility there. Hopefully, that will take some pressure off the parking congestion and ease the lighting issue.

Flooding: Inter-agency Approach

T7. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's long-term plans for funding of an inter-agency approach, given that, during the recent flooding caused by Storm Ciara, an inter-agency tactical response team, comprising the Fire Service, the PSNI, DFI Roads, Rivers Agency and other relevant agencies, was active and was very effective because of the resultant coordinated approach. (AQT 177/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I put on record my appreciation and thanks to staff from my Department and all those agencies who worked together, and they have worked tirelessly because of the relentless flooding and storms over the past four or five weeks. My Department takes the lead on that work and works very well with other agencies. I want that to continue. Whether it is addressing flooding, gully cleaning or preventative work, it will be successful only if we all work in partnership. I want to play my part through my Department's facilitating, encouraging and promoting that partnership working right across the board with all stakeholders.

Ms C Kelly: Does the Minister agree that we need to fund best practice models to deal with flood risk in order to minimise the harm caused to communities by adverse weather events?

3.30 pm

Ms Mallon: Yes. Partnership working and the pooling of resource to try to deal with that are key. I am keen for my Department to play its part, working with other stakeholders.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for one moment while we change the top Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)

Ministerial Statement

Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I start by thanking the Speaker's Office and the Business Office for allowing me to make this urgent ministerial statement.

Further to my written statement on Friday on COVID-19, I wish to give Members a further update on recent local developments. As of today, 150 tests have been carried out, of which 149 were negative and one was positive. As Members may be aware, the Public Health Agency (PHA) has been publishing the number of tests done on a weekly basis. However, with recent developments, we are moving to twice-weekly updates. As such, further information on the number of tests carried out will be published again later this week.

The individual who had a confirmed positive result for COVID-19 on 27 February is receiving appropriate specialist healthcare, in keeping with expert advice and agreed procedures. I understand that the individual followed the public health advice and had self-isolated before seeking medical attention. I am sure that Members will join me in wishing them a speedy recovery. Contact tracing of those who came into close contact with the individual since their return from Italy was immediately undertaken by Public Health Agency personnel. I can confirm that that was completed on 28 February. Those requiring appropriate advice have been provided with it. I emphasise that members of the public who have travelled between Dublin and Belfast using public transport need not be concerned.

Once the details of the case were known, the Public Health Agency immediately contacted their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to provide all relevant information regarding the person's movement while in Dublin. The case relates to travel to an infected area in Italy; it was not linked to a school ski trip. At this stage, we do not believe that there are any wider implications for children or schools. Across the United Kingdom, public health professionals are continuing to carry out enhanced monitoring of direct flights from areas such as northern Italy and Iran. Whilst the situation is, no doubt, serious and while it is far from certain that it will happen, detailed plans are in place in case of the virus becoming a pandemic. Even with the recent case, I stress that we are very much still in containment phase. We have been planning for the first positive case in Northern Ireland,

and we have robust infection-control measures in place that have enabled us to respond immediately to this type of situation. Our health service is used to managing infections, and we are well prepared to deal with this. I assure members of the public that we are taking all necessary measures to minimise the risk to them.

As I have previously stated, it was not unexpected that, at some point, we would have a positive case in Northern Ireland. However, it is important that we continue to remain calm and focused on containment at this point. The risk to individuals in Northern Ireland has not changed at this stage. Based on the advice of the UK Chief Medical Officers, the risk to the UK remains at "moderate". However, we will continue to plan and be ready for all eventualities. As Members will, no doubt, be fully aware, the virus has continued to spread to many countries and regions.

The Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 has been amended by my Department to make coronavirus disease — COVID-19 — a notifiable disease. I thank the Health Committee for its support in doing that last Thursday. The changes came into effect on 29 February 2020. On Friday, I updated the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. On Saturday, along with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, I spoke with the Taoiseach and the Republic's Health Minister, Simon Harris, about the case. We are all in full agreement that the relevant authorities, North and South, should continue to work closely with each other and ensure that any necessary actions in relation to the case have been fully completed.

Members will be aware that the first case in the Republic of Ireland was confirmed on Saturday. I understand that contact tracing of those who may have been in close contact with the individual is ongoing, but there are not believed to be any implications for Northern Ireland. The Health and Social Care Board have been liaising with their counterparts in the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that, where possible, both jurisdictions can make the best use of our collective resources when responding to COVID-19.

My advice to the public remains the same. I urge those members of the public who have symptoms and are concerned that they may have COVID-19 not to turn up at GP clinics or hospital emergency departments; instead, they should contact their GP or the GP out-of-hours service, and advice will then be given on the next steps, including testing, if required. I remind Members and the public that everyone

can play their part. I encourage everyone to take sensible precautions by washing their hands regularly and especially to heed the advice recommended for similar illnesses such as cold and flu: catch it, bin it and kill it.

Northern Ireland now has full access to the NHS 111 helpline on the coronavirus. It is available 24/7 to provide advice. More general advice about the coronavirus is available at the Public Health Agency's website and NI Direct. As the situation develops, my Department and the Public Health Agency will continue to provide updated guidance to healthcare professionals and other Departments and their authorities, including schools, as and when necessary.

I remain in close contact with the other UK Health Ministers, and I will continue to take part in the weekly COBRA ministerial meetings to ensure that our joined-up approach to tackling the disease continues. I can also advise that, along with the First and deputy First Ministers, I participated in a COBRA ministerial meeting this morning that was chaired by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.

My Department, including the health and social care system, has planned extensively over the years for an event like this and is therefore well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the public. My Department has also contributed to the UK-wide coronavirus action plan that is due to be published by the UK Government tomorrow. The document sets out what the UK as a whole has already done and what it plans to do further to tackle the current coronavirus outbreak on the basis of our wealth of experience of dealing with other infectious diseases and our influenza pandemic preparedness work.

The exact response to COVID-19 will be tailored to the nature, scale and location of the threat in the UK as our understanding of it develops. The document will set out what we know about the virus and the disease it causes; how we have planned for an infectious disease outbreak such as the coronavirus outbreak; the actions that we have taken so far in response to the current coronavirus outbreak; what we plan to do next, depending on the course that the current coronavirus outbreak takes; and the role that the public can play in supporting that response now and in the future.

Locally, the Health and Social Care Board is leading on surge planning, working with the health and social care trusts. That will be informed by our existing pandemic flu plans, which are in place across the health and social

care sector. As I have previously advised the House, the regional virology lab in Belfast has been set up for the testing of COVID-19 since mid-February. All positive tests are sent to Public Health England labs for confirmation. My Department, the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board will continue to work closely with the relevant authorities and public health organisations across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to deal with the situation as events unfold.

Across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, planning has been stepped up to ensure a coordinated response from all sectors of government. I am aware that the Executive Office is leading the work on assessing essential services and key sector readiness and convened a cross-departmental meeting on 20 February where information on all possible eventualities was shared. All Departments were asked to review business case continuity plans. A tabletop exercise is planned in the coming days where our planning and preparation across government will be discussed. Internationally and in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, we remain in the containment phase of our response as we seek to prevent sustained community transmission.

Lastly, I thank all the staff who have been involved in dealing with the first confirmed case in Northern Ireland. Their professionalism and dedication is very reassuring. My priority as Minister is to ensure that all effective measures continue to be put in place in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, let me direct my comments beyond the House to the people watching at home and, indeed, to the media reporting on these proceedings. It is vital that we keep taking a balanced, proportionate approach at all times, with our actions based on the best scientific advice. Complacency is our enemy, but so are panic and hysteria. As we have said, we will continue to prepare for all eventualities. When the UK Government issue their action plan tomorrow, there will inevitably be intense interest in what kind of emergency measures may form part of our collective planning. These are measures that we will have in our toolkits to deploy only if required. "If required" are important words in that sentence. The emergency measures in the forthcoming UK Government action plan will apply to Northern Ireland if needed. It is normal practice to plan for worst-case scenarios. That does not mean that these outcomes are expected or likely. That is a really important point to underline.

Our primary focus remains on containment at this time and then to delay and mitigate. There

are risks for society in taking premature actions that are not grounded in scientific advice. We have already heard fears being voiced about our economy and jobs, including in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Obviously, public health protection must come first, and I am sure that all Members will agree on that. However, premature actions in the current situation could also have impacts on our health. I am thinking of the risks from undue panic or hysteria and from social isolation as a result of social distancing.

Let me finish by saying that the people of Northern Ireland are a resilient people. I believe that they are well used to keeping calm during challenging circumstances. I believe that they will not be unduly influenced by rumour or fake news on the internet and that they will rely on the advice and guidance of our public health experts. That is what I am doing, and I believe that the Executive are 100% behind me in that approach. I believe that we should remain both vigilant and determined to tackle the virus with our well-developed plans in place. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister. I have an extensive list of Members who wish to speak. I want as many Members as possible to get asking questions of the Minister, so I remind Members to please ask questions and not make speeches.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for addressing the House on the issue. We know that it is a very fluid situation and that it can change multiple times over the course of a day, never mind over a weekend or week. I welcome the high-level activity across and between these islands over the weekend and the efforts of you and your clinical leadership team. In keeping with your comments, I acknowledge the efforts of front-line staff.

Given that we are such a small island and that North/South interconnections, travel and interaction are part of the social and economic fabric of this island, as the First Minister acknowledged in the Chamber earlier, will the Minister agree that maximum cooperation and coordination, similar to the weekly COBRA meetings, between the health services North and South is now not only beneficial but essential?

3.45 pm

Mr Swann: I thanked the Chairman of the Committee for his support in the statement. I

also thank him and his Committee members for the support that they have given me and the Department in the past number of weeks, as we were preparing for how to tackle COVID-19.

Minister Harris and I have had very good communication in the past number of days. Unfortunately, due to the updated situation, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Taoiseach, Simon Harris, our Chief Medical Officer, the Republic of Ireland's deputy Chief Medical Officer and I had an extensive telephone conversation on Saturday, and we agreed to continue that communication as and when necessary.

I put it on record that, although we have been involved in COBRA meetings at a UK level, the engagement between the Chief Medical Officers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has been second to none in the past few weeks regarding how we prepare for this and regarding information sharing between the Public Health Agency and the HSE in the Republic of Ireland. At a professional level, engagement has been ongoing for some time, and that has proven beneficial in recent days. The continuation of the communication between us and the Republic of Ireland is guaranteed because it is in all our interests to work together to tackle this.

Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important that it has come to the House today. I put on record our best wishes to the individual who has had the one positive test to date and hope that that number stays relatively low in the near future.

I very much welcome full access to the NHS 111 helpline. What are the limits to and the nature of the information available through the NHS 111 helpline? How concerned is the Minister that people can be infectious before they become symptomatic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Deputy Chair and place on record my thanks to her for supporting the work that we have been doing. I will take her last point first on people being infectious before they become symptomatic. At present, research indicates that COVID-19 is being spread by droplets. It is spread when people cough or sneeze, so it is unlikely that someone who is asymptomatic will spread the disease. It is believed that, to become infected, someone would have to be face-to-face or have a face-to-face conversation with someone who has COVID-19 for at least 15 minutes. It is that period of engagement.

The NHS 111 service has been put in place by the Department of Health in consultation with the Public Health Agency. I was keen to enhance local helpline provision in light of the increased level of public queries about coronavirus and had asked officials to explore the option of Northern Ireland having access to NHS 111 for that purpose. I am pleased that that was achieved so quickly by departmental officials and the PHA working over the weekend. I thank the staff who worked to bring that about in such a short time. It means that people in Northern Ireland will have access to the same level of advice as citizens in England, but, for medical advice and guidance, they will still be referred back to calling their GP. Initially, NHS 111 will provide coronavirus advice and guidance, not medical guidance; it is initial information that will be given.

Mr McNulty: I express my sincere thanks to those in the health service and the Public Health Agency for their work on the issue so far. Will the Health Minister confirm that we have a suitable quantity and quality of testing kits to ensure that we can properly and efficiently diagnose, given the bizarre circumstances whereby the United States did not and given that people will want to be reassured swiftly in the case of suspecting a contraction?

Mr Swann: At present, in Northern Ireland, we can carry out 32 tests a day. We are looking at the feasibility of increasing our capacity to be able to complete several hundred tests a day. All positive results will still be sent to a reference lab in England for confirmation. No matter where it has been tested initially, we always look for that second reference before we declare a positive case, but we react on the presumptive positive. If we get a result in Northern Ireland that indicates a positive test, we will take immediate steps before we wait for the second test.

On testing kits, testing is done in a lab, so it is about how we scale that up. That is what we are looking to do. There are 14 centres across the United Kingdom, with the Belfast virology lab being one, so we have that ability in Northern Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, you talked about appropriate specialist healthcare. Will you outline what exactly that means and who is providing it? If this becomes a more serious issue, what will you do to ensure that there are adequate staff in place given the other pressures in the health service?

Mr Swann: The healthcare is that provided by our health service in Northern Ireland. As the Member may be aware, we have an established infectious disease control facility in the Royal. It has been there a long time, so we have professionals staffing it and scaling it up.

As the number of incidents and positive cases increase, we have a surge plan in place. That plan has been developed with the Health and Social Care Board, working with the Public Health Agency and trusts. That will mean that, as coronavirus and the positive number of cases expand, we will have the capacity in the system to manage them. At some point that may — I say "may" — result in us having to scale back other parts of NHS delivery, but we are not at that stage yet. I do not want to concern people that this will bring the NHS to its knees in a very short space of time. It will not, because our Health and Social Care Board, our Public Health Agency and our trusts are preparing for those surge plans. Across our system, we have a number of negative pressure rooms that are our initial response to locating a positive patient. As numbers increase, we will look to not only expand the use of those rooms across the whole of Northern Ireland but to cohort patients and designate wards, especially for coronavirus-positive patients.

As I have said, one of the things that impressed me last week was that, with all the preparations, briefings and guidance that we have been doing across our system, when we needed to use it last Friday, it came into play and our health service professionals came into their own. That is one of the things. The Chair of the Health Committee, the vice Chair and I have commended and given recognition to the contribution of those who work in our health service and who come into their own in cases like this.

Mr Robinson: Will the Minister give an assurance that staff and visitors are following the correct hand-washing or hand-cleansing protocols to minimise the spread of infection in hospitals and other health facilities in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. As I said in my statement, it is one of the things that we can all do to prevent contamination. I have heard it said that, if you wash your hands with warm water and soap, it is as effective as any other chemical or sanitiser out there. The guidance is to wash your hands for over 20 seconds, but it is not just about washing the same part for 20 seconds; there is a detailed regime that Members should follow, and, I think,

that has been made available online. I would recommend handwashing. The recommended time is 20 seconds, and, apparently, that is the equivalent of singing 'Happy Birthday' twice or 'The Alphabet Song'. Other songs are available, I have been advised [*Laughter.*] The Member makes a valid point, and it is not one that I want to take lightly. Everybody has a part to play in how we come together to tackle the spread of COVID-19.

Ms Flynn: I know that the Minister has updated Members on a few occasions on developments on the coronavirus, which I thank him for doing. Will he identify what steps he has taken to ensure that Departments and the public are fully informed on the guidance and the steps to take? I know that the Minister mentioned the cross-departmental meetings and another meeting that has been planned. Have any specific steps been taken to help inform the public and the other Departments about what they can do practically to deal with this?

Mr Swann: Since coming into post and in the current situation with COVID-19, I have noticed the level of work that goes on behind the scenes, often unnoticed, in the Department of Health. We should be cognisant of that, especially now.

Our Chief Medical Officer has been briefing the royal college. He had a conference call on Friday with principals of schools that had gone or planned to go on trips. We have been meeting at departmental level. The multi-agency civil contingency group, which involves a cross-sector of public bodies in Northern Ireland, met on 20 February. This morning, the Executive Office indicated that there will be a civil contingency group that brings together representatives of every Department in one room so that we can monitor and share best practice across all Departments.

To inform members of the public, we share updates on social media and TV. I am sure that my statement will be broadcast widely. However, as I said in response to the Member for East Londonderry, we all have a part to play. It is about sharing handwashing best practice and making the public aware that, when contacting GPs, it should be by phone. Do not go to a GP practice. Do not turn up at an emergency department. Use the plans and procedures that we have in place, because, to date, they have worked. However, it also involves buy-in and support from the general public.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for the work that he has done. What discussions has he had with the Finance Minister or with the First and deputy First Minister on the potential for more funding if a pandemic occurs?

Mr Swann: That very good point was raised at the Executive this morning. In 2009, I think, the Department received an extra £55 million to tackle swine flu. If we reach that level of infection, the money that will be spent across the UK means that Barnett consequentials will come to us, and we will make sure that the money comes to the Department of Health to tackle COVID-19. From the support and response that I have had from ministerial colleagues, I do not doubt that that will be so.

I am led to believe that a contingency fund sits in Westminster, and, in cases such as this, each Department gets to bid for that money. That was raised at the COBRA meeting this morning, and the Executive will have the option to bid should the need arise for more finances. In tackling COVID-19, we need not worry about finance; we need to be sure how we tackle it.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement and commend his Department on its communication. I, too, wish the infected individual a safe and speedy recovery.

I am sure that the Minister will share my appreciation of all healthcare workers, including those in GP surgeries and community pharmacists, who work daily in the health service to provide these services. Will the Minister provide reassurance that there are sufficient stocks of personal protection equipment (PPE) in the North to deal with an outbreak?

Mr Swann: In line with agreed procedures, I can confirm that front-line Health and Social Care, GPs and pharmacists will have access to appropriate personal protection equipment, as and when required.

When we were looking at a no-deal Brexit, the Department of Health stockpiled a number of essential medicines and various items. Other jurisdictions looked to discharge their stockpiles. We did not, and we will not do so now. Therefore, we have in place stockpiles of essential medicines and PPE. We will distribute it as and when required.

Mr Beggs: The UK's NHS model of giving free health advice brings advantages. Does the Minister accept that it is very positive that we have the free 111 service and free access to

our GP? That should give us an advantage, perhaps over some countries that charge for such access, in trying to control the outbreak.

4.00 pm

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his support of the National Health Service, because access to free medical advice at the point of need, whether at the end of the telephone or in person, remains a cornerstone of Northern Ireland.

I cannot stress this enough: if you have COVID-19 symptoms, please do not go to your GP or the emergency department. Phone your GP first, and if testing is necessary, that will be arranged. The Member makes a fair point. Our National Health Service comes into its own, not just because of its structure but because of the people whom we have working in it. We can rely on them at this time. As the situation develops, their professionalism should not go unnoticed, no matter what level of the health service they work in.

Mr Givan: In his statement, the Minister referred to UK-wide emergency powers that will be revealed tomorrow as part of the action plan. Is he in a position to advise the House what discretionary powers are expected to be taken by Departments in order for precautionary measures to be actioned in the worst-case scenario, which may well have been modelled? I note that the Health Secretary indicated at the weekend some of the measures that may need to be taken for schools and large events. Is the local Health Minister in a position to advise the House of any more detail in advance of tomorrow?

Mr Swann: As I briefed earlier, and this was in my statement, what the document will set out tomorrow is the steps that might be taken. I am not going to go into any detail on what we have specifically put into it. There have been high-level discussions about the action plan, and it is the action plan that will be published tomorrow. There is no indication of additional legislation being introduced, although that is what we have done in the Assembly. Last week, we used an SL1 to make COVID-19 a notifiable disease, and I thanked the Health Committee in my statement for its support in doing so.

Tomorrow's plan will concentrate on what we are planning to do next, depending on the course that the current coronavirus outbreak takes, and on the role that the public can play in supporting the response now and in future.

Ms Mullan: Like others, I reiterate my good wishes to the individual concerned. I thank the Minister for his update. As Deputy Chair of the Education Committee, I ask him to ensure that he does all that he can to keep schools and parents updated, including providing advice on school trips and returning from trips. Parents and schools are rightly anxious, and I ask that you keep the situation under constant review.

Mr Swann: The Member's point is well made. As I said earlier, our Chief Medical Officer briefed, by conference call, a number of school principals on Friday on exactly those points. I spoke to the Education Minister this morning, because I am aware that the Department for Education in England has set up a specific advice line for schools. At this time, I say this to schools and principals in Northern Ireland: if they have a concern, contact the PHA with their queries, because that is where our advice and best-practice guidance is coming from.

The avenues for information are there. We will scale up that information and get it out to the Department of Education if that becomes necessary, but it is something that we are cognisant of, especially for school trips. We know that until the Foreign and Commonwealth Office declares an area out of bounds there are financial implications for schools from cancelling trips, because insurance companies will not pay out until then. Boards of governors and school principals have taken decisions to cancel school trips on their own, but I advise them always to be aware of the health guidance that comes out of the Public Health Agency.

Mr Lyttle: As Chair of the Education Committee, I thank the Health Minister for the engagement that he has had with the Minister of Education. Have specific contact details for the PHA been provided to all schools in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: The contact details of the PHA are widely available. I am not sure whether they have been conveyed specifically to all schools, but, following the Member's query, I will ask.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his efforts to date on this difficult issue. Can the Minister clarify the advice that has been given to GPs by trusts? I understand that they have been told that they need to wear protective clothing, including masks, before dealing with high-risk patients. It is also my understanding that GPs were told that the trusts would supply such equipment, but that has not happened to date.

Mr Swann: I repeat to the Member that the guidance that has been given to the public is that they should not go to their GP practice: they should telephone their GP practice. It is important that I repeat that advice and guidance in response to the Member's query. If people have symptoms of COVID-19, they should telephone their GP, not turn up at a GP practice or emergency department.

The Member asked about the supply of personal protection equipment (PPE). It will be provided to GPs, and they will have access to it as and when required. However, I stress this to the public: if you have symptoms of COVID-19, do not turn up at your GP practice or emergency department. It is a matter of phoning them and making contact, and if testing is required, you will then be advised to go to one of the testing points rather than to a GP practice.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers to the questions thus far. I concur entirely with what the Minister has said about the fine line that we must tread between vigilance and panic. Communication is key to doing that. Is there a bespoke communication plan for the groups of patients with perceived vulnerability or underlying conditions? Or, must they, like the rest of us, rely on going to the PHA website for updates?

Mr Swann: The Member's main point is on whether we have specific guidance for patients with an underlying health condition. At this time, we do not, because we do not know how COVID-19 reacts with certain underlying medical conditions. We know that it is especially virulent — especially bad — for those of a certain age and with specific underlying health conditions, but we have not broken that down into specific causes or conditions. We know that COVID-19 presents as a potentially more significant threat to people with respiratory diseases. I am not aware of specific guidance, but someone will ask the PHA if we have it. If it is available, we will make it available. I say this to the people: in the first instance, go to the PHA website for advice and guidance, and if you think you are symptomatic, call your GP.

Mr Allister: The Minister's statement refers to the emergency measures that will be forthcoming in the action plan tomorrow. It says that they will apply to Northern Ireland. Does that mean that any changes in legislation will apply automatically to Northern Ireland as a UK-wide Act? Does it mean that if any measures are taken, for example stopping large

gatherings, they will apply automatically, or will you or your colleagues have discretion in that regard?

Mr Swann: We have been inputting to the final document, as have the other devolved nations, that is being finalised at this time. The COBRA meeting that we had this morning included the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, as well as our First Minister and deputy First Minister. My understanding is that the action plan that will be developed tomorrow will lay out a number of options and guidance. If legislation is required, we will do all that is necessary to provide for, and prevent the spread of, COVID-19 in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement and join him in wishing a speedy recovery to the member of the public who contracted the virus. Does the Minister agree that people who are forced to take time out of work due to containment should not be out of pocket or financially penalised for doing so?

Mr Swann: I know and fully recognise where the Member is coming from. That is not within my remit at this time. I want to make sure that I have everything in my toolkit and at my disposal to ensure that we can tackle COVID-19 so that it does not become a greater imposition on our society, our economy or our workers in the future, and to take steps now to contain it so that we do not have to go to the next phase.

Mr Chambers: Minister, I place on record my appreciation for the work that you, your Department and your officials have carried out so far in response to the threat of this virus. The Minister will be aware of the decision to postpone Ireland's Six Nations clash with Italy. What advice does he have for organisers of local events and fixtures here in Northern Ireland going forward?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments. On the decision to cancel the rugby, when I spoke to Simon Harris, the Minister of Health in the Republic of Ireland, I learned that it was not a decision taken easily. As we tackle COVID-19, we should be aware that it will be a marathon, not a sprint, because it will be with us for a period of time. What we will say is that organisers of all large-scale public gatherings and sporting events should be mindful of the latest public health advice available from the Public Health Agency's website. At this stage, I do not believe that there is any need to cancel local sporting events or public gatherings, but, based on updated scientific advice, that may

need to be reviewed, and any decision to cancel events or mass gatherings will be assessed at the time, based on the clinical guidance available to me.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's replies so far and, like others in the Chamber, will try to keep to a calm narrative. The instruction is for people to contact the PHA and the website, but it is very much drafted for the individual. Will there be, or has the Minister given any consideration to having, clear contact points across Departments? For example, will leaders in our communities such as schools, the community pharmacy and nursing homes have a clear, accessible, informed contact point, via a Department, in case the PHA becomes a bit of a bottleneck for accessing information?

Mr Swann: In response to a previous question, I outlined how the multi-agency civil contingency group met on 20 February. The civil contingency action plan, which comes under the remit of the Executive Office, sets out how it will disseminate information across the Executive, all Departments and their arm's-length bodies. That is the next phase. It indicates what comes next in how we provide specific advice. Disseminating specific advice to every group and in every eventuality will take time, so, at this time, I recommend that people go to the Public Health Agency's guidance and see how it best fits their approach to their event. There will be concerns as they look to the future in how they organise events and make plans. The plan will be updated when we see how COVID-19 develops over the next days, weeks and months.

Ms Sugden: My apologies to the Minister and the Chair for missing the beginning of your statement. Given that this is a viral strain, I am not sure whether a vaccination is able to be developed. I am sure that the scientists in the House will be able to confirm that for me. I recall that, when there was swine flu, an antiviral medication was made available to front-line staff, the most vulnerable and those with autoimmune diseases. Again, I am not sure whether what was made available then is appropriate now. Have there been any thoughts about that? I understand that, at the time, a significant amount of money was required for that, and there were shortages, which is why they had to prioritise it. If we get to the point where something like that is necessary, has the Minister had any thoughts on how we can ensure that we have the appropriate amount of provision?

4.15 pm

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine for COVID-19 at present. Coronavirus is so new and different that it will need its own vaccine. It is estimated that the first vaccine could be ready in the next year to 18 months, so we have to do everything today using the available weapons to fight the virus. Vaccines take time to create, because the virus needs to be studied while it spreads and potentially mutates, and it must be tested, first on animals and then on humans. On 3 February 2020, the UK Government pledged £20 million to develop new vaccines for epidemics, including vaccines against COVID-19. In the meantime, simple hygiene measures, such as washing your hands with soap and water often and avoiding people who are unwell and displaying COVID-19 symptoms, are the best preventative medicine that we have at the moment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister. I thank him for coming and taking the time to do so. Nineteen Members spoke in the debate.

The next item of business is the resumption of the debate on the motion on the legislative programme. I am due to speak in the debate, so I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we make changes at the Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Legislative Programme

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the Executive's legislative programme as presented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in their statement of 11 February 2020. — [Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister).]

Mr McGrath: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for tabling the motion and fulfilling the obligations placed on them in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. It has been said before — it is worth repeating — that it is very welcome that we are back in this place, delivering legislation that will improve people's lives. That is not before time. Much of the legislation will be brought to the Executive Office Committee, of which I am Chair, for

scrutiny. Committee members were interested to learn just when those elements of the legislative programme process might commence. Perhaps we could get some ballpark timings for the legislation, as that would certainly help the Committee's forward work planning.

I will make a few brief remarks on behalf of my party and my constituents in South Down about the legislative programme that the Executive intend to bring forward. I warmly welcome the swift action taken by the Communities Minister and her Executive colleagues in moving decisively to extend the welfare mitigations. The looming cliff edge at the end of March was causing fear and anxiety for families across the North, and it must be welcomed that those mitigations are to be extended. However, we must look at strengthening those protections and scrapping the most callous elements of welfare reform, including the two-child benefit cap. At a time when so many families are being pushed into hunger, poverty and despair, they should be able to look to our Executive and the Assembly to help them. It is right that we welcome the progress and the safeguards that were secured for our citizens, but it does not go far enough. The Minister must act to strengthen mitigations for families across the North, and I look forward to working with her and colleagues across the Chamber to deliver on that.

I welcome the housing (amendment) Bill, which will make changes and allow us to open up potential and capacity for our housing sector. I take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to the diligent staff who campaigned hard to deliver on this. I am sorry that the impasse means that it has taken us three years to deliver, but I am glad that we are finally here.

The other element of the legislative programme that I want to refer to is the licensing and registration of clubs (amendment) Bill. Many sectors were negatively affected by the political impasse and lack of legislation, none more acutely than the hospitality sector, which has been crying out for years for change. As Hospitality Ulster outlined, the local hospitality industry supports thousands of jobs, contributes £1.2 billion every year to our economy and is a cornerstone of our growing tourism industry.

The commitments in this programme are welcome, but they must be the first step on a journey to modernise licensing laws and unlock economic growth across the North. There is a lot to welcome in the programme, therefore, it would be churlish not to do so. However, while we recognise that the Executive must be

flexible and respond to urgent priorities, there is a lot we are missing.

Our public services are in crisis, and people are struggling to make ends meet across the North. They deserve an Executive and Assembly that do not merely exist but genuinely deliver. After three years of failed politics, people deserve the right to expect better. I recognise that this programme does not represent all the legislation that the Executive intend to deliver, but it is disappointing that there is no commitment to tangible action to address decades of regional inequalities and imbalance. That is felt acutely in my constituency of South Down, where, as my colleague Justin McNulty revealed last week, Invest NI brought precisely zero investors. Addressing the stark regional imbalance across the North has been a priority for the SDLP. That is why our key talks commitments included priorities such as the expansion of Magee. That was highlighted in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, and I believe it was even included in bold as a top priority for the Executive.

It is regrettable that tangible action is not included here.

Mr Speaker: The Member needs to conclude his remarks.

Mr McGrath: How much longer must communities outside parts of Belfast wait for their fair share? We must dream bigger and imagine more. I hope that this programme will allow us to do so.

Mr Nesbitt: I know that the deputy First Minister said that this was not the full legislative programme, so I will be brief. The welfare mitigation/social sector size criteria Bill will extend mitigation on the bedroom tax. The question on that is this: is that temporary or permanent? The answer, I guess, depends on plans for our social housing stock.

I get it that you should not be penalising somebody who is deemed to live in a house with too many bedrooms, when they are not offering them the choice of downsizing. That said, I question whether the bedroom tax is a good idea in principle. If you are building a social house, presumably you need a kitchen, a bathroom, a living area and a bedroom, so a second bedroom is a marginal cost that comes with significant advantages for the long-term usage of that property when the current occupants no longer need it. I look forward to a debate on that.

I note that the Finance Minister will reduce the normal Budget Bills. I am hoping that will be the last time a local Minister of Finance introduces a single-year Budget and that we will move swiftly to multi-year legislation.

The licensing and registration of clubs (amendment) Bill is an opportunity to recognise the growth of microbreweries across Northern Ireland, not least in my constituency of Strangford, and to deal with three points that they would like to see addressed. The fact that they are not allowed to sell online needs to be rectified, as does the need to sell on-site. I have had the pleasure of visiting taprooms in microbreweries in England. It seems to make enormous sense that local breweries should be offered that facility, and the ability to sell at markets, farm fairs and other events. There is a lot that can be done.

Reverting to housing, I should have said that the housing (amendment) Bill's reclassification of housing associations to the public sector is to be welcomed, not least because it will significantly and positively impact on their ability to access and borrow more money and access financial transactions capital. As Minister Murphy made clear a couple of weeks ago, it is highly regrettable that we are returning £150 million of financial transactions capital to the Treasury because we were unable to allocate it.

The domestic abuse Bill is also to be welcomed, not least because it recognises that not all abuse in a relationship is physical. It will take account of controlling and coercive behaviour.

On legislation that will affect the work of the Committee that I sit on, the Committee for the Executive Office, amendments to the Northern Ireland Act make provision for the office of identity and cultural expression and the appointment of the various language and cultural commissioners. The point has been made that, when the Committee was briefed by officials, it was told that a budget of over £28 million had been set aside for the next three years. Apparently, however, this is indicative. I question what value you can place on such indications. Other issues in the briefing paper were also indicative, such as redress payments to victims of historical institutional abuse. Those figures were accompanied by a very detailed and logical narrative. Sadly, there was no narrative attached to the £28.25 million in the briefing document for the office of identity. That was a serious omission. I ask the officials responsible for that document to reflect on why they did not put in a narrative to make clear that those figures were, to some extent, indicative. I

look forward to a debate on that Bill to find out what has happened to, and the implications for, the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. It has cost nearly £1 million, sat for three and a half years and is yet to produce a single word by way of a report.

These new bodies and commissioners probably move us off the grounds of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. I note that, at point 4 under the chapter "Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity", there is a list of eight action points to promote Irish, all under the umbrella of:

"where appropriate and where people so desire it".

I hope that the same test will be applied to the work of the Irish language commissioner, the Ulster-Scots/Ulster-British commissioner and the office of identity and cultural expression.

Ms Armstrong: Like others, I reiterate that it is great to be back in this place talking about legislation. I appreciate that, as the First Minister said, this is not the full amount of legislation that will be taken through. We are very realistic that this is a one-year programme and that the legislation will be brought through by the summer in order for it to happen in the coming year. However, a number of things are missing from this, which is sad to see. We could have had quick wins: for instance, the removal of mineral planning permissions and bits and pieces on driver and bus licensing that the Infrastructure Minister could have taken through. We look forward to seeing what the future plan will be.

Getting back to what is listed, I have a question on welfare mitigation. I think that all of us have this in the back of our mind: where is that legislative paper? We all welcome the mitigations and need those to come forward. The 31 March deadline is pending, yet none of us has seen the paperwork. That was brought up as a concern in the Communities Committee. We appreciate that the Minister is working extremely hard to try to take that forward and that it will be by accelerated passage. That is not the way that we want it to happen, but it is the only way to, hopefully, meet the deadline. However, we have not yet seen the paperwork. My question to the First Minister, therefore, is this: will the legislation be processed in time? If not, I have a great concern that the Civil Service will not be able to cover any gaps. What will we do then?

4.30 pm

Thinking about that sector size criteria, my colleague from Strangford Mike Nesbitt MLA has confirmed that we do have an issue about housing and that is why it is vital that the housing (amendment) Bill comes forward. The reclassification of social housing is very much needed to ensure that co-ownership stays as an option for people and can actually receive funding to enable people to use that to buy a house, but if the reclassification of housing is going to take some time, we are in trouble. The Minister has confirmed that her legislation may well come through before the summer, but it will be about how long it will take ONS after that. That will cause difficulties for us.

On the licensing and registration of clubs, I reiterate what others have said: microbreweries deserve to be treated appropriately. They can provide a tourism opportunity in areas, particularly rural areas, where there are none and can potentially bring jobs into those rural areas. I look forward to that coming forward.

We absolutely welcome the domestic abuse Bill. We take this forward knowing that, finally, we will have legislation that will protect victims and provide a good way for the police to look after people.

We appreciate that this year's Budget Bill will be for one year. We need to see the Programme for Government for that. Once we have this Budget Bill out of the way, we want Committees to start planning for the three-year period, because while we understand that, in this period of time, we have a Budget Bill and a Programme for Government that are set for a year, there is a commitment to a three-year process or longer and we need to be able to plan for that. I look forward to movements being made by the Executive after the summer to bring forward discussions on the future Programme for Government.

Mr Givan: I, too, welcome the opportunity to contribute to this take-note debate this afternoon. It is not just legislation that marks out the effectiveness of an Assembly; it is Ministers taking decisions, Question Time and being able to raise all these issues. Nevertheless, legislation is important where a need is identified, but it should not be legislation for legislation's sake.

I welcome the statement from the Executive Office, within weeks of it having been formed, that outlined a number of key pieces of legislation that can be taken forward. I have no doubt that there will be more Bills. As the Member from Strangford said, other work is needed, including in the Department of Justice

on stalking and on a miscellaneous provisions Bill that can cover areas such as, for example, the Gillen review and a whole host of issues around sentencing that I want to see taken forward. The Minister of Justice indicated that such a Bill will be brought forward. However, it is not cited in this, as that will be the case for others. I welcome the debate this afternoon.

In respect of the Department of Justice, I want to comment on the domestic abuse Bill and the criminal justice Bill to reform the committal process. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom not to have a domestic abuse offence that specifically covers controlling or coercive behaviour or behaviour that amounts to emotional or psychological abuse. Preparations for such legislation were at an advanced stage in 2017 but, unfortunately, the dissolution of the Assembly prevented that legislation being taken forward. Most recently, the Department was moving to make provision for such an offence through Westminster. The return of this Assembly means that the legislation can be made here, and I have no doubt that the Justice Committee will ensure that key stakeholders, voluntary organisations and, most importantly, the victims of domestic abuse can have a voice in shaping the legislation to meet our specific needs.

The importance of having appropriate and effective legislation is illustrated by the Police Service's own statistics, which show that, in the 12 months from 1 January 2019 to the end of that year, there were 18,033 domestic abuse crimes recorded in Northern Ireland, which is the highest of any 12-month period recorded since 2004-05. The number of crimes increased by nearly 15% on the previous 12 months.

Since the first meeting of the Justice Committee, we have made the case for the legislation to be brought through the Assembly rather than at Westminster, and I fully support the inclusion of this Bill in the Executive's legislative programme. When discussing the legislation with officials from the Department, the Committee was concerned that the estimated timescales for legislation to become operational appeared very lengthy and unambitious. However, following the introduction of the Bill, officials have estimated that Royal Assent will be around April or May 2021, subject to the Bill's passage through the Assembly and associated timetables. With awareness raising and training, the offence would be operational by April or May 2022.

I have no doubt that the Committee for Justice will want to carry out robust, detailed scrutiny of the legislation during Committee Stage,

particularly the definition of the proposed offence, to ensure that it is as effective as possible. Progress on that will be a top priority for the Committee. With the will of the Assembly, I am sure that the legislation can be completed in less time than the Department envisages. When the Chief Constable appeared at the Committee recently, he was pressed on the issue, and he reassured us that the PSNI would be able to undertake the training in less time than the 12 months originally indicated by the Department. Last week, at the Committee, the Minister indicated that she hoped to introduce the Bill just before Easter or shortly afterwards. The legislation is needed urgently. The sooner the work can begin on it, the better.

The Committee also discussed the possibility of including an offence to cover stalking because that is connected. However, the Minister indicated that work on that was still not advanced enough and that it would come forward in a separate Bill.

We are also looking at the committal process. That is part of the speeding up of justice. For far too long, we have talked about the slow process of the justice system. This is one element to it that will make progress.

I look forward to dealing with those two Bills in particular through the Committee for Justice, as well as the other aspects of the legislative programme that has been outlined.

Mr Stalford: I do not know whether other Members have referred to it, but, on this day three years ago, we were all standing shivering outside primary schools, asking people for their votes in the Assembly election. It is a source of profound regret that so much of those three years has been wasted. I believe firmly in devolution and the value of having devolved government at Stormont. Devolution allows us to serve the people. Our success in this place shall no longer be determined — and cannot be measured — by simply existing or surviving. These institutions need to be used to deliver for the people.

That is why I welcome the fact that the Executive have outlined the legislative programme. Of course, it is not a comprehensive list but is merely a headline of priorities going forward. I want to mention some of the issues that are of particular concern in my constituency. I am very pleased to welcome the housing (amendment) Bill. It is essential for constituencies, particularly South Belfast. I am sure that all Belfast Members can attest to the need to build more social and affordable

housing. I welcome that because I think that it will be positive.

I also welcome the clarification on the culture package, which was given in the earlier part of the debate by the deputy First Minister. It is important for Northern Ireland society that all cultures and identities are treated with equality, dignity and respect. I come from a British unionist tradition. I have been a member of the Orange Institution from the age of 17. My father was in it. His father was in it. Going back a long way, I am steeped in that tradition. I am proud to come from that tradition. I recognise that other people are steeped in, and proud to come from, other traditions. The success of Northern Ireland, going forward, will be when we create a situation where people feel equally valued and respected in their identity. Therefore, the clarification that was given by the deputy First Minister is important — that we will take that package forward together, with no tradition or identity being left behind.

I very much welcome the proposals that were referred to by Mr Givan on the introduction of a domestic abuse Bill. It is a scandal that this is the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have dedicated legislation in that area. It is right that the Executive have identified that gap and the need to fill it. I look forward to that legislation coming forward and to seeing the discussions and debates taking place in the House. That is where those debates and discussions should have been taking place for the last three years. There is no point in rehearsing the arguments as to how the last three years were frittered away; let all of us across the House now resolve to use the two years that we have remaining and demonstrate to all the people of Northern Ireland the value of having devolved government here at Stormont.

Dr Archibald: I, too, welcome the publication of the legislative programme and the opportunity to contribute to the debate here today. I will, first, speak briefly in my capacity as Chair of the Economy Committee. For the past number of weeks, the Committee has been engaged in what you could call a process of familiarisation with the remit of the Department. We have heard from the various sections of the Department on the programme of work. We have also engaged with the Minister on her priorities. It will be no surprise, however, for Members to hear that a large part of the Committee's work over the next number of months will be focused on Brexit and the impact that it will have across the remit of the Department. We have been advised that there will be a legislative burden associated with

leaving the EU, and we anticipate turning our attention to the scrutiny of that.

As I mentioned, we have engaged with the Minister, who has stated publicly that she intends to legislate for statutory parental bereavement leave. We do not yet have a time frame for that, but the Committee is very supportive and welcoming of that, as, I am sure, most Members are generally. The Committee is still developing its priorities, and it will continue with that work over the next number of weeks and months. Potential legislation will form part of that discussion.

I will speak now as a Sinn Féin spokesperson. Some significant and important Bills are contained in the legislative programme that has been published. Members have already talked about them. Some are very necessary and welcome, such as the Bill in relation to bedroom tax, the housing amendment Bill, and, of course, the domestic abuse Bill. We all welcome and look forward to those coming before the Assembly. I also welcome the legislation to implement the commitments in New Decade, New Approach, particularly in relation to the repeal of the Administration of Justice (Language) Act 1737, the appointment of an Irish language commissioner and the provision of official recognition of the status of the Irish language. Will the First Minister, in her response, indicate the time frame for bringing that legislation to the Assembly?

Finally, it is welcome that the deputy First Minister, in her comments when introducing the debate, indicated that this is the legislative programme as it currently stands and that other legislation for which there is no time frame as yet has not been included. I look forward to a number of other pieces of legislation, particularly in relation to some of the commitments in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, being expedited, not least in terms of my own remit on climate action and workers' rights. I look forward to those pieces of legislation being added to the programme.

Mr Durkan: As our party's social justice spokesperson and as a member of the Communities Committee, my focus will be on the pieces of legislation coming forward pertaining to that. The breadth and importance of the role of the Department for Communities is reflected in part by the fact that the Minister has at least four named pieces of legislation to progress in the near future, all of which have the potential to improve people's lives. As a member of that Committee, I look forward to working with the Minister and others to do just that.

Ms Bradley, the Chair of the Committee, has already outlined in some detail the need for and purpose of those pieces of legislation. The welfare mitigation social sector size criteria Bill will give security of tenure and peace of mind to tens of thousands of households across the North.

We in the SDLP argued that the best way to protect people from the bedroom tax and other draconian elements of welfare reform was not to legislate for them in the first place. That is why we voted against it, but we are where we are, and it is vital that we take all steps possible to prevent people from being plunged into debt, arrears and, ultimately, homelessness.

4.45 pm

It is our view, and not only our view, that the cost of not mitigating the bedroom tax would far outweigh the cost of mitigation payments. Minister Hargey has assured us that existing loopholes that have seen over 250 households not qualifying for the existing mitigation payments will be closed. That is good news, but what about those who have fallen through the gaps? Will they be awarded retrospective entitlement to mitigation payments? What about the massive arrears that many of those so affected have accrued? Those questions and many others will need to be answered as the legislation progresses, and while I recognise that different legislative tools can be utilised to extend other mitigation measures, I wonder whether either Minister from the Executive Office could advise whether new legislation will be required to mitigate the awful two-child rule, which was introduced here only after the original mitigation package had been designed and welfare powers had been handed back to the Tories. We must not be content with merely extending existing mitigation; we must listen to and learn from those who are bearing the brunt of welfare cuts and other experts in that field.

The housing (amendment) Bill is essential to ensure that more much-needed social and affordable homes can be built. We would also like the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to be empowered to get back to doing what nobody has done better since: building houses and providing homes.

The pension schemes Bill is also important legislation — it will not get the same headlines as the others — but I wonder whether there is any intention — perhaps one of the Ministers can clarify — to bring forward new legislation or amend existing legislation to reduce the pension age in the North.

I declare a pretty tenuous interest in the liquor licensing legislation. It is ridiculous that here, in 2020, we are still stuck with antiquated licensing laws that will, once again this Easter, hamper our hospitality industry from maximising the benefit of a holiday period. The legislation is not just about addressing that; it must identify and prevent practices that could and do contribute to alcohol misuse and its associated issues.

There is other stuff that we would like to see in there. We welcome the fact that the New Decade, New Approach deal included childcare as an Executive priority and would like to have seen it matched, or mentioned at least, in the Executive programme. We recognise that the programme is not exhaustive, and we are happy to work in our various Committees with the respective Ministers to see how it can be added to and enhanced.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas agus as an rún seo. I thank the Ministers for tabling the motion on forthcoming legislation to the House.

I have to say — Mark will not be surprised at this — that the SDLP also voted against protecting the most vulnerable. The party claim to be the champions of the most vulnerable. SDLP Members also voted against cancer drugs, special educational needs and so on and so forth.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, you are grand.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I have heard enough.

So, I am glad that they are now on board. One thing I do agree with the Member on is that I do not like the term "welfare reform"; it is very American and masks the impact of Tory austerity on people's lives.

This morning, I noted Michelle O'Neill, joint First Minister, saying that the small window is what it is but that she was hopeful that other legislation would come forward. I was delighted to see the Minister for Communities come straight out and along with the support of her Executive colleagues, and that is the entire Executive, look at protecting those most vulnerable on the mitigations on what has been known as the bedroom tax.

The legislation that is coming forward on the reclassification of housing associations is really important because it means that the money from financial transactions capital, particularly for co-ownership, which we talked about during last week's Budget Bill debate, will be spent. It will be spent delivering much-needed homes, and it also means that housing associations will remain private so will be able to build with half their own money and half from the Department rather than all the money coming from the block grant. I, too, would like to see the Housing Executive building again in conjunction with housing associations because I do not think that there is enough housing to meet needs, irrespective of any bedroom tax. I think that it is a horrible piece of legislation to hurt those who are most vulnerable.

I am concerned about an element of the proposed pensions Bill, so I would like to see more information about the automatic enrolment of employees. Maybe that will happen in the legislation that comes forward. In particular, I am worried about those who are on zero-hours contracts, and that has not been mentioned in any great detail. With a lot of these entitlements, people on zero-hours contracts do not enjoy the same benefits as the rest of the employees. That will certainly have an impact on them once they reach pension age.

I think that it is particularly good that we are looking at a suite of legislation on language and culture. Like many Members, I listened to Christopher — he is not in the Chamber at the minute — talk about his background. The repeal of the 1737 legislation will be very welcome, particularly for children or anybody who has to go through court, including families dealing with wills and things. I do not think that people fully understood the iniquitous impact that that legislation had, particularly to people's identity and their ability to express themselves in their first language.

Legislation on liquor licensing will be greatly welcomed, particularly by the hospitality industry. With potentially more hours, I would like to see better protections for workers, particularly those who are on zero-hours contracts. I know that this will not cover all workers, but it would certainly cover those who are involved in the hospitality industry.

I am not on the Justice Committee, but I am really interested in and quite supportive of the domestic abuse Bill. I agree with the Chair of the Justice Committee, Paul Givan, when he said that he would to see other legislation coming forward, and I would particularly like to

see legislation on upskirting and other offences, which we do not yet have in full. There are a lot of pieces of legislation that I do not foresee taking a lot of time. Kellie Armstrong mentioned the two bits of legislation that we will be dealing with on the Communities Committee that are going forward through accelerated passage. That is not anybody's first option; I think it is a last resort. It was agreed that we would do that, but Paula Bradley, the Committee Chair, said that any future legislation that comes in front of our Committee will certainly be scrutinised, and I welcome that. I also welcome the raft of statutory rules that will come forward. We will be able to scrutinise those and, potentially, private Member's Bills that may amend current legislation. It is a good start, but I think the sentiments are that we are looking forward to seeing more.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to respond to the Executive legislative programme up to June 2020. The absence of an Executive for over three years has prevented MLAs from delivering the legislative reform necessary to improve the lives of people across our community, and I welcome the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach commitment to publish a legislative programme of reform.

The legislative programme of reform is, of course, not the full list of Bills that will be implemented in this mandate, but it represents an important start. I particularly welcome the decisive action taken by the Justice Minister to bring forward the domestic abuse Bill. That legislation will recognise that not all abuse is physical and will create a new offence of domestic abuse. The new offence will apply when there are two or more occasions of abusive behaviour against a partner, former partner or family member engaging in controlling or coercive behaviour or behaviour that amounts to psychological, emotional or financial abuse, and it can also include behaviour that is physically violent, threatening or intimidating. I also welcome the committal reform Bill proposed by the Justice Minister. It will speed up justice and deal with delay in the criminal justice system in order to deliver better for victims of crime.

I acknowledge proposals to create an office of identity and cultural expression. I recognise the importance of culture and identity to many in our community and, of course, the creative, positive force that cultural expression can be for a community. The Alliance Party, however, believes that there is an opportunity to widen the scope of the office to one of cultural expression, diversity and inclusion, and to

ensure that every identity in our society is respected and celebrated.

The Alliance Party also believes that the work of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition should be promptly concluded and published for consideration and implementation by an office of cultural expression, diversity and inclusion.

Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland has a rich linguistic heritage, and I sincerely hope that the commissioners for Irish and Ulster Scots will enhance access to the language, arts and literature of this region in a positive, proportionate and inclusive manner. I am somewhat unclear about how a duty in relation to Ulster Scots pertains to the Department of Education, and I await further information from the Minister of Education.

It is concerning that, despite the declaration of a climate emergency by the Assembly, the Environment Minister has not prioritised the enactment of a climate change Bill and an independent environment agency Bill. It is disappointing that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have not prioritised a legislative amendment to remove the exemption of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order, but I hope that those measures can be introduced in due course. All are legislative measures that would have set out the intention of the Executive Office and the Environment Minister to deliver a more united and sustainable Northern Ireland for all.

There is also, of course, an opportunity for MLAs to introduce private Member's Bills, and the Alliance Party will seek to play a constructive role in that, particularly for integrated education, early education in care and animal welfare. The programme is, however, an important first step towards restoring the legislative function of the Assembly, and I look forward to playing my part in ensuring that it is a legislative programme that delivers better for everyone in our community.

Mr Gildernew: I, too, welcome the publication of the legislative programme today. Although there is no legislation that directly impacts on health, some measures that are being introduced will have a significant impact on the physical and mental health outcomes of many vulnerable people. I will draw particular attention to two of those measures: sector size in housing and the binning of the bedroom tax, as is being introduced by Minister Hargey; and

the domestic abuse Bill that is being introduced by the Minister of Justice.

The Committee is working on a series of forward work imperatives, and we will look at those in due course, but I do not think that anyone will be surprised to learn that we expect legislation to come our way that relates to public health and Brexit and as a consequence of ongoing inquiries.

As Sinn Féin health spokesperson, I look forward to working on legislation that comes forward in future programmes. Certain measures would be very useful in addressing health inequalities. One is supporting and encouraging a higher uptake of breastfeeding, which produces better outcomes. That is long overdue. We also want developments on carers' rights to come from the 'Power to People' report that was commissioned by Michelle O'Neill when Minister of Health. We are acutely aware of the need for a single piece of legislation to provide clarity on safeguarding legislation, as well as providing additional protection for older members of our community.

5.00 pm

Mr Allister: Obviously, the output of a legislature is its key function. A Member who spoke some time ago told us that what we had in the document was the headline of priorities. Indeed. We find that, in the primary office of the Executive, that of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the only priority that will make its way towards the statute book is the language package. Whether you call it a trilogy of acts or a trinity of acts, unholy or otherwise, there is no mistaking the fact that the centrepiece of the legislation is the Irish language legislation, the very thing that, Mrs Foster told us, would not happen on her watch and that was rejected in February 2018. Yet, here it is as the centrepiece of the package. Yes, the package might be wrapped in a few tartan bows and a few items of that nature, but the core and the heart and the fundamental is the Irish language legislation. You have only to compare the two proposed Bills for Ulster-Scots and the Irish language to discover which really matters. The Irish language commissioner, of course, is a commissioner with bite, an enforcer whose main function will be:

"to protect and enhance the ... use of ... Irish ... by public authorities"

in the provision of their services. The poor old Ulster — well, he is not even called the Ulster-Scots commissioner; the "further ...

Commissioner" is the grandest title that he gets. The poor old further Commissioner can "produce and distribute publicity material". Wow. He can:

"increase awareness and visibility of [Ulster-Scots] services which are provided".

No enhancement; no adding to; just taking the static of what is there and increasing awareness of it. Whereas, the enforcer in the Irish language has all those additional powers. It is clear that it has been packaged in that way to try to deceive some of the gullible that it is not really what it is, but, of course, as we come to debate it, we will have the opportunity, I hope, to further explore and expose those very issues.

I have one outstanding question for the First Minister. I have been tabling questions about this since the Assembly came back, and there seems to be a great diffidence about answering them. I asked this simple question: will there be a public consultation on this trilogy of legislation? I did not get an answer, so I tabled it again, more precisely. I tabled it as a priority question for written answer. It was due to be answered 10 days ago, but it has still not been answered. I ask the First Minister this today: will there be a public consultation on this trilogy or trinity of legislation, or are the public just being taken for granted? Do their views not matter? Will this be steamrollered through because it was the price of getting back into the House and of getting back into the First Minister's limo? Is that the truth of it? That seems to be it.

Of course, I have already raised the question today of the cost and the squander. It is squander. There is not a person in the House who does not adequately speak English, yet, in another mechanism, we will spend hundreds of thousands probably —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Allister: — maybe millions, on interpretation and translation that no one needs.

Mr Carroll: There are things to be welcomed in the legislative programme, but I find it disappointing how the Executive plan to address some important issues. As was mentioned, despite declaring a climate emergency in week one, there is no pledge to legislate for measures to tackle the crisis. On welfare, you would be hard-pressed to find anyone who says that this brutal system designed by the Tories does not require

mitigations. Only last week, we heard that universal credit was directly connected to the rise in clinical depression. Under the current mitigations package, too many people are not being protected. People face a six-week wait for benefits. We have had a surge in the number of food banks and in food poverty, with single mothers feeling the sharpest effects, being punished by the brutal and misogynistic two-child tax cap.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. He quite identifies that welfare "reform", as it is called, was designed by the Tories. Does he agree with me that, while it was designed by the Tories, it was delivered here by Sinn Féin and the DUP and the attack by the Sinn Féin North Belfast Member on me is merely another attempt to erase their fingerprints from it?

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for his point. I agree with him: it was voted for by those parties.

Those on the personal independence payment (PIP) face traumatic application processes carried out by private companies that have been the subject of incredible allegations, such as ignoring medical evidence. Many are denied PIP by those same companies, only for them to win appeals because it is found that they do need the support. The average waiting time for an appeal is an incredible 33 and a half weeks and much longer for the 7,000 people who have had their appeal adjourned.

Some already pay the disgraceful bedroom tax, despite claims from some Sinn Féin Members that People Before Profit and I were not telling the truth when we warned of that inevitability. Those who move to houses that better accommodate their disability, illness or children will be hit with the bedroom tax if that new home has more bedrooms than they require.

That is our reality, because the Assembly did the Tories' dirty work. At the time, the big parties told us that they had no choice but to implement welfare reform, because, otherwise, Westminster would fine us. At the time, People Before Profit refused to accept that excuse. Five years on, we are backed by studies that show that we lose at least £1 billion from our economy every year because of welfare reform. The amount that we pay in mitigations and from outsourcing PIP assessments, added to the amount that people have lost from their pocket, is much more than we would have paid in fines to Westminster. While we pay more, people in every community and constituency suffer. Today, I reiterate our call to scrap the reforms and implement a social security system that

aims to protect the most vulnerable in our communities, not only to save money but to save lives.

I move on to the proposed housing Bill. We have a huge waiting list emergency, with certain communities particularly affected, yet our Housing Executive barely functions. To rectify the situation, the Executive should allow the Housing Executive to borrow against itself and promote a rapid programme of building public housing; instead, we see plans to allow housing associations to do exactly that. While housing associations can and should work in harmony with the Housing Executive, the privatisation of those organisations removes accountability, as it strips away necessary oversight and answerability. Housing associations should not be the main vehicle for providing homes, but, if they are allowed to borrow and build while the Housing Executive cannot, that may indeed become the case, especially as the Minister for Communities cannot rule out the selling off of Housing Executive houses beyond this year.

There are some welcome moves on the Irish language that are evidently the result of the hard work of Irish language activists but fall disappointingly short of the commitments given in the St Andrews Agreement. Gaeilgeoirí were promised no return to Stormont without the Irish language Act that they needed, and that has not happened. The plans do not give the language official status, which is a key demand in order to protect it from the whims of individual Ministers, such as the cut to Líofo funding. Whilst I welcome the appointment of an Irish language commissioner, I am concerned that his or her work could be vetoed by the deputy First Minister or the First Minister and that suggestions for best practice are required only to be given due regard by Ministers. Ministers in the business of making decisions such as cutting the Líofo funding will lose little sleep over the commissioner, especially when the post is announced without any mention of funding, signage or rights.

Finally, when it comes to language rights, we should question the unnecessary equivalence that the Executive continue to demand when the Irish language is mentioned. Despite a much-hailed "New approach", the constant equivalence only further entrenches sectarianism by doubling down on the two-traditions approach, whereby communalism is elevated in politics while other approaches, such as working-class history, labour history, women's history and more, can be relegated.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): I thank Members for most of their contributions to

today's debate. It should not surprise us that, as a primary function of the Assembly, legislation is a subject of considerable and enduring interest to its Members. Legislation is, of course, a shared responsibility between the Executive and the Assembly. While Ministers identify the need and develop the underlying policy, it is for the Assembly, ultimately, to decide, after debate and scrutiny, whether to legislate to give effect to the policy.

Our purpose in presenting the legislative programme has therefore been to advise the Assembly on the matters that, the Executive believe, are sufficiently important to be enacted as law. As those Bills are introduced, the Assembly will shortly have its opportunity to consider those matters in greater detail than today's debate allows us, as this is only a take-note debate. I am sure Members will have many and various questions that they will want to go through about each Bill that will come before the House.

I will go to each of the various issues that were raised in the debate. Paula Bradley and Declan McAleer spoke as Chairpersons of their respective Committees and welcomed the Bills relating to their Departments.

The TEO Committee Chair, Colin McGrath, wanted some clarity about when the NDNA commitments would be brought forward by the Executive Office. Our officials are processing and progressing the New Decade, New Approach agreement and draft Bills. Consideration has been given to bringing forward the language rights and identity proposals in the agreement as soon as possible. The New Decade, New Approach agreement sets a very challenging time frame, as it does for many issues, and it sets the time frame for the introduction of the draft Bills to the Assembly as:

"within 3 months of the restoration of the institutions".

Therefore, people who feign surprise that the Bills should be in the legislative programme obviously have not read the New Decade, New Approach agreement, where there is a commitment to bringing forward those Bills within three months. The agreement commits me and the Deputy First Minister to sponsoring and overseeing a new framework that will recognise and celebrate Northern Ireland's diversity of identities and culture and will accommodate cultural difference. I hope that that answers the Chair's point about timing.

Mr Nesbitt welcomed a number of Bills. He asked whether welfare mitigation would be temporary or permanent, and that is, of course, a matter for the Minister. He looked forward to multi-year Budgets in the future and hoped that they would be before us.

Kellie Armstrong welcomed what was there and made some commentary about things that she wished were there but were not. Again, she hoped that Budget Bills in the near future would be for multi-year Budgets — as do we all.

Paul Givan made the point that it is not always about legislation and we should not just have legislation for the sake of it; it must be there to make a difference and to answer a real need. He hoped that the Department of Justice would be able to bring forward the stalking Bill, and I think that we all agree that we look forward to that legislation. He welcomed the domestic abuse Bill and give us clear reasons and some statistics as to why it is urgent that we deal with that legislation.

Christopher Stalford referred to this date three years ago and what we were all doing. He indicated that devolution allows us to serve our different electorates and that it is important that we are here to do so. He welcomed the housing amendment Bill and welcomed the DFM's clarification about the written statement on culture and rights. He indicated that the success of Northern Ireland is really when we create a situation where everyone is equally valued and respected. He felt that the package should go forward together, as no one's identity should be left behind.

5.15 pm

Ms Archibald, Chair of the Economy Committee, made reference to the significance of a number of the Bills, including the housing Bill and the domestic abuse Bill, and again welcomed the fact that we are bringing forward the package on our NDNA commitments, including the repeal of the 1737 Act. She also made reference to the time frame, but I hope I have answered that query.

Mr Durkan asked a question about the raising of the pension age. That, of course, is a matter for the Westminster Government and not for us.

Ms Ní Chuilín welcomed the reclassification of housing associations, the mitigations on the bedroom tax and the suite of legislation on language and culture. She also welcomed the liquor licensing legislation.

Mr Lyttle recognised that this is not the full list. It is important that we recognise that this is not the full legislative programme; it is as much as we think we can bring forward within this mandate. He welcomed the domestic abuse legislation and the committal reform Bill. He made comments on the office of identity and culture and said that he hoped that it would be inclusive of diversity and inclusion. If he looks at the strategic aims of the office in 'New Decade, New Approach', he will see that it is clear that one of them is:

"to promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, including Northern Ireland's ethnic, national, linguistic and faith communities".

Those aims are covered there and will be reflected in the legislation when it comes forward. He was disappointed about a number of things that are not included, but I think he accepted that it was a start.

Mr Gildernew, Chair of the Health Committee, mentioned items that he would like to see coming forward from the Department of Health, including legislation on adult safeguarding, on carers and on breastfeeding, but he recognised the impact that some of the mitigations would have in relation to the health of the people.

Mr Allister made various comments around the priority of the TEO. As I indicated, we are just following through on the commitments that we made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. He also made comments on perceived differences between the office for the Irish language commissioner and the office for the Ulster-British commissioner. Both commissioners will investigate complaints where a public authority has failed to have due regard to standards. That is both commissioners, not one. He should not mislead the House in that way.

Mr Speaker, I have to ask, is the Member seriously suggesting that the people of Northern Ireland did not want to see the Northern Ireland Assembly back and running? Is the only reason we are back here the fact that, apparently, I have acquired a limousine? Seriously, at a time when we are dealing with our response to leaving the European Union and with our response to coronavirus and all of the issues around that, I have to say this to the Member: the Assembly and Executive have a big job of work to do. Whilst of course he has the right to criticise and question, I cannot let it go past for him to say that that is the only reason we are back in the Assembly. Some of us do this job because we feel we have a public service to

deliver to people, and we do it because we have a duty to the people who elected us. That is why we are standing here today and doing our job.

Mr Carroll made various comments in relation to the Irish language. He does not like the fact that there is an Ulster-British commissioner, but that is what the agreement says, and that is what will be delivered.

As the deputy First Minister outlined in her opening speech, the publication of the legislative programme is only the beginning of a process which will, over the next two years, involve Ministers, the Executive, the Assembly and its Committees working closely and collaboratively to deliver the legislation. That, of course, is not an end in itself. What is most important is the positive difference that it will make to the lives of our citizens. We fully expect this programme to grow as the work of the Departments regains momentum, and we will keep the Assembly updated on that, but we must also be conscious of the limited time frame within which we are working.

We believe, therefore, that our approach to legislation should be governed by a number of important considerations as we move forward. First, will it make a positive difference to people's lives by offering protection or remedying weakness in provision?

Secondly, is it essential to be done now? Would it displace other more critical legislation? Thirdly, is it achievable? Is it based on sound policy and implementation plans? Lastly, can it be scheduled to be completed within the time available in order to avoid nugatory effort at the end of the mandate, bringing about congestion, which has, unfortunately, been a feature of past mandates?

Taking those considerations into account and with a mutual recognition of the importance of legislation, we believe that there is great potential for the Executive and the Assembly to work together to maximise the value that we can obtain from the next two years and to lay a firm foundation for legislation in the next full mandate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Executive's legislative programme as presented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in their statement of 11 February 2020.

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

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

Private Members' Business

Violent Crime

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern about increasing levels of violent crime; recognises that this has been accompanied by a similar rise in alcohol and drug-related offences; notes the effect of such crime on victims and on communities across Northern Ireland; further notes that comprehensive legislation protecting victims of domestic violence has yet to be passed; and calls on the Minister of Justice to work collaboratively with the Minister of Health to bring forward an action plan and a resourced implementation plan to reduce violent offending and the risk of reoffending.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the total time. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech.

I invite Dolores Kelly to open the debate on the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: I am pleased to have the opportunity, on behalf of the SDLP, to present this motion to the House. What should be clear is that the causes of violent crime are complex, and there is no single, simple solution. The motion and the Sinn Féin amendment, which we accept, acknowledge that fact. I am pleased that the Minister of Justice is in attendance for the debate, but I acknowledge that not all the solutions lie with her Department. Tackling violent crime will require an approach that spans right across government.

Statistics show that violent crime is increasing. In the 12 months from 1 January to 31 December 2019, 106,604 crimes were recorded in Northern Ireland. That is an increase of 7,300 on the previous 12 months, continuing the increase seen during 2018-19. Violence against the person increased by 14.1%. That equates to 4,975 offences. The biggest rise was in the

category "violence without injury", which should be seen in light of changes in recording practice with the harassment classification. Progress is being made on the reporting of hate crime, and I look forward to the outcome of Judge Desmond Marrinan's review. Hate crime is, of course, a motivating factor in many crimes against the person.

Tragically, last year there were 26 homicides, whilst a further 167 people died or were seriously injured as a direct consequence of unlawful driving. Behind those statistics are hundreds of personal tragedies — the lives lost, families left bereaved and many others having to struggle with life-changing injuries. Our thoughts are with them today.

Police statistics also tell us that there were 983 reported rapes and 2,434 other sexual offences. Crimes against society are also increasing, with 951 drug trafficking offences and 6,957 drug possession offences. Minister, I welcome your commitment and that of your predecessor, Ms Claire Sugden, to put in place stronger legislation to tackle domestic and sexual violence. Across Northern Ireland, eight of the 11 policing districts showed an increase in domestic abuse incidents and all 11 had higher levels of domestic abuse crimes. We can all acknowledge that both those types of crime are vastly under-reported and that much more needs to be done.

The comprehensive report by Judge Gillen sets out some 253 recommendations across the criminal justice system, many of which will require additional financial resources if we are serious about supporting victims and bringing perpetrators before the courts. Many others challenge government to work more collaboratively and smarter. Therefore, Minister, I am sure that we will all be keen to hear your response, the steps taken to date and your implementation plan to address those recommendations.

I also welcome the high priority that the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Policing Board have given to tackling domestic and sexual violence in the draft policing plan for the year ahead. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. The establishment of a domestic homicide review team will also, hopefully, help agencies to better understand and red-flag vulnerable individuals to allow for earlier intervention and prevention.

The changing drugs market is identified as one of the drivers of the increase in violent crime. The role of alcohol-fuelled violence is also well-documented. Substance misuse is properly

reflected in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, and I welcome the focus of the Health Minister, Robin Swann, on developing a strategy to improve services and take innovative and effective action to reduce alcohol and drug-related harm. The recent focus on low-level drug dealing and tackling the availability of illegal prescription drugs online must continue to be a priority for the PSNI. Community confidence in policing will be judged on how well the police respond to the low level but high impact of that type of behaviour on the community, but law enforcement is not the only solution.

There is little that I can disagree with in the DUP amendment, but it practically rewrites the motion and focuses almost exclusively on a criminal justice response. Therefore, I cannot accept that amendment.

Early intervention supporting families, such as the Sure Start programme, must continue to be funded by the Minister for Communities. More investment is needed to provide secure homes for those and their children who flee violence. I trust, Minister, that this is an issue you pick up on with your ministerial colleague Ms Hargey.

No debate on the prevalence of violent crime would be complete without attempting to outline the causal factors behind and the absolute requirement to have, as our motion calls for:

"a resourced implementation plan to reduce ... offending"

and reoffending. The Older People's Commissioner accepts that older people are less likely to be victims of crime, but whilst not diminishing the trauma that is experienced by older victims of crime, that subject will be debated more fully tomorrow, and I will concentrate more on younger people.

According to the World Health Organization, being male is the greatest risk factor, with 15- to 29-year-old men accounting for three quarters of all homicide victims globally. Being male not only increases the likelihood of being a victim of violence but increases their likelihood of being a perpetrator of violent acts. Our prison population profile underlines that fact.

There is a wealth of academic research pinpointing the key risk factors and individuals most at risk of being either victims or perpetrators. That includes growing inequalities between the haves and the have-nots, hopeless job prospects for many of our young people, the collapse of Youth Service provision through funding cuts, the crisis in mental health care,

school failure and expulsion, and outcomes for looked-after children.

We need to break the cycle of violence. Any approach will depend on partnerships across a number of sectors such as education, health, social services, housing, youth services, probation and victim services. In particular, it needs communities working together to support measures aimed at getting young people and young adults involved in positive activities.

5.30 pm

I welcome the reintroduction of neighbourhood policing teams across all council DEAs and hope that the recent PSNI recruitment campaign will enable the Chief Constable to quickly fill the gaps in provision. However, I must remind the Minister that the additional 400 officers are funded through additional money secured for Brexit planning. They will need additional financial commitment from her Department beyond the next two years.

As chair of the partnership committee, I was pleased that our recent work enabled the focus to return to policing neighbourhood teams across all areas. That was a key priority for the then Assistant Chief Constable, now Deputy Chief Constable Mark Hamilton, in his delivery on local policing. I am sure that we can all relate to the fact that neighbourhood policing teams are the eyes and ears of the police. They can enable earlier interventions and identify those most likely to be engaged in crime and antisocial behaviour.

We propose a collaborative approach across a number of Departments as the only way forward, and we recognise the key roles that the Justice Minister and Health Minister have in driving forward societal change and saving lives.

I commend the motion and amendment No 2 to the House.

Mr Givan: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "crime;" and insert:

"highlights that in 2018-19 violence against the person accounted for more than one third of all recorded crime in Northern Ireland; notes with concern the assessment by the Police Service of Northern Ireland that crime against women and children is increasing and the resulting harm becoming more severe; further notes the effect of such crime on victims and on communities across Northern Ireland; regrets

that comprehensive legislation protecting victims of domestic violence has yet to be passed; notes that the public consultation on the sentencing review Northern Ireland, which sought views specifically on sentencing in respect of deaths by dangerous driving, attacks on elderly people and attacks on blue-light services, closed on 3 February 2020; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward legislation for tougher sentencing for violent crimes and to work collaboratively with the Minister of Health and victims' advocates to introduce an action plan and a resourced implementation plan to reduce violent offending and the risk of reoffending."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I invite the Member to take his seat. I just want to confirm that you have 10 minutes to move the amendment and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. You may now open the debate.

Mr Givan: This amendment seeks to enhance the motion. I disagree with the characterisation of it by Mrs Kelly. It does not take away from the original motion; it adds to it. It removes nothing from the original motion, but it does enhance it. On that basis, I hope that it will gain support. I have no difficulty with the subsequent amendment that was put forward by Linda Dillon and, if it came to it, I would be happy to support that.

I thank Members for raising an important issue that seriously affects Northern Ireland. It has an impact on the victims who suffer the violence perpetrated against them, and that manifests itself in many forms. It also has a wider impact on a victim's family, friends and community. When a violent incident takes place, there is a broad ripple effect, so it is right that we seek to have a criminal justice system and wider response from society that seek to address that.

I wish that we were able to say that we were winning the battle, but the figures indicate an increasing number of offences. From 1 February 2019 to 31 January 2020, violence against the person was up by 14.3%. The total number of offences relating to violence against the person was almost 41,000, of which nearly 3,500 were sexual offences.

Many more crimes are committed than there are successful prosecutions and sentencing. Looking at it purely through the lens of sentences would be to mask the problem of violent crime. Within that, it is concerning that a third of all violence against the person was domestically motivated. There have been

horrendous examples of domestic violence leading to murder. I can think of a most horrific case of violence that led to deaths in Newry recently. Members will be able to bring other examples to the debate. The Assembly will now rightly look at domestic violence, particularly the coercive control aspect. I have no doubt that, as we take the domestic abuse Bill through the House, Members from across the Chamber will have a particular interest in ensuring that we have the most effective legislation in this area given the level of crime. The number of recorded domestic abuse crimes from 1 January 2019 until the end of last year was just over 18,000, which is the highest for any 12-month recording period since 2004-05. That is a horrific statistic. As Members have said, behind each of those figures are individuals and families who are impacted on. This type of crime is appalling, and it is getting worse as opposed to reducing.

We look at the number of fatalities caused by reckless driving, but there are also those who are left with severe, life-changing injuries. I have been dealing with a constituent, a lovely girl, who was out in the car with her boyfriend. He was driving recklessly and was subsequently convicted for that. She was left paralysed, which has had a life-changing impact on her and her family. There was then huge disappointment at the sentence that was passed down in the courts. The inadequacy of the sentence continues to inflict trauma on that individual and her family. For many people, the sentence does not fit the crime that is perpetrated against them. It is sentencing not just for driving offences but for all these crimes. That is why it was welcome that the former Minister, Claire Sugden, who is here, initiated a sentencing review that covers a broad range of issues. Consultation on that concluded in February. I look forward to seeing the outworkings of some of those proposals. I recognise that there needs to be judicial discretion when it comes to sentencing. There needs to be a framework that takes into account various factors, such as the aggravating factors and the mitigating circumstances. It is right that there is a broad framework by which the judiciary can look at each case. I do not particularly advocate Parliaments specifying the exact form of sentencing that ought to occur when a crime takes place, but I understand why Members often want to bring proposals for minimum sentencing, particularly for attacks on our elderly and in other spheres. As we see the outworkings of the consultation on the sentencing review, which is now complete, I would like more detail on that. I look forward to

hearing from the Minister on that consultation process.

Some of the causation factors of the increasing offences include drug abuse and alcohol misuse. Alcohol undoubtedly has a huge influence in offending. Since 2012-13, around half of all violence-with-injury offences and one third of violence-without-injury offences were motivated by alcohol. You often hear alcohol being glamorised. People do not talk about celebrating their big wins by having the odd one or two glasses; people boast about getting drunk. We need to be very careful about the message that we send out about alcohol consumption. That is not to say that we ban alcohol, but it is important that we recognise how many of the people in our accident and emergency departments are there as a result of alcohol misuse. When we look at crimes committed as a result of alcohol misuse, we see that this is a serious problem for this society. Legislation cannot necessarily address it, but we need to take a different approach to alcohol abuse and the way in which all that is managed.

Mr Catney: Thanks very much for giving way, Mr Givan. I hope that you will agree with me that, in the controlled atmosphere of a public house, publicans may still sell drink but that the day of the drunk man in the bar finished 20 years ago. You just do not see them any more. Most of the abuse is fuelled by cheap off-sales and people drinking at home. It is not coming from the controlled environment that is catered for within the structure of a public house.

Mr Givan: The Member makes a very important contribution, and he is right. It is as a result of that preparation for going out on the town, so to speak, with people preloading. When they have already consumed significant amounts of alcohol, they then go to the public house. The publican will often take a very responsible approach to managing the situation, so the Member raises an important point. The reason why I support minimum pricing is because it should not be as cheap as it is to purchase alcohol from off-licences, supermarkets and so on. There needs to be much more robust legislation on minimum pricing, and I look forward to it being introduced.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. This is a very important debate. I agree that an action plan is needed that addresses a lot of the factors that are talked about, including those in the amendment tabled by Linda Dillon and others opposite, but there can be no excuse for crime emanating from anywhere, whether that be middle-class areas or socially deprived areas. Some of the biggest criminal hotspots

are in very affluent parts of the Province, where certain people reside. It is important that we look in detail at the issues. I support taking a cross-departmental approach to an action plan to address the underlying issues, and I look forward to working with the Minister of Justice on specific legislation that can help address the issues that have been raised in the motion. I commend amendment No 1 to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Pat Sheehan to move amendment No 2.

Mr Sheehan: I do not doubt that everyone in the Chamber today —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I am asking you to move amendment No 2.

Mr Sheehan: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "collaboratively" and insert:

"with Executive Ministers to bring forward an action plan and a resourced implementation plan to reduce violent offending and the risk of reoffending, including by addressing the root causes of offending behaviour such as addiction, mental illness, and poverty."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Thank you. I ask the Assembly to note that amendment Nos 1 and 2 are mutually exclusive. Therefore, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

I confirm that you have 10 minutes in which to move the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Sheehan: I will start again. I do not doubt that everyone in here, from whatever background or party, would like to see a decrease in all crime, particularly violent crime, and a reduction in reoffending. That having been said, there will be disagreement among us about how that can be achieved.

I welcome the Minister of Justice to the debate today. I agree totally with what Dolores Kelly said in her contribution: the Justice Minister cannot solve the issue of crime or violent crime. In fact, she, the police and the whole criminal justice system cannot deal with that issue. Collaboration among all Departments is needed.

There are three principal ways of making inroads into preventing crime and reoffending:

the use of legislation; early intervention; and rehabilitation. I will deal first with legislation. It is clear from the evidence that legislation can and does have an impact on behaviours. If you want an example of that, you need just to look to the laws on the wearing of seat belts and on smoking in public places. Of course, one of the most eagerly awaited pieces of legislation will come before the Assembly shortly in the form of the domestic abuse Bill, and I welcome the advent of that Bill. At this stage, I should pay tribute to the previous Justice Minister, Claire Sugden, who did much of the heavy lifting on the issue but, unfortunately, did not get enough time to see it through to its conclusion.

However, legislation, on its own, is not a panacea for domestic violence. There needs to be better education and greater cultural change, among the male population in particular, before we will make inroads on that scourge of society.

5.45 pm

Early intervention is vital if we are serious about tackling the root causes of crime. When I was a member of the Policing Board, one of the most memorable and powerful presentations that we received was from an officer from Police Scotland. He opened the presentation with a short piece of CCTV footage. It was quite grainy, as CCTV footage often is. It showed a fight on a Glasgow street, with maybe 10 or 12 people involved in it. A taxi pulled up and someone disembarked from it — someone who had absolutely nothing to do with the row that was taking place. One of those who were involved in the row went over and, in the CCTV footage, appeared to punch that person in the side. As it turned out, he had not punched him; he had stabbed him. That man died. The person who was responsible was identified and later sentenced to life imprisonment for murder.

The presentation was about tracing back the life of the perpetrator, the person who had murdered an innocent man in the street. He was someone who had frequently come to the attention of the police, and was often before the courts, sometimes on charges that related to violence. He had left school without any educational qualifications. He came from a dysfunctional family. His parents were addicts of either drugs or alcohol, and he had been in and out of care as a young child.

The police officer was leaving the Policing Board in Belfast to fly to London, to attend a conference on breastfeeding, to give exactly the same presentation. Why was he doing that? He

was doing that because the evidence shows that children who are breastfed are more likely to develop a strong bond and relationship with their mothers. It is also beneficial to mothers in building relationships with their children.

I am sure that most Members are now familiar with the term "adverse childhood experiences" (ACE). The evidence shows that children who have suffered a number of adverse childhood experiences are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system. We need to deal with those issues. It is not just for the Justice Minister to deal with them. Take, for example, the particular case that I just outlined and the different agencies and statutory bodies that could have intervened at different stages, early in that person's life. Perhaps there would have been a different outcome; perhaps there would not have been a man lying bleeding to death on the streets of Glasgow.

Just imagine the situation here of a family living in poverty — living in a cold, damp, mouldy house; the children suffering from respiratory illnesses, such as bronchitis or asthma, and that illness being exacerbated by the conditions in which they live. As a result, the children become ill more frequently. That leads to longer absences from school. They continue to fall behind in school and do not catch up. What happens then? Again, the evidence shows that children who leave school without qualifications are not only likely to end up with chronic illnesses but are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system.

If we are going to talk about collaboration, we must recognise that it is across many spectrums. We have to deal with poverty. Education has to be beefed up. The criminal justice system has a role. The Housing Executive has a role. Collaboration is the name of the game.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Certainly.

Mr Storey: I have listened with interest to what the Member has said. Sometimes, in these debates, we focus on context. Let us remember that violent crime is carried out by some people from affluent parts of society, and they have access to money and to other individuals. So while I concur with many of the comments that the Member has made, he cannot just say that, if we solved socio-economic issues, we would eradicate crime from our society.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for that intervention. I agree wholeheartedly; we are never going to eradicate crime completely from society. We need to get everyone on an equal footing and give everybody the best start in life that we can. Children should not be punished because they grew up in poverty or had parents who had bad or no parenting skills or because those parents were addicted to drugs or alcohol. We need to do what is best for the greatest number of people in society.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member acknowledge the fact that any mapping exercise of the prison population will show up disparities, in that most of the people who are serving jail sentences come from high levels of deprivation and poverty? The link between crime and poverty and deprivation is well established.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for that. Her point is well made. The evidence is clear: the prisons are full of, mainly, people from disadvantaged areas. Large percentages of the prison population are involved in self-harming or substance abuse and have suicidal tendencies or mental health problems. We need to deal with all those issues that lead to people going to prison.

I am glad to welcome the pilots that are, and will be, taking place on problem-solving courts, which deal with addiction and mental health. The aim is to do exactly what it says on the tin: to solve the problems that bring people before the courts. It means that people with mental health or addiction issues or who persistently reoffend can get help with those issues, rather than constantly going into and coming back out of prison, like a revolving door.

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

Mr Sheehan: I come to the last point: when Ronnie Armour, the director of prisons, was in front of the Committee recently, he spoke about his emphasis now being on rehabilitation in the prisons. That is something we need to place emphasis on as well.

Mr Beattie: I support the SDLP motion. We will support both amendments as well, because both add value to the motion. Anything that adds value to the motion is a good thing. I think that we are all agreed that what we are trying to

do is set something in motion to help to deal with the problem of violent crime.

I reflect on the debate and all of the things that we are trying to look at: victims; punishment; rehabilitation; protection; separated communities; social isolation; vulnerability; alcohol and drug abuse; mental health; sentencing; public confidence; accountability; and victims. Victims: sometimes, with everything that we do, we forget about the victims. Yes, we want to stop having victims, but we will have victims, and we need to think about them. I will address that in a little while. I think that everybody is agreed that this is an issue for all Departments; not just Justice, but Health, Communities and Infrastructure. It affects absolutely everybody.

There has been lots of debate about domestic abuse. I listened intently to some of it, including to the Chair of the Justice Committee when he gave horrific statistics on the amount of domestic abuse in the last 12 months. I would add that 27% of children in a violent home have been physically abused. I say that today as pretty horrific news comes out of Larne about a terrible incident. It is something that we have to address. Of course, please do not forget about men; in the statistics for domestic abuse, one in nine victims are men. Men are less likely to come forward and say that they are victims of domestic abuse. In fact, in a recent survey, 20% of people thought that men who were victims of domestic abuse deserved it.

Domestic abuse does not sit alone. Violent crimes against the vulnerable, particularly the elderly, are increasing. As Dolores said, we are discussing that tomorrow, so I will not go into it in any great depth. I reflect back to the causes of violent crime, one of which is mental health. Mental health is a huge issue: if we have a problem with domestic violence being at epidemic levels, the same applies to mental health. We need a comprehensive mental health strategy that victims can feed into.

I am working with the family of Mr and Mrs Cawdery, who were murdered in 2017. The family have been fighting for justice for their relatives. They have had to fight through pretty horrific circumstances and have not had the support that they need. They have been fighting against the Department of Health and the Department of Justice to get help to deal with the seriously flawed serious adverse incident report. That process has cost them their own mental health, and they have not had the necessary support. We are traumatising victims as they fight to get justice, as they fight for

support and as they fight to understand why they are victims in the first place.

So, yes, we have to deal with the causes of mental health problems, but when it all goes wrong, we have to deal with the victims. I raised the issue with the Minister of Justice at the Justice Committee, and she gave a very good and fair answer, but I still wonder whether there needs to be a wider debate on whether there should be an overarching victims of crime commissioner. We have a Victims' Commissioner for Troubles crimes. We may well need a victims' commissioner for domestic abuse; I would have no problem with that. What about all the other victims? What about those victims of crime who need somebody to stand up for them and link between the different Departments that we all agree should be working together? There is merit in it, and there needs to be a bigger debate about it.

I spoke to the family and asked, "What would a commissioner have done for you?". "They would have been a voice for the victims. The justice system works only when it delivers justice for both victim and offender, and justice for victims means their voices being heard". It is hard to argue with that.

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

Mr Beattie: I could go on. I guess the point is well made there. We need to look at victims as much as we look at perpetrators. Deal with the perpetrators, but let us not forget about the victims.

Mr Blair: The Alliance Party supports the original motion in the name of Dolores Kelly. We can do that, not least because the motion calls for increased collaborative approaches to crime and the causes of crime. The motion also makes specific reference to victims and communities and the effect of crime on those two groups of people.

The emphasis on collaboration also makes it easy to support the amendment in the name of Linda Dillon and others. That amendment asks the Minister to seek solutions, not simply on a collaborative basis but on an Executive-wide basis.

Alliance is not in a position to support the additional amendment in the name of Mervyn Storey because of its consistent and restrictive reference to criminal justice solutions and its sole focus on such solutions with no reference to prevention, intervention or rehabilitation. In

this context, that is not helpful because we have to seek solutions on a wider basis.

In reference to that, there are already some very productive joined-up approaches to the problems that have been highlighted already during the debate. Hopefully, when the Minister speaks, she will elaborate on some of those, such as substance abuse courts, support hubs, which are a growing phenomenon, and multi-agency triage teams, which are helping out in the field.

Those are vital approaches if we are to realistically tackle the drugs and alcohol-related issues that have been spoken about already a number of times.

6.00 pm

There are additional approaches if we wish to seriously nurture a society of lawfulness. For example, there should be visible support from all of us and interaction with police through schools, colleges, public life, universities, employment settings, the family hubs that have been mentioned and wider society. We need to encourage understanding and solutions rather than have judgement on and attach stigma to addiction matters, it could be argued. We need also to have mature discussions on real-life issues such as abuse of prescription drugs on an everyday basis. The collaborative approaches requested in the motion and in the amendment for which I have already expressed Alliance's support are crucial next stages in this process and in seeking understanding as well as solutions. I, therefore, express our support for the motion and the amendment that I outlined.

Mr Frew: I acknowledge the good work by private Members in bringing this forward today. It is no accident that, since we have been back in this place, we have had a motion on the climate emergency and three on crime. After this debate is a motion on paramilitarism, and tomorrow there is a motion on crime against older people. I think that that speaks volumes, and I believe that Members have hit on something out there: crime, the fear of crime and the impact that that has on society.

Many Members talked about crime statistics and how they rise and fall, but usually how they rise, rise and rise. When I see that I see two things. I see a real problem, but I also see an uncovering of a problem. It is probably the truth that, for far too long, domestic violence was taking place behind closed doors, behind walls. We did not know, and we did not want to know.

That would be shameful for any society if that were the case, but, now that we do know, we have to do something about it. I appeal to the Minister again, because I know that this is one of the things that she is going to take very seriously and it is a priority for her. We need to see this legislation as quickly as possible, and we need to see it implemented as quickly as possible. We need the PSNI to take it seriously, and putting it on a legislative basis will do that. I am not saying that they are not taking it seriously now, but they need the tools at their disposal to make this problem right. It is a massive problem. I, like many Members, could probably tell stories about domestic violence cases or suspicions, and there was one time when I witnessed things out in the back garden, and it happened to be that that domestic violence manifested itself outside and continued out, and people were then able to witness it.

I also have experience of one punch devastating lives. It has devastated the life of one individual and all the family connected. That is hard to take for friends and family, and it is hard to take for the individual. Doug is right when he talks about victims, and a question that has to be posed is this: do we support victims properly? Do we really? Do we give them the support, from all sectors of society and from all our Departments, that they need to recover? That is something that we need to really take seriously. Detail is important here. Pat raised the issue of people being missed in the system and who, through experiences in their younger days, maybe return or turn to violence and believe that to be an acceptable way of behaviour. I get all that, but somewhere along the line someone was failed, and that leads to a completely innocent person being in the wrong place at the wrong time and dying or suffering devastating injuries that affect their life and their family for the rest of their life. That is very important. It seems that most violence is fuelled by drug and alcohol abuse. We need to tackle that as well. Those who do not see the drugs in our society are probably the most naive among us. That has to change. We need to shine a light on all of this. Violent crime is not acceptable. Violence is not acceptable, whether it is at home or at a sporting event.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He referred to domestic abuse. Does he believe that, fundamentally, by breaking the stigma of domestic abuse, we will help to eradicate it?

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

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, we must shine a light and open the doors on this. No one should be victimised or subjected to domestic violence or any sort of violence.

In the time remaining, I want to raise an issue that is close to my heart, and I would like the House to take cognisance of it. Before the Assembly fell, I had a private Member's Bill going through, and it was to protect accident and emergency staff — nurses — who are at the cutting edge and are abused daily, sometimes violently. We really need to pick up on that, and I look forward to miscellaneous Bills coming forward so that I get the chance to do so. I know that Dolores is very keen on miscellaneous Bills, too. Maybe we could work as a double act, as we have always done.

It is very important that we protect the people who protect us and that we give tougher sentences for assaulting them. Such assaults have a double impact. They impact on the victim, and, if that victim is out of service or cannot do their job, someone will die, so it has an indirect impact on another family's life. The connection will probably never be made, but it means devastation for yet another family, and that is very important. The House should take cognisance of that and protect the people who protect us in this country.

Ms Anderson: Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I support the motion and Sinn Féin's amendment. In 2019, there were over 3,000 incidents of domestic violence — violent crime — in my home town of Derry, making up nearly a third of all reported crimes, and a 21% increase since 2018. Derry is in crisis. It is a crisis caused by a decade of neglect and driven by a lack of opportunities for young people, a lack of public services, a lack of quality jobs and a lack of income support. I say that because I agree with what was said about statistical evidence showing a link to poverty and economic deprivation and how that has been identified as one of the root causes of violent crime. That link makes it even more important that the Executive tackle and address regional inequalities. In doing so, they must deliver resources on the basis of objective need. That also includes developing legislation to address the impact of the fear of crime on our elderly population. That is being discussed further tomorrow, so I will not go into that.

At the Justice Committee last week, members were given a shocking statistic by the Minister: some 90% of the prison population has some form of alcohol or drug issue. Given the link between the high volume of violent crime,

fuelled by alcohol and drugs, those who own clubs and pubs should not be possibly indirectly fuelling such crime by running drinks promotions in our city centres.

In Derry, nearly half of all violent crimes involve domestic abuse.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. In my past business, I was involved with public houses. I cannot stress enough that people drank within that controlled atmosphere. Pub owners should not be labelled with all the ills of society. Most of the drink in question is cheap drink that is bought in supermarkets. People are fuelled long before they even go out for a night of socialising. I will make it plain. I will make this point as quickly as I can. You cannot lay all the ills of alcohol abuse at the doors of publicans or public houses.

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

Ms Anderson: I ask the Member to not be too defensive. Perhaps if he had listened, he would have heard me say "possibly indirectly fuelling". I did not accuse, but I said that there was an onus and responsibility on those who own clubs and pubs to understand the link between drinks promotions and violence.

To go back to what I was saying: Derry has the highest level of domestic violence incidents in the North, and, according to the PSNI, there were 1,519 domestic abuse crimes recorded last year alone. That is four crimes per day; four too many. Domestic violence is not confined to age, gender or sexuality, yet it is absolutely staggering that 67% of victims of domestic violence are females, while 86% of abusers are male.

I express my appreciation of local organisations that support victims, such as La Dolce Vita Project and the Men's Action Network. In particular, I commend the work done by Foyle Women's Aid, which, each year, supports nearly 3,000 women and children who are directly affected by domestic abuse.

Last year, domestic abuse incidents increased by 6%, and we are told that that represented 16% of all crimes recorded in the North. It is unfortunate but also welcome that more women are seeking help for domestic abuse, yet there are still countless other victims who are suffering in silence and trapped behind closed doors. I would like to address them today. When every call, text message or post on social media is scrutinised by your abuser; when you

are forced to do things because, if you do not, your abuser will hit you or your child; and when you are led to believe that everything is your fault and that you are alone in the world, do not feel isolated. There are organisations, like La Dolce Vita Project, Foyle Women's Aid and Women's Aid all over the North, that are there to help you. Domestic abuse can be physical, emotional, sexual and violent. La Dolce Vita Project in Derry offers one-to-one counselling for those impacted by domestic abuse and has been doing sterling work, highlighting the impact of parental alienation and perpetrators who unfortunately use the courts to further their domestic abuse. I spoke to the Minister about that at the Committee last week. Parental alienation is recognised by the World Health Organization as —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Anderson: — emotional or physical harm caused to children by the parent-child relationship. I ask the Minister to consider it in the domestic violence Bill in the time ahead. There is much more that I could say, but time does not permit.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on our amendment to this very important motion, which highlights the fact that violent crime and alcohol- and drug-related offences are on the increase. PSNI statistics confirm an alarming trend, with over 106,000 recorded offences during the 2019 calendar year; an increase of over 7% when compared with the previous 12 months in 2018. All but one of the policing districts experienced a higher level of crime last year compared with the previous year, with the Ards and North Down District, in my constituency, the only district with a 2.2% reduction in police-recorded crime in 2019 compared with 2018. Alcohol and drug abuse are the main contributing factors, costing the country hundreds of millions of pounds every year and, tragically, costing too many lives.

Between July 2018 and June 2019, there were 16,575 domestic abuse crimes recorded here, which represents an alarming increase of 10% on the previous 12 months and the highest rate since records began in 2004-05. Statistics also show an alarming increase in attacks on children, young people and women. The PSNI defines domestic abuse as violent, abusive or threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour by a partner, ex-partner or family member. The abuse can be physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or financial in nature.

"Domestic abuse" is a much wider term than one might think, and it is also an ever-evolving issue, with the digital age in which we all live opening up so many new challenges. It is worth acknowledging that many efforts have been made at every level in society, from the community and voluntary sector right through to Executive level, to tackle domestic abuse. We see greater awareness and understanding of the issue through education and through effective public awareness campaigns that have highlighted the devastating impact that violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse can have on people's life and family and on our communities. It is important that people speak out and speak up and that they are not afraid to have their voice heard.

It is important that the punishment fit the crime for victims of violent crime. By way of example, the lead story last week in our local paper, the Bangor edition of 'The County Down Spectator', was about a bottle-attack victim who was left with 15 stitches to his face. His violent attacker, who had a criminal record of 106 convictions, escaped jail and was instead given 100 hours of community service and put on probation for three months, leaving the victim and his family disgusted with the judicial system.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: I will indeed.

Mr Buckley: Does the Member agree that that sentence does nothing but bring additional terror to the family, who have to live every day knowing that the perpetrator is back on the streets so quickly?

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

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. In fact, our whole community is put at risk because the perpetrator is at large.

A joined-up, multi-agency, partnership-based approach is crucial. It should involve the PSNI, councils, policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs), community and voluntary groups working alongside our elected representatives to tackle the problem.

Voluntary groups in my constituency, such as the Ards and north Down street pastors, play an important role. They are often on the front line on dark, wet nights, working with those affected by alcohol and drugs. They play a valuable role in preventing violent crime and must be

commended. They even go as far as to collect empty glass bottles, which they recognise can become weapons in the wrong hands.

New PSNI neighbourhood police teams (NPTs) have recently been rolled out and play an important role in our communities. We greatly welcome that initiative and are delighted to see local police in our communities in north Down. They are people whom we already know and people whom we will get to know, and the public gain confidence in them. There is also an important body of work being done to prevent adverse childhood family experiences, which include exposure to alcohol, drugs abuse and misuse, and domestic abuse, through the provision of greater support for families and young people. Education plays an important role in improving future outcomes and earlier intervention.

Finally, we must continue to strive for better sentencing. We need to see tougher sentencing introduced to deter perpetrators, alongside progress being made on delivering legislation to protect victims of crime.

Mr McGrath: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the motion on violent crime. I also welcome the level of engagement that there has been on the motion and the input from other parties.

An American legislator once said:

"this mindless menace of violence ... which ... stains our land and every one of our lives."

Most regrettably, 50 years on, "this mindless menace of violence" still overshadows our land and continues to affect the lives of all.

All across the North, men and women suffer, oftentimes in the most awful silence, because of domestic violence. The victims and survivors of institutional abuse have suffered for years as they have sought to speak truth to power and let their story be heard and the evil perpetrated on them rooted out and brought into the light. Young and old alike are attacked in their home and in our very streets, and they must then piece together their life afterwards.

This looming shadow, which stains our land and our lives, has a name, and it is violent crime. My constituency is, in many ways, a rural one, and my home town of Downpatrick is not exempt from that looming shadow. Last year alone, the PSNI in the Downpatrick area recorded 2,395 acts of antisocial behaviour,

1,619 acts of violence and sexual offences and 837 acts of criminal damage and arson. However, the most harrowing truth of this matter is that we may never know the total levels of violent crime occurring across the North, as many people still feel unable to come forward to tell their story.

Members, if like me you feel the same sense of moral outrage that this Assembly did not sit for over three years and did not legislate to combat the shadow of violent crime, then you will agree that we must do more. The sad reality is that the majority of cases of violent crime are underpinned by alcohol or drug consumption. We must do more to rid our society of the scourge of alcohol and drug abuse. I am careful to note that I am not referencing the overwhelming number of people who can have a glass or two of wine or a few pints; I am referencing those who get so intoxicated that they cannot control their behaviour.

Ms Rogan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

Ms Rogan: Will the Member agree that poverty also plays a huge part in the violent crimes that are a scourge on our society? In my constituency, in the town you are talking of, one evening a child was brought home to his parents by the PSNI for committing antisocial behaviour, which can lead to violent crime. There was only one light bulb in the house — only one light bulb, no food in the fridge, nothing in the cupboards. They had to take a burning light bulb out of the upstairs ceiling and bring it down to light the living room so that the parents could have a conversation with the PSNI about their child's behaviour. A collaborative approach is also needed to deal with this issue, mental health issues, addiction and poverty. It is a huge problem.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I remind Members that interventions should be brief. The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, and I thank the Member for her intervention. We have a range of issues that we need to address and tackle. Earlier today, I referenced the need for the Executive to deliver on an anti-poverty strategy, because that will start to combat the poverty in our community, and that will then allow some people to receive help and assistance, which may mean they do not have to be in the circumstances that have been mentioned.

I was referencing those who get so intoxicated that they cannot control their behaviour, and it can be a complete stranger in the street or a partner at home who feels the brunt of that abusive behaviour at the end of the night. We must do more — and see more action from the police too, who often get exposed to such violent crime and become the needless targets of such crime as well.

The interventions need to start earlier. I welcomed the announcement made by the Police Service a number of months ago, before this Assembly reconvened, to deploy extra officers back into the community beats or neighbourhood area teams. These officers operated at the coalface, but they were a permanent fixture. People knew them, and they knew people, and those relationships and their network of contacts were used to challenge issues in local communities. I look forward to seeing them again in areas like Downpatrick.

We currently have issues with large groups of young people gathering on Friday afternoons, trying to get passing 18-year-olds to purchase drinks for them. If successful, they consume large amounts of alcohol, and then their behaviour goes downhill. In recent weeks, we have had assaults, threats, intimidation, drug consumption and criminal damage, but the root cause is always the same: large volumes of alcohol being consumed. I want to see the new officers in place soon and challenging this behaviour in Downpatrick. I hope the Minister can tell us today when those new officers will be in place.

We must do more to change attitudes. We must do more to combat paramilitaries who continue to wreak havoc across the North. We must do more to seek ways to prevent reoffending. We must do more to encourage those who have been the victims of crime to speak up, and most importantly, when they do speak up, we must do more to support the victims.

It was the SDLP who brought this motion to the Assembly, not the Executive or the Department.

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

Mr McGrath: We want to see positive action being used to challenge these events.

Mr Chambers: I welcome this motion, and the opportunity to speak about the important issues it raises. I also welcome the fact that it recognises the effect of such crime on victims.

It is easy for victims to be forgotten, as they are often just absorbed into official statistics.

A victim of a violent crime does not seek to become one. However, once someone decides to make them a victim, they are plunged into a world that may be completely alien to them. They will be expected to engage with police officers investigating the crime — an experience that some people who are not used with engaging with the police may find a daunting challenge. They may also have to face the ordeal of attending an identity parade, followed by long days sitting in a courtroom if a suspect is charged and a case is made against their assailant. That will be followed by a grilling from the defendant's barrister when they enter the witness box. They may then decide to seek compensation, which they are legally entitled to for their injuries, both physical and mental. That can become the biggest ordeal that the victim has had to face up to that point. Suddenly, they may feel that they have become the person standing in the dock, being faced down rather than supported by the authorities.

I have been there. My family has been there, simply because we run a family retail business that trades in cash. My daughter, who was 16 at the time, was present in the shop when an armed gang entered the premises and ordered customers to the floor at gunpoint. My daughter had the barrel of a gun placed into her mouth by an assailant, who was reeking of alcohol, to make her compliant with the robbers' demands. I shared the trauma of her attempting to cope with that incident. She attended psychological counselling for over a year to help deal with it. Her claim for compensation from the criminal injuries compensation scheme was initially rejected and, after appearing at an appeals hearing, she was granted the minimum award.

In my own case, I was attacked late one Sunday evening by an assailant wielding a hatchet. The assailant pushed me to the ground and hit me several times around the legs with the weapon, drawing blood. In the meantime, my wife was being threatened by the other robber, who was waving a hammer around her head. Those events made us both extremely apprehensive of every stranger who came through the door of the business for months afterwards.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I want to put on record high praise to him for sharing his experience with us. In the context of what he has just said, does he not find it incredible that people think that the DUP amendment is too focused on the criminal justice system? People who behave in that

manner should be subject to the full rigour of the criminal justice system.

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

Mr Chambers: I thank the Member for the intervention. Absolutely.

My claim for compensation was rejected as my injuries did not meet the threshold, and neither had I sought professional help for my psychological ordeal. Furthermore, I had not lost any time off work, and apparently that went against me. Other self-employed businesspeople will know that they do not enjoy the luxury of taking time off work while they are still standing. A High Court judge thought the ordeal was worthy of an eight-year custodial sentence for my assailant after a jury found him guilty of causing me actual bodily harm. Obviously, a pen-pusher in the compensation service did not share the learned judge's opinion, nor that of the jury, of what had happened to me. My experiences gave me no confidence that victims of violent crime are considered as anything more than a number. More care and support for victims should be the trademark of any caring and compassionate government.

I had experience of dealing with government agencies through my political activities, but still ran into a stone wall of negativity that I struggled to penetrate. What chance has the average citizen of coping with a system that appears to be designed to knock them back, rather than to recognise what they have been put through by a situation not of their making?

The personal experiences I have described are only a couple of examples of robberies and crime that my family business has been subjected to over the years. The common denominator has been that they all have been driven by criminals attempting to obtain money for drugs. That is the catalyst that needs to be addressed. Violent crime is not about getting money to put food on the table, but rather stealing money or goods to settle drug debts. They will always target the softest targets. Their violence is driven by the urgent need to feed their drug habit. Two of the people involved in robberies of my business died suddenly as a result of drug abuse some months after attacking us.

Another vulnerable group that is subject to violence is our front-line emergency personnel. Courts should take a zero-tolerance approach to attacks on fire, police, ambulance and medical staff. We should ensure that the courts

have the tools to make such violence unattractive by allowing them to impose sentences that are a serious deterrent.

We owe that duty of care to our emergency services.

It should be said, by way of reassurance, that the vast majority of our citizens will never fall victim to a violent crime. That is not to minimise the impact on those who have fallen victim. We must ensure that the police have the resources to thoroughly investigate such crimes with full and unfettered access to forensic services.

6.30 pm

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

Mr Chambers: The courts should also have available a range of sentences that recognise and reflect the seriousness of violent conduct.

Ms Sugden: I support the motion. Although they are mutually exclusive, I support both amendments, as each raises important considerations about how we genuinely and effectively tackle violent crime in Northern Ireland. I will, however, prioritise my support for amendment No 2. That amendment encourages a Northern Ireland Executive approach to tackle the issues by addressing the root cause of the problem rather than the symptoms. I will, however, acknowledge amendment No 1, tabled by Mr Storey and Mr Givan. If amendment No 1 were a stand-alone motion, it would have my full support, but, unfortunately, it competes with amendment No 2, which I see as the most realistic and long-term route for tackling violent crime, including the various types noted in that amendment.

I am not entirely content with the wording of the original motion, but I support the general principle that identifies the relationship between violent crime and alcohol and drugs and the harm that that causes in communities. I would prefer that we called on all Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive to address the issue rather than just the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health, which is why I support amendment No 2.

Please, Minister, bear with me when I say that the Department of Justice could be described as the "Department of Failure". When all other Departments have failed in providing high-quality public services, protecting the most vulnerable in society and offering genuine opportunities for children and young people for

a better life, the Department of Justice picks up the pieces. When a perpetrator commits a crime, it is too late. It is too late for victims and their families, too late for wider society, too late for the perpetrator and too late for public finances. What point is not too late? Is it adulthood, early adulthood, adolescence, childhood, early years or even in the womb? The point I am trying to make is that no one is born bad and, definitely, no one is born a perpetrator of violent crime or, indeed, any other type of crime. They are a product of their environment, circumstances and opportunities. Not having a roof over their head, a hot meal on the table or access to quality education will affect the people they become. If Government, whose job it is to serve and protect their people by providing a minimum public service, as outlined above, do not do that, those people will turn to crime and criminality dressed up as paramilitarism. It is the cost of failure, and all society will suffer. As well as calling on the Minister of Justice, I call on every Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive to do their job, to work together, to provide public services and to improve what we have so that violent crime, paramilitary activity or any other type of criminal behaviour is not the preferred option.

It is inevitable that we will address symptoms of a broken society and poor public services and that people will commit crimes, but maybe we should take a walk upstream and address where those problems began. There is no point in emptying the sink if you do not turn off the tap. The correlation between the rise of crime and alcohol- and drug-related offences is entirely valid. Again, we can seek to address alcohol- and drug abuse-related crime, or we can try to understand why people abuse alcohol and drugs, which leads them on a path of criminal behaviour. I suspect that much is to do with poor mental health and early childhood trauma, among other reasons. I really appreciate a number of Members acknowledging the impact of trauma and sharing their own stories. At this point, I want to stress that I am not providing excuses for criminal behaviour. I am providing reasons with the hope that, if we address those reasons, we prevent crime and, most importantly, we prevent the creation of victims.

A considerable number of domestic abuse incidents are reported to the police each year. The number that go unreported does not bear thinking about. Despite the shortcomings of the Assembly in not sitting for three years, I genuinely do not understand why it took so long to address the issue. It is to society's shame and to the Assembly's shame that we have not legislated before now. Our shame is that a

wooden table has more justice in Northern Ireland than a victim of domestic abuse.

I fully support and commend the Minister for agreeing to legislate as soon as possible. I understand that it can happen here as quickly as in Westminster and that we can tailor it to meet our specific needs.

I sought to address domestic abuse for a number of reasons —

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

Ms Sugden: — not least the reasons that I have outlined. Domestic abuse in itself is a trauma that can lead to mental health and addiction issues that can then lead to criminal behaviour. We need to break that cycle. We can do that through domestic abuse legislation, but we need to look more widely at other traumas.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Linda Dillon to make her winding-up speech on amendment No 2 — sorry, I missed a bit. I call the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, to respond to the debate.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I put on record my gratitude to the Members for Upper Bann, South Down and Mid Ulster for bringing the motion to the House and to the Members who tabled amendments to expand on the debate that we have had. I also thank all those who participated in the discussions, and I very much welcome the opportunity to respond.

I share Members' concerns about violent crime. No crime is acceptable, and those that involve violence can be particularly traumatic for the victim. It is, however, important to remember at the outset that, with some of the crimes that involve violence against the person, such as domestic violence, the statistics are rising at least partially as a result of an increase in support for victims to report and the consequential increase in reporting levels. The more we know about those types of crime, the more we can try to address them effectively. Whilst I, again, stress that no crime, particularly violent crime, is acceptable, it is also important to reassure Members of the Assembly and, importantly, members of the public that levels of crime across Northern Ireland generally are low. Police-recorded crime statistics show us that it is about 40% lower in Northern Ireland than in England and Wales. Nonetheless, I recognise that that is no comfort for victims. Alan Chambers set out very passionately the

wider long-term consequences of violent crime for those who are affected by it.

Ensuring that communities are safe, resilient and supported is an absolute priority for me. I am also very conscious of the underlying issues and risk factors that increase the likelihood of people offending, which Mr Pat Sheehan and others set out, and I want to take some time to set out the work that my Department is doing to address that.

We recognise that drugs and alcohol misuse is cross-cutting and impacts on people's lives at every level in Northern Ireland. It can lead to crime committed to fuel drug dependence and to fuel the organised criminality, violence and exploitation that often go hand in hand with production and supply and paramilitarism. It can also cause untold damage and loss to families and individuals. It is difficult to know exactly how many people in Northern Ireland use illicit drugs or misuse prescription drugs; however, I, like others, am concerned by the apparent upward trend in risk-taking behaviour, as evidenced by increases in seizures, arrests and, most worryingly, drug-related deaths. I am committed to ongoing work with partners to end the harm caused by the illicit supply and misuse of drugs and alcohol, and my Department and law enforcement agencies clearly have key roles to play in that. However, as Dolores Kelly and others rightly stated, it is also clear that they are issues that justice and policing alone cannot solve. They require collaborative, joined-up and holistic responses across a wide range of partners to successfully tackle the interaction between substance misuse and poverty, deprivation, mental health and adverse childhood incidents. I am grateful for the strong partnerships that already exist through the Organised Crime Task Force, policing and community safety partnerships, drug and alcohol coordination teams and the structures that underpin the delivery of the Department of Health's new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs. The Executive have committed to an ongoing cross-departmental response to deal with those issues, and that collaborative approach to improving prosperity and well-being for all will be reflected in the draft Programme for Government commitments and is reflected in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

Today's debate provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the specific actions that have already been taken forward in the Department of Health-led Executive strategy 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs: Phase 2' to prevent and address the harms related to substance misuse in Northern Ireland. It is also an opportunity to raise the Health-led work that

is ongoing to shape and develop the new substance misuse strategy, which is aimed at preventing the use and misuse of substances, reducing harm and maintaining recovery. In liaison with the Department of Health, my Department will focus on how the new strategy can strengthen the powers to reduce drug supply and support those vulnerable to offending or to being a victim of offending by developing initiatives to identify at an early stage individuals with problems and ensure that appropriate action to reduce the harm of substance use is implemented. My Department already engages with these issues in innovative ways. Ultimately, addressing the root causes of problematic behaviour will result in fewer offenders, fewer victims and more confident and safer families and communities. From a criminal justice perspective, I have a vested interest. We know that people with drug and alcohol problems and other health-related issues are more likely to come into contact with the justice system.

We support local work through the PCSPs, which work with communities to address safety concerns. Many of those initiatives will help to address alcohol and drug issues in local areas. One is the Remove All Prescription and Illegal Drug (RAPID) bins, which help to remove illegal and prescription drugs from the streets. So far, they have proved successful, with tens of thousands of drugs being deposited regularly into bins located throughout Northern Ireland.

The Department has made a substantial commitment to tackle the root causes of offending through problem-solving justice approaches that aim to reduce harmful behaviour in families and the wider community. Practical interventions are already being delivered. As an early-stage intervention — something raised by a number of Members, including Colin McGrath — my Department works with schools to raise awareness among young people of the consequences of the abuse of alcohol and drugs. That includes using drama such as the play 'Blackout' to explore how misuse can lead to antisocial behaviour or more serious criminal activity and violent crime, leading then to coming to the attention of the criminal justice system. The inter-agency work of support hubs is another way in which we work collaboratively to reduce the vulnerability of individuals who may be susceptible to offending through alcohol or drug use or to being a victim of violent crime. My Department will continue to support the development of that model, which, in addition to helping to improve people's situation, reduces the demand on services such as the police, allowing them to focus on crime prevention. The substance

misuse courts provide another approach to helping individuals when substance misuse is the underlying problem. It seeks to tackle the root causes of their criminal behaviour and provide specialist support and interventions to help people to turn their life around. It allows a judge to direct individuals to an intensive treatment programme before sentencing to help to address their addictions and change their behaviour. Evaluation of the approach is ongoing, but the early indications are positive. Those are just three of the problem-solving pilot projects that the Department delivers to address the root causes of crime and antisocial behaviour. Through them, we collectively provide effective support to the individuals who most need it, and, in doing so, we make our communities safer.

Supporting individuals is crucial. However, a comprehensive response must also deliver effective enforcement action, and a number of Members referred to that. I acknowledge the important role of the Organised Crime Task Force here in providing a strategic lead on multi-agency activity to disrupt the illicit supply of drugs to communities. I also pay tribute to the operational response of the law enforcement agencies. They work collaboratively to disrupt the importation, supply and distribution of drugs. In the 2018-19 financial year, they delivered increased operational success, with increased drug seizures and drug-related arrests.

The Organised Crime Task Force gives a specific focus to drug-related deaths. It works collaboratively to gain a fuller picture of the issue and causes so that agencies can target resources at the areas of most need. The task force also tracks trends and emerging behaviours so that we can respond to them. That work will inform how we work with partners in the health and social care and voluntary sectors to educate the public about the risks of alcohol and substance misuse, particularly those associated with polydrug use. I concur with John Blair's comments on the misuse of prescription medication, which has serious consequences.

I repeat my reassurance that levels of violent crime across Northern Ireland are relatively low. However, that does not give grounds for complacency. I am committed to working with partners across government and law enforcement to put in place appropriate measures to keep people safe from crime and reduce the fear of crime, which Paul Frew rightly identified as often being much higher than the actual level of crime but which can

impact on people's freedom to live their life confidently.

Offenders who are convicted of violent offences will, in many circumstances, be subject to public protection arrangements and will be assessed and managed on a multi-agency basis to ensure that we keep the public safe. I am pleased that, in the current financial year, my Department has been able to reinvest nearly £1 million of recovered criminal assets through the assets recovery community scheme to support the delivery of projects designed to reduce crime and the fear of crime across Northern Ireland. Not only does the scheme provide a strong visible message that crime does not pay but, by funding projects like cold-calling and DNA-marking schemes and other strategic crime prevention initiatives, it helps to protect individuals who are often vulnerable and to make them feel safer in their homes and communities.

6.45 pm

I will focus for a moment on the importance of feeling safe and being safe in your home. Violent crime does not happen just on the streets; sadly, it often happens within families. It is important to recognise that domestic abuse involves not solely physical violence but often controlling, coercive behaviours, psychological and financial, that have long-term consequences for the victim and the wider family, as Paul Givan noted. Worryingly, they are often invisible to those outside the immediate relationship. Domestic abuse is about more than just physical violence; equally serious is the often hidden abuse that goes on behind closed doors.

While we continue to see an increase in the reporting of domestic violence and abuse crimes, that is also a positive reflection of an increased willingness to come forward and report to the police. There is, however, more to be done to further encourage reporting, both through having comprehensive legislation and providing support to those who are affected by domestic abuse. I have announced my intention to bring a domestic abuse Bill through the Assembly to create a new domestic abuse offence for Northern Ireland. I assure Paul Frew that, with fair wind, I intend to do so prior to the Easter recess. It will capture patterns of coercive or controlling behaviour and send a clear message that domestic abuse in all its forms is wrong — not just illegal but culturally unacceptable. We must end the cycle of multigenerational harm and dysfunction to

which Pat Sheehan and others referred and Martina mentioned particularly.

The use and abuse of family courts to maintain contact and the manipulation of children through parental alienation also need to be addressed. It will not be possible to make it a specific offence in this Bill. However, I draw the Member's attention to coercive behaviour, which will be covered by the Bill, and the fact that any behaviour involving or witnessed by a child is an aggravating factor when it comes to sentencing. As part of the Bill, crimes with a domestic abuse motivation may also attract increased sentencing as an aggravating factor as a result of the domestic abuse element. That is in addition to the new domestic abuse offence. There are opportunities here to make a real difference, and I put on record my thanks to Claire Sugden for the work that she has done.

I turn now to victim support services. As well as the necessary protections against abuse and violent crime more generally, we need a consistent regional support service for victims and witnesses of crime, as Doug Beattie and others identified. My Department funds Victim Support NI and the NSPCC Young Witness Service to provide support services to adults and young victims and witnesses of crime. By next year, we want to have in place a new advocacy support service for victims of domestic and sexual abuse that seeks to provide the best possible service with the funding available.

Violent sexual crime and the Gillen review was raised by Dolores Kelly. Along with others, I am keen to see progress made on those recommendations. Not all of them will fall to Justice to deliver, but my officials are working with criminal justice and voluntary sector organisations. An action plan is being progressed to ensure, particularly in the first phase, that the recommendations that impact on victims are expedited.

A number of Members raised the issue of reducing reoffending. For those who commit violent crime and those affected by it alike, a custodial sentence is an important part of the justice process. It reflects the harm caused to victims and society by those actions and is needed to uphold the rule of law and to maintain public confidence in the justice system. However, a key element in any sentence for those who commit a crime and those who are affected by it must be a focus on rehabilitation to reduce reoffending and ensure positive outcomes. It is incredibly important that we see the role of prisons not just as a punishment but as keeping people safe and

ensuring that, on release, there will be reduced reoffending and, ultimately, fewer victims of crime.

I share the concerns that were voiced about the harms caused to our community and to vulnerable individuals through the misuse of drugs and alcohol and through violent crime. While Northern Ireland continues to have relatively low levels of crime, such statistics can only be cold comfort to individuals who suffer loss as a result of the supply of illicit drugs or who have been victims of violent crime or domestic violence. I am committed to ongoing work with my Executive colleagues to tackle that harm and to support and protect the vulnerable, particularly noting the importance of the interfaces that exist between my Department and that of my colleague the Health Minister. I look forward to strengthening and deepening our partnerships to deliver against our shared outcome of a safe Northern Ireland where we respect the law and respect each other.

Ms Dillon: I begin by thanking the Minister for her comments. I will not go over everything that everyone said, but I support the motion and ask Members to support amendment No 2.

Dolores Kelly outlined some of the issues around the Gillen review, and that is the greatest example of the need for cross-departmental collaboration. Gillen, in his recommendations, touched on every Department.

Doug Beattie argued for a victims' commissioner, and the Minister has already responded to that suggestion. Nobody is necessarily opposed to that, but you have to decide whether it is the best use of resources.

Paul Frew commented on attacks on healthcare staff. I absolutely agree with him, but it goes back to the question of what is the root cause. My mother was a healthcare assistant in Daisy Hill Hospital, and she was badly injured one night by a patient who injured her accidentally. She was encouraged to make a statement against that individual, but she said, "That gentleman is extremely ill. He did not intend to injure me, and, therefore, I do not feel that any kind of sentence or judicial process would be beneficial to anybody in this case". That goes back to what Christopher Stalford said, and it is the reason why we cannot support the DUP amendment. Whilst, to be fair, in essence, it is a good enough amendment, it probably has too much focus on the judicial process and not enough on tackling the root causes.

There is little that Claire Sugden said that I do not agree with. She is absolutely right: if people have reached the judicial system, we have failed them in every possible way. That is the essence of the motion. I thank our colleagues in the SDLP for tabling the motion.

I place on record my thanks to Alan Chambers for outlining his personal story; I know that that is not easy to do. I understand that being a victim of this type of crime has a lasting impact, and he is to be commended for bringing that to the House's attention today.

Our amendment is set in the context of prevention and early intervention. That is essential in order to reduce violent crime, whether it is domestic and sexual violence or attacks on our elderly or on those who are vulnerable. Those who are vulnerable are the victims of crime and, as well, those who are vulnerable are the perpetrators of crime. That is why we tabled our amendment.

To address root causes, all Departments need to work together. As we well know, people who end up in the criminal justice system overwhelmingly have issues with mental health and with substance and alcohol misuse and come from the areas of highest deprivation. There is some good collaborative working going on in some areas, particularly between Health and Justice, specifically on prisons and the PSNI. Whilst that is welcome, as we have already outlined, by the time the individual has come into contact with the criminal justice system, we have failed them.

The Education and Communities Departments have their role to play, particularly through the Youth Service but also in our school system, in identifying where children are at risk. The Department for Communities can play a part by addressing deprivation and housing need. DAERA has a role, particularly on rural crime and isolation, which can make people more vulnerable to being the victim of crime. The Minister for the Economy, as part of her portfolio, needs to look at where we can provide skills, training and employment in areas of high deprivation, and, as this will have to be financed, the Minister of Finance has an important role to play in any strategic approach to dealing with the root causes. Those are the reasons that this cannot simply be a matter for Justice and Health. All Departments have their role to play. We need to focus on addressing the root causes.

When a violent crime is committed, the punishment must fit the crime — on that, I agree with many Members across the House —

particularly where there is loss of life or serious physical or psychological injury. Subsequent sentencing should reflect the seriousness of the crime: that is what families and society as a whole expect. However, nothing can replace the benefit of prevention. Families who have lost a loved one or have been victims of violent crime can attest to that. We also need to ensure that there is a focus on rehabilitation, as that is the only way to tackle reoffending effectively. The Minister has referred to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Dillon: Sorry. We need to have a proper strategic approach to ensure that we implement good policy that reduces the risk of people ending up in the criminal justice system in the first place.

I just want to outline one case that was brought to me recently by a school principal —

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

Ms Dillon: — who highlighted to me the need for nurture in his school —.

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

Ms Dillon: I think that some leeway was given to others.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member, please, take her seat?

Ms Dillon: The need for nurture in his school to address this is where it begins.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member, please, take her seat? Thank you.

Mr Storey: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate as we conclude on the issues that have been raised. Rather than rehearse all the issues that Members have raised, I will make a few comments on what has brought us to this point. Obviously, we are disappointed that the proposer of the motion will not accept our amendment and that, when Mr Blair was making his remarks, he did not refer to the last part of our amendment, which calls on the Minister of Justice:

"to work collaboratively with the Minister of Health and victims' advocates to introduce

an action plan and a resourced implementation plan".

The issue of collaboration was there.

While I welcome the fact that the Minister is here, it is disappointing that nowhere throughout her comments did she make any reference to the amendments or what her view would be. I trust that that does not send out a signal to those who are a blight on our society, whether they are criminals who go under the guise of paramilitaries — we will come to that shortly — or just thugs who are determined to destroy communities and destroy people's lives, that, somehow, there is no place for the criminal justice system. I want to see those who break the law pay the price for doing so. A society that does not have that approach will, in a way, become diverted from actually seeing those who are responsible being brought to justice. Therefore, I am somewhat disappointed in the Minister and the approach that she has taken, even though the previous Minister indicated that her review, which is now complete, gave us a raft of sentencing that needs to be addressed so that we have a judicial system and a sentencing regime that is fit for purpose and, more importantly, fits the crimes of those who have destroyed lives.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. I just want to point out that, while the sentencing review is complete, its outcomes or conclusions have not been enacted. I would also point him to the part of my speech where I said that the criminal justice system had an important role to play, because he must have missed that in my original remarks.

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

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister. This is the place to have that debate. I look forward to seeing what she brings forward. We can all come to the House, make comments on Twitter and try to salve our consciences by saying that we have done our best for the people that we claim to represent, but the test will be the legislation that we can enact and that can be effective in dealing with those who want to break the law and destroy lives.

I concur with my colleague who moved amendment No 1, the Chair of the Committee for Justice. He gave us the statistics.

The sad reality is that, when we come to debates like this and others, we use statistics, but, as has often been said — we have been

given examples in the House this evening — behind all of those figures are individuals, families and communities who have been destroyed because of those activities. We need to ensure that we do not forget that.

7.00 pm

Let us not forget that violent and sexual offences are becoming more prevalent. Victims of those crimes will not be comforted by the Minister saying to us this evening that we are better than the rest of the United Kingdom. Although that is the case — the figures indicate that that is so — it gives no comfort to female victims in particular, because crimes against females are becoming more harmful; they account for almost 49% of all violence-against-the-person offences. My colleague gave the figures for those particular crimes.

We could go down those lists of figures, but it is also important to highlight an issue that came to the Policing Board just a few weeks ago: the pathfinder initiative on custody nurse practitioners (CNPs) in Musgrave Street police station. It has seen very good outcomes; it has resulted in a reduction in referrals to emergency departments from Musgrave station of some 42%. I have written to the Health Minister to ensure that funding is in place —

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

Mr Storey: — so that it cannot be used as a football to determine who pays the bill, rather than ensure that those who need help will get the help that they rightfully deserve.

Mr McGlone: I thank all of the Members who have contributed to the debate here today. It is very important. As my colleague Dolores Kelly said at the start, it is imperative to answer the Members across the Chamber by saying that we have a cross-departmental approach to these issues. She cited school failures and mental health, which draw in education, health, housing, youth services and, as was mentioned during the debate, anti-poverty strategies to try to tackle some of the root causes associated with violence of that scale.

I pay tribute to — it has been mentioned somewhat — the likes of Women's Aid and Nexus, which are very often at the forefront of providing help and assistance to those most affected through some of the most vulnerable and difficult times of their lives. I am sure that all of us here have, through our offices, helped to support people and have seen the really

good work that is carried out by those organisations — on many occasions, quietly and beneath the radar, but of vital importance.

Paul Givan explained the impact of violent crime. He said that it requires a wider response from society. He nodded in the direction of — we will support the Sinn Féin amendment — support for an extensive and cross-departmental approach to the issue. He referred to an increase in violent crime. All of us would like sentencing to match the level of the violent crime, but we have to look at some of the root causes of that as well, hence the need for a cross-departmental approach. He cited the evidence of trauma inflicted on a family. I suppose that many of us have cases that we can refer to in our own localities. While some are pretty traumatic for the families, those that stick out for us are especially the ones that involve children. We should not forget about those children; some very vicious cases have been before the courts. Trauma inflicted on a family could be on the wife, partner or husband, or it could be on those innocents lying in their cots. Reference was made to increased offences of drug misuse and alcohol abuse, which we all know instances of.

Pat Sheehan referred to the three-stranded approach, if we can call it that: the need for legislation, early intervention and rehabilitation. I thank him for being so concise in outlining that to us. He went on to refer to adverse childhood experiences and insights into the prison population and those coming from disadvantaged areas, and attendant issues such as self-harming and suicide, again bringing us back to mental health often being an underlying factor for people who wind up in prison.

Doug Beattie supported the motion and the amendments. He made reference to not forgetting victims, and I do not think that any of us would do that. Some people have come through awful traumas in their lives, and it would be totally immoral to forget those people and not provide support for them.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Linda? Yes.

Ms Dillon: Does the Member agree that we are absolutely not forgetting about victims in this, because very often the perpetrators were themselves victims and that is how they became perpetrators?

Mr McGlone: Yes, there is that element of recidivism that comes about, and we hear of families where that is the case. Some have carried that family experience with them and inflicted it on others. In some of those families, that has, unfortunately, become accepted behaviour, which is an awful aspect of life in some households.

John Blair referred to increased collaboration, victims of crime and seeking solutions on an education-wide and cross-departmental basis. He also referred to the substance abuse courts and multi-agency triage.

Paul Frew referred to his previous efforts on domestic violence as well as the issues of one-punch attacks and drink-driving. He talked about the need to give support to victims. In an intervention, Jonny Buckley referred to domestic violence and the importance of doing the right thing. Paul Frew referred back to the private Member's legislation. An important point concerned emergency personnel, doctors, nurses and others who may be subject to assaults while trying to care for people.

Martina Anderson referred to the incidence of violent crime, citing in particular her own city of Derry, where there has been a significant increase in the amount of problems associated with violent crime. She rightly referred to those problems and the lack of quality jobs, the heightened increases in poverty and urban deprivation and how that is associated with violent crime.

Gordon Dunne referred to the need for the voluntary sector and its involvement in particular schemes — he cited a number of schemes in Bangor. He also talked about the effect of violent and abusive behaviour, justice for victims and the punishment fitting the crime. He also referred to the PCSPs, the PSNI and community and voluntary groups: again, a local policy that fits the needs of a local town.

Colin McGrath referred to people suffering in silence because of awful domestic abuse, both young and old, and the need for an anti-poverty strategy to help to tackle some of the root causes of violent and criminal behaviour. He also referred to investment, the recent announcement on local policing initiatives and the importance of local police knowing their local areas and the people in them. He also referred to the ability of young people to access alcohol, which leads on to drug use or drug abuse and antisocial behaviour.

Alan Chambers told his personal, harrowing story of violence. That would have been truly

traumatic for any family to come through, and I hope that the proper support was provided to you and your family, Alan, at the time and since.

Claire Sugden referred to her experience at the Department and explained that, at the end of the day, the Department was expected to pick up the pieces. She spoke of the need for cross-departmental cooperation on mental health, education, sport and an anti-poverty strategy. The current Minister thanked her for her hard work during her time as Minister.

The Minister in her response referred to the need for cross-departmental initiatives, for those initiatives to support the vulnerable and for victims to get the necessary support. She cited a number of the Department's initiatives to help to try to tackle violent and antisocial behaviour. She referred to the substance misuse court and the fact that it and other pilot projects seem to be, at this stage, rendering some useful benefits in their progress, albeit that they are pilot projects. She responded on effective enforcement, referring to the Organised Crime Task Force and, again, a multi-agency approach to dealing with a number of these issues, including where the source of some of this criminal activity is organised crime. We will come to that topic later. She spoke about the importance of the assets recovery scheme and of drawing those assets to put them back into the community to help to support efforts to piece communities back together.

Linda Dillon talked about the motion in her intervention, and I thank her for that. She spoke about the necessity for cross-departmental support and cross-departmental initiatives, which has been the common theme running through the debate. Indeed, it was referred to during the debate, including, I think, by the Minister, that it would be part of the Programme for Government. All the parties adhered to that position, so that might be useful.

Mervyn Storey said that he was disappointed by some of the approaches being taken.

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

Mr McGlone: In conclusion, we support the Sinn Féin amendment, given that it embraces that necessary cross-departmental and multi-agency approach to tackling some of the worst excesses of violence and domestic crime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind

Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 32; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr M Bradley and Mr Robinson

NOES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr McNulty, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Dillon and Mr McGrath.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Ms Sugden

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern about increasing levels of violent crime; recognises that this has been accompanied by a similar rise in alcohol and drug-related offences; notes the effect of such crime on victims and on communities across Northern Ireland; further notes that comprehensive legislation protecting

victims of domestic violence has yet to be passed; and calls on the Minister of Justice to work collaboratively with Executive Ministers to bring forward an action plan and a resourced implementation plan to reduce violent offending and the risk of reoffending, including by addressing the root causes of offending behaviour such as addiction, mental illness, and poverty.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

7.30 pm

Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland

Mr Beattie: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that many communities across Northern Ireland are still living under siege from paramilitary gangs; reiterates its total rejection of those who continue to engage in criminality, intimidation and coercive control; gives its full support to the agencies working to close down criminal networks and activity; and calls on the Minister of Justice to ensure that the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other agencies are properly resourced to allow them to increase their efforts in addressing ongoing paramilitarism.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Beattie: I will be supporting the SDLP's amendment because it adds value to the motion, and anything that adds value is positive.

Paramilitarism is a scourge on our society and on all our communities. Those involved in paramilitarism are self-serving individuals who are involved for profit, for self-proclaimed status, to control the working class with violence distilled through fear and for the promotion of a separated society that creates a sense of distrust of the other community. When I say paramilitary groups, I mean the UVF, I mean the UDA, I mean the INLA, I mean RAAD, I mean PIRA, CIRA, RIRA and all others

shades of paramilitary terrorist groups. There can be no difference.

In 2010, 12 years after the Belfast Agreement, we still had 94 violent paramilitary crimes: that was 37 shootings and 57 assaults. The effects are the same, whether it is a gun, or a stick, or a bat, or a nail or a hammer, the results are exactly the same: ruined lives.

In 2016, the year we introduced the action plan on tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime, there was a total of 85 attacks. The split between the trend for shooting and assaults remained pretty much the same, and this went up in 2018, before the latest statistics from 2019, where we now sit again at the 2016 figure of 85 violent paramilitary attacks — more than one a week. It is as if nothing has changed, even with the paramilitary task force, but we all in this House know that lots has changed because there is more to paramilitarism than just violent attacks.

We have a duty in this Assembly to show leadership in the tackling of paramilitarism, in word and in deed. We cannot shy away from it. I look to the Sinn Féin benches, and I know you do not want to hear it, but it is important that you do hear it, because your link with the IRA and the army council is destroying our society. Your argument that it does not exist just does not hold water.

The murder of Robert McCartney — that despicable, disgraceful crime — was met with a wall of silence, as was the murder of Paul Quinn in 2007, where the Sinn Féin MLA met the IRA to assure himself that they were not involved. But they were involved. Then he gave them cover by saying Paul Quinn was involved in criminality. After the violent death of that young lad, they besmirched his name. It is absolutely disgraceful. Sinn Féin must distance itself from the IRA — past and present — and it must do so vigorously. There is no place for a political party that has a military wing; there is no place for a military wing that has a political party.

Unionism must also take a hard look at itself and ensure that it distances itself from loyalist paramilitaries. For far too long, active paramilitaries have torn their communities apart. Loyalist paramilitaries are responsible for extortion, intimidation, drug dealing and coercive control — self-styled brigadiers feeding off their communities.

Communities are living in fear of loyalist paramilitaries. In its worst excesses, it results in murder. The murder of Ian Ogle was utterly vile.

It was perpetrated in a cowardly manner. The Ogle family represents the reality for many people across working-class areas in Northern Ireland. People out there are still using paramilitary gangs to torment communities. The intimidation of the Ogle family started long before Ian was murdered. A year on from that, the family is still not allowed to grieve in peace. They are still the victims of intimidation and attempts to alienate them from their community.

I pay tribute to the Ogle family — Vera and Toni are in the Gallery — for their steadfastness and courage in seeking justice over the murder of Ian, partner of Vera and father of Toni. The perpetrators are loyalists who say they are protecting their community, but they are doing nothing more than damaging their community, and they must be rooted out. They will be rooted out only if we — all of us in the Chamber — take stock of our actions and words and tell them that they are not acceptable. It is not enough for us to say that it is down to civic community to do that if we do not show leadership.

Of course, resourcing the police is going to help a lot. I hope that we do resource the police, because neighbourhood policing and ward constables are the way forward in order for people to link with a policeman that they know to help them get rid of the paramilitaries.

There must be other practical measures. Society is not balanced in the way we tackle paramilitaries. We try describing paramilitaries as nothing more than criminals or organised crime gangs, and I am in favour of doing that. We seek evidence against them, make arrests, put them through the courts and, if found guilty, jail them. Then we allow drug dealers to classify themselves as politically motivated offenders. We put them in a separated prison regime, where they pick up their title of brigadier, and, when they get released, they bring it back into their communities. It is absolutely ridiculous that, on the outside of prisons, we say, "You're a criminal", but when we put them in prison, we say, "You're a brigadier". When they come out, with their self-importance, the cycle starts all over again.

The House will know that in 2016 I brought forward a motion to end separated prison regimes, for that very reason. My motion gave eight years to reduce and then end that separated regime. If the Assembly had supported me, we would be halfway through that process, and that would have been the point at which we stopped putting in new admissions to the separated prison regime — but you did not. When the chips were down,

you did not support it, and we are no further forward. I received abuse and threats, but I stood here and said that it needed to end, and it does need to end.

We are allowing ourselves and our society to be held hostage by the paramilitaries. The outworking of that is up in the Gallery, if you wish to look: the Ogle family. We should be supporting people like that, and there are many people like that around the country.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it is with regret that two of my former colleagues, prison officers David Black and Adrian Ismay, lost their lives perhaps because of our failure to challenge and end the segregated regime, as you have explicitly laid out before us tonight?

Mr Beattie: Thank you for the intervention. You are absolutely right, because the intelligence says that those prison officers were targeted from inside the prison and from inside that prison regime. That separated prison regime targeted two men for murder, and we allow it. It is time that we stopped appeasing them and stood shoulder to shoulder with our communities to say, "No more".

For those who want to make the transition, they need to do so. There should be no inducement: just do it. Move away from it and become something positive in your community. Just move away from it. If you are waiting for somebody to put their hand in their pocket and pull out a wallet and give you money, you have missed the point. It is time to end it for your community's sake, for your children's sake and for your family's sake. If you do not do so, I go back to the very start, when I said, "You do this for profit. You do this for self-interest. You do this because you want to be seen as the big lad, in the pub with a pint, saying, 'I'm the brigadier'".

Mr Speaker: Will the Member start to wind up his remarks, please?

Mr Beattie: For those who do not wish to move away, we need to chase them and root them out. We need to bring every single thing available to get those people, to get the evidence and to get them into jail. When we put them in jail, we treat them like criminals. That is how we will deal with this.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. Thank you, Member.

Mr McGlone: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "activity;" and insert:

"acknowledges that paramilitarism is being used as a cover for profiteering criminal gangs; further recognises that addressing the pervasive influences of poverty, deprivation and lack of opportunity in working-class communities across Northern Ireland is critical to releasing the grip of criminals; and calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce unexplained wealth orders to allow the PSNI to disrupt and dismantle these gangs and to work with her Executive colleagues to fully resource the PSNI and other agencies to eradicate the influence of paramilitarism."

I thank the proposer of the motion for delivering —

Mr Speaker: Will you resume your seat for a second?

Mr McGlone: Sorry. Excuse me.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate.

Mr McGlone: You should have said, "You should've known better". *[Laughter.]* Thank you for that. It is getting a wee bit late.

I thank the proposers of the motion for tabling the debate. The presence, prevalence and insidious influence of paramilitary gangs in our community should be a matter of immense concern for all Members. Their operation as organised paramilitary gangs is in opposition to our collective efforts to sustain peace and to deliver for the people whom we represent through exclusively peaceful means.

Our amendment is designed to be constructive and to build on the sentiment that the proposers have introduced here today by identifying some of the methods by which the new Executive can disrupt and dismantle paramilitary gangs. Those methods may not be exclusive to the Executive themselves. It is also designed to give a voice to those communities who have tried to break from the grip of paramilitarism but feel that, through the cycle of poverty, deprivation and inequality, the odds are stacked against them.

Paramilitarism involves murder, extortion, fuel laundering, cigarettes, drugs, organised crime, human trafficking and prostitution, to name but a few. Tackling those issues needs the involvement of the Organised Crime Task Force, along with HMRC. If Mr Bling, with no apparent means to his name, is sailing about in a BMW, with lots of gold dripping from him, it is not too hard to figure out that, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be an extortionist paramilitary.

Any plan to eradicate the influence of paramilitaries and criminal gangs must recognise that inequality and lack of opportunity are critical recruitment tools for those intent on ruining the lives of a new generation. If we want to stop them, we need to provide those communities with the opportunity for a better life. Indeed, that was touched on in the earlier debate around some of the domestic violence activities of individuals. I hope that the proposers of the motion take the amendment as a supportive supplement.

We cannot pretend that the recurring influence of paramilitaries is not a feature of this society that needs to be overcome. It is a fundamental part of the unfinished business of our peace process. While parties here will disagree on the profile or the provenance of paramilitary gangs or, indeed, on the most appropriate operational response to their threat, it is important that we send a united message to those involved. Whoever you think that your struggle is against, whether it is republicanism or loyalism, apparently, Irish unity or the British state, allegedly: you are wrong.

Every act of violence is a violation of the will of the people of this island, North and South. Your fight is with the people of Ireland, and that is a fight that you will never, ever win.

7.45 pm

It is important that we do not allow our different approaches to this issue, or different emphases on approaches to it, or to the issue of legacy, to be interpreted as division on the core matter. There is no tolerance for those who set themselves against the direct wishes of our people for peace. As parties, we should have a coherent and consistent shared standard that recognises and rejects paramilitary interests. Our shared approach should be about rooting out paramilitarism in all its forms, not singling out particular groups or parties. A whole-community approach, which the SDLP has long called for, would send a powerful message to

those whom we represent and to those who oppose these institutions.

That should present a challenge to us all as Members of the Assembly. It is not enough to issue stale statements of condemnation when there is a security alert in our own constituencies. Recycling the same words and sentiments when it is close to home is just not enough. The truth is that a bomb in Derry or Belfast is as much of a threat to people who live in Mid Ulster, Newry or anywhere else as if it had been placed in one of our towns. We should see every vestige of paramilitary activity as an attack on all of us and respond as one community, united in our commitment to ending the coercive control of those gangs over our society.

It is easy to talk about unity in the House in March, removed from the context of difficult situations. Our commitment to tackling paramilitarism together is more often tested in the white heat of controversy in the summer months. I will not dwell on that, but it is worth saying that when political messages on paramilitarism appear capricious, self-serving or, indeed, divided, it only compounds the working challenges for those who are trying to help communities to transition away from ingrained paramilitary interests. They thrive on division, and it must be our mission to stay close to each other when times are difficult. It must also be said that it would be easier to stay closer on those issues if these institutions were clearly able to allay the misgivings that have previously been expressed that programme money unduly follows paramilitary-related entities or that employment that derives from some community funding is unfairly given to those with proven paramilitary associations.

I will now turn to the terms of the amendment and, specifically, to the additional tools that the PSNI and the courts need to disrupt and dismantle criminal gangs. Members will be aware that the absence of a functioning Executive has led to a lag in the introduction of unexplained wealth orders here. I welcome the Justice Minister's comments that she intends to bring forward the necessary provisions to activate the implementation of those orders. It would be useful if she would — I am sure that she will, later on — outline a timetable for the introduction of the necessary regulations.

It is important for confidence in policing, and in our efforts to tackle paramilitaries and criminal gangs, that people see the relentless pursuit of those who have amassed significant assets as a result of criminality. How many times have Members tried to encourage people to bring

information to the police, only to be told that the dogs in the street know who is behind the drug dealing, punishment beatings or racketeering? That is because they live in big houses, drive flash cars and appear invulnerable to the law. Indeed, it is suggested that some of them are agents, and that must be put on record here too.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that those who have significant assets, with no immediate evidence of a means to support that and who are suspected of being implicated in serious criminal wrongdoing, should have to account for those assets. We cannot pretend that there is no correlation between those who have previously exercised coercive control over communities under the guise of armed struggle and those who now exercise the same form of control for profit. They have not gone away, you know.

It is important that every tool be available to bring those gangs to justice. This must be the beginning of a sustained assault on the infrastructure of criminal control that exists in far too many communities. We must acknowledge that this is not a matter for just the Justice Minister to tackle — I referred earlier to the likes of HMRC — nor will resource alone bring to an end the activities of those who prey on our communities and their insecurities or fears. We need a whole-Executive approach to dealing with the causes of the poverty, deprivation and deep-seated inequalities that exist, particularly in working-class communities.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, in dealing with the past, it is imperative that the legacy mechanisms in the Stormont House Agreement are introduced sooner rather than later because we need the truth — the horrible truth — to be told in full about what was done, and we need all those responsible held to account?

Mr McGlone: Absolutely. It is vital that we have the truth. Without the truth, people will live with that sense of injustice. That, too, can be fed upon and perpetuated by these people, who tend to portray themselves, which is the only way to put it, as defenders of communities and the like. Without that sense of justice permeating society, those people, however misguided they may be, will still see a void to fill.

There is also a requirement to invest in communities that have yet to experience the peace dividend. It means ensuring that we have a regionally balanced economy that provides opportunity for everyone. It means levelling up

our ambition for new housing. It means investing in the infrastructure needed to allow towns and cities across the North to flourish.

We should be building a society that provides everyone with the security of a job and the dignity of a home. It is the communities that have been let down the most that are most at risk of paramilitary and criminal control. I therefore ask Members to support our amendment in an effort to deal with the insidious influence of these gangs. We are happy to hear that the Member has agreed to support our amendment.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for Upper Bann, Mr Beattie, for bringing the motion to the Assembly. We will support the motion and the SDLP amendment, which, we think, enhances the motion. Indeed, it reflects one of the amendments that we had wished to table on unexplained wealth orders. To that end, we will support it.

Paramilitarism has been a challenge for decades. It was wrong in the past and it is wrong today to have paramilitary organisations. We need an effective response to that. When I look at how the police engage with paramilitary organisations, I recognise that they have a policy. Their policy outlines that their engagement must be for a clear policing purpose and that subsequent interactions must be necessary, lawful, proportionate and in line with the code of ethics.

An uncomfortable truth that Members need to face up to is that there is engagement with individuals associated with paramilitary organisations. There are also policies in place, whether written or unwritten. We see it when officials from the Housing Executive or other public-sector organisations engage with individuals regarded as community representatives. I suspect that that happens across every constituency, and Members will be able to cite examples of where that takes place. That is an uncomfortable truth that people need to face up to. It is the uncomfortable reality that paramilitary organisations exist, as do the individuals associated with them. That does not make it right. Therefore, there needs to be a response that brings us to the stage where paramilitary organisations no longer exist, and we can see the transition that people have talked about taking place.

I will give way to Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: Does the Member ever think that those organisations might continue to exist in part because of the encouragement that they

draw from the House? Where else in the world would you have a security assessment that the structures of the IRA remain in existence, the Provisional army council is still there, the IRA continues to have access to weapons and that the IRA army council oversees the IRA and Sinn Féin? How on earth do we ever defeat paramilitaries by allowing the example to be set, through the institutions of this House, that a paramilitary organisation controls a party of Government?

Mr Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr Givan: I will come on to the Provisional IRA very quickly, because I notice that my time is going. The Member makes a valid point that we need to know exactly what is going on when it comes to the Provisional IRA. That is why I and colleagues have been raising this issue at the Justice Committee. It was raised with the Justice Minister at Question Time. Where is the assessment? The Garda Commissioner has indicated that he stands over the assessment from 2015. The Chief Constable did not answer on it when he came to the Committee, yet the police have given press releases to different media outlets. We need to know the extent of the criminality that paramilitary organisations are engaged in, because that is the only way to deal with them effectively. That response in 2015 talked about the members of PIRA involved in electioneering, leafleting and other aspects, and that is fine. However, if someone who was engaged in the Shankill bomb, for example, comes to your door, one might ask whether it is really appropriate for that individual to be involved in electioneering. We need a proper and up-to-date assessment, so that people can face up to what the status of PIRA is and what level of criminality PIRA members are involved in. It talked about them being engaged in large-scale smuggling. We need to find out the extent of that, and, therefore, we need an assessment.

I support the amendment. We need unexplained wealth orders, so that people's assets can be seized. Until people see action, they will not have confidence in law enforcement agencies' ability to deal effectively with people who masquerade under the banner of paramilitary organisations and are engaged in criminality. The Chief Constable indicated that he would like the Assets Recovery Agency to be brought back to Northern Ireland. I would like that to be developed to see whether that would become an effective tool in going after and targeting paramilitary organisations. If it is, it will get our party's support. I also want to see what more the National Crime Agency is doing.

It took a lot of work to get the House to support the NCA. People resisted it, and eventually we got there.

Mr Speaker: Could the Member wind up his remarks, please?

Mr Givan: We need everybody to support the forces of law and order, including the National Crime Agency. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an rún. I thank the Members for bringing this important motion for debate. I will speak in favour of the motion and the amendment; I see that that is where all the other parties are at. I should also declare that I am a member of the Policing Board. *[Interruption.]* I am the one speaking here.

The Fresh Start Agreement was published by the Executive and the British and Irish Governments in November 2015. It included commitments to tackle paramilitaries and organised crime. The Executive action plan was published in July 2016 and contained 43 recommendations. The action plan was predicated on the need for a law enforcement response to the criminal gangs and their activities but, importantly, in tandem with a systemic, sustained and collaborative response to tackling the underlying issues of a socio-economic nature that are endemic in the areas in which those gangs mostly operate.

Doug Beattie went through a number of statistics. In 2019, the recorded statistics of paramilitary groups were that there were two deaths from shooting and 18 casualties of shooting. Of those 18 attacks, eight occurred in Derry and Strabane and eight in Belfast. There were also 67 recorded casualties of assault by various organisations. Five of those attacks were on people under the age of 18. There were also 15 bombing incidents and 39 shooting incidents. There were 147 arrests, which resulted in 18 people being charged. I add to that the fact that threats have been made to a number of political representatives. Threats are made against community workers on an ongoing basis and, indeed, wide-ranging threats to Sinn Féin members.

8.00 pm

The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) was established by both Governments to report annually on progress made, especially on the implementation of the relevant measures from the three Administrations. The IRC's second

report was published in November last year, and it outlined the imperative of a:

"sustained, long-term and holistic effort that combines the policing and justice response alongside a major and energetic tackling of the deep socio-economic issues facing the communities where"

these criminal gangs

"operate".

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. In a previous debate and in this one, we have heard, on more than one occasion, about socio-economic deprivation. Does the Member not agree that, ultimately, individuals are individuals, that they choose to engage in criminal activity and that no excuse can be found lying in a defence of socio-economic deprivation?

Mr Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr G Kelly: I thank you for that, and I do not necessarily disagree. Of course individuals are responsible for what they do, but you cannot ignore the underlying socio-economic issues in communities. You have to take a holistic view, and if you want to draw people away from criminal activity, you need, as other Members have said, a full-government approach. I will talk about that in a moment.

The issues are complex and are ingrained in the fabric of those communities. We require a new, dedicated outcome in the Programme for Government as the best way of achieving the whole-of-the-system approach that is so essential for the success of the project. A policing and criminal justice response is essential, so I agree with you entirely on that, but, in isolation from an accompanying community empowerment response, it cannot deliver the required outcome that everyone in the House and outside it wants.

The IRC's second report also contained a number of other key recommendations: a greater emphasis to be placed on the correct use of civil recovery powers, and, as has been mentioned a number of times, that would also involve unexplained wealth orders being introduced; and an increased provision of dedicated neighbourhood policing teams, which should be fully resourced. Again, information that tries to deal with that is, at the base of policing, community empowerment and community policing.

Another key recommendation was the introduction of measures to improve the effectiveness of the justice system. Those are aimed at increasing the pace at which the justice system works, with a view to building public confidence and support, especially in communities that have become disengaged from the criminal justice agencies. All those things are connected.

To conclude, if we are really intent on wanting to tackle effectively and degrade seriously those major criminal gangs, the twin-track approach outlined above is essential to achieving our shared objectives. They are not mutually exclusive in any way. I note that the Chief Constable, commenting on the publication of 'New Decade, New Approach', welcomed commitments pertaining to those points. As a member of the Policing Board, I can say that the policing with the community branch is central to there being confidence in policing, and the commitment to increasing neighbourhood teams is fundamental to that. I urge Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Muir: I speak on behalf of the Alliance Party and welcome the tabling of the motion, which addresses a key concern for many people across Northern Ireland, especially those living under the grip of criminals who are masquerading as paramilitaries.

Nearly 22 years after the Good Friday Agreement, people are rightly fed up. They want to see the rule of law apply to every part of Northern Ireland and paramilitary organisations gone for good. The process of transitioning towards a culture of lawfulness as part of our post-conflict transformation has been far, far too slow. The reasons for that are many, with an improved statutory response always something that we should explore, but it would be wrong to point the blame at others when, in fact, it is political leaders who share a significant burden of responsibility.

I acknowledge the complexity of our past, but, until we finally declare that all violence in the past, whether by organisations, individuals or the state, was wrong and should never be glorified or excused, we will continue to lend justification to those who seek to legitimise their actions in the present. Whether in 1970 or 2020, all paramilitary activity was and is wrong. If, however, people are willing to transition and committed to transitioning to a new, lawful future that recognises that the only organisation whose writ should run large is the Police Service of Northern Ireland, we must embrace that and assist.

As David Trimble stated:

"Just because someone has a past does not mean they cannot have a future",

but when they are, in fact, still living in the past, and denying others a future as a result of their criminal activities, such as drug dealing, which are done under the cover and veil of illegal paramilitary organisations, the only future that those people should have is in prison.

Tacit or explicit tolerance and endorsement of those people must end. Words must be matched with actions. A Member cannot vote for the motion and then stand side by side with individuals who are known to be still involved in paramilitarism. Failure to stand up to those who are known to be actively involved in paramilitarism, and instead meeting, endorsing and legitimising them, only serves to worsen the situation that is endured by local communities and inhibits statutory bodies to act when elected political representatives send out messages of acceptability. Only the police, courts and rule of law should be given respectability in Northern Ireland in 2020, properly resourced and with all the necessary legislative powers.

Last week, I picked up my local newspaper to read that the number of households who were declared homeless in Ards and North Down because of paramilitary threats has almost doubled since 2016. That is just one of the number of reasons why we must take action. I am, therefore, content to support the motion and amendment but in the knowledge that we can have all the laws and funding, and pass all the motions we like, but to effectively tackle and end paramilitarism, there must be collective effort across the Executive, the Chamber, councils and communities.

Local people are being locked out of opportunities to grow and prosper by paramilitary gatekeepers who control, dominate and exploit them. By working together, addressing the circumstances that are used to recruit people into their criminal empires and adopting a zero-tolerance approach to figures who are actively involved in paramilitarism, we can, together, turn the words that are being expressed here into action. It is important that we do that.

Ms Bunting: I wish to declare my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I thank those who tabled the motion, giving the Assembly a chance to discuss properly the scourge that has blighted our land and communities for decades. It is scandalous that,

some 22 years after the Belfast Agreement and all the promises of ceasefires and standing down, paramilitarism continues, albeit in a different guise. Then again, what is a mere lie to those who engage in violent beatings and murder? Let me be clear: it was just as wrong then as it is now, and has been all along on all sides.

Like the parasite that it is, paramilitarism has morphed and mutated to fit its own needs and gain. Long gone are the days when those who engaged in it took the view that they were defending their people — that there was a cause. Now, the only protection the community wants or needs is from those who purport to be their protectors and defenders. The only cause is lifestyle, status, money and drugs. There is no political or religious cause. There is only crime — organised crime, drug dealing, loan-sharking, racketeering, and keeping their own people in line through threats and intimidation. My constituency of East Belfast has seen more than its fair share.

They murder their own because of perceived slights or insults. For hard men, they have very sensitive egos. Just ask the McCartneys and, more recently, the Ogles. I have met both, and I stand with both. There is no justification for people's being chased, beaten and stabbed to death in the street, or on a farm, as in the case of Paul Quinn.

Folks are sick of working themselves into the ground to raise their children and give them a decent life. They are just about making ends meet, while watching people who have seldom, if ever, worked a day in their lives, or who apparently have modest jobs, but live in great houses, with the best of everything, and cars, clothes and holidays that do not reflect their supposed income. Now we see young adults who are owned by organisations, working to pay off drug debts, and, even worse, coming at an arranged time, often driven to the appointed place by a loved one, to be beaten, maimed or shot. It seems as if those gangs do so without fear. I have regularly challenged the PSNI about who runs Northern Ireland. Is it the lawless —?

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bunting: Pat, if you do not mind, I will keep going. Thank you very much.

Is it the lawless or the lawful? There is no question: the gangmasters and their minions consider themselves to be judge, jury and executioner. The problem is that that view can be reinforced by delays in the justice system.

Unquestionably, the slow pace of the system, in a society that demands immediacy, contributes to the context in which there are those who reach the end of their tether and approach the paramilitaries for swift justice in the form of an assault or the threat of one.

Thankfully, we are seeing a change in views. The grip is loosening. Recent DOJ statistics show a 46% decrease in the view that paramilitary assaults are justified in certain circumstances. Moreover, 68% of those living in mainly loyalist areas and 62% of those living in mainly republican areas disagree that paramilitary groups keep the area safe. People are seeing through them. Long may that continue. The communities have had enough; they have found their voice and the strength to say, "Enough". Now it is the responsibility of politicians, the PSNI and the courts to come in behind them with support, investigations, convictions and adequate sentencing. If people are to come forward, often at great risk to their safety and that of their family, they must feel that the support, protection and follow-up will be worth that risk. Otherwise, the fear and coercion will re-establish itself and the information will run dry.

Clearly we are beginning to see some fruit from the Ending the Harm campaign. However, it is imperative that that work is not undermined by statutory agencies and Departments, including, but not limited to, councils, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Often, as has been stated, the gatekeepers in a community are afforded access to senior officials in those organisations whom the average citizen is not.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bunting: I will give way.

Mr Givan: Does the Member agree with me that Newry and Mourne council, for example, really should include tackling paramilitarism in its action plan, and that the fact that it has not sends out the wrong message?

Mr Speaker: The Member has one minute extra.

Ms Bunting: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

That is right. All councils should be considering it in their community plans.

The average citizen is not afforded such access. That in turn serves to underscore and legitimise their credibility and standing. That is equally applicable to the Parades Commission. I have raised this matter directly with it: we cannot, on the one hand, expend millions of pounds to reinforce the message that paramilitarism will no longer be tolerated and that our society must move on and desist from the glorification of terror, whilst having that message being entirely undermined annually by the IRA's D company parade in Belfast, which sees participants dressed as active combatants. There is a world of difference between celebrating heritage and history, as we are all entitled to do, and the glorification of a terrorist campaign.

Undoubtedly, there are those who have turned their lives around —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Bunting: I will do, Mr Speaker.

— and who now use their influence to show young people that there is a better way. They should be assisted. I welcome the results achieved by the paramilitary crime task force. I urge it to follow the money, and I urge the Minister to bring forward the criminal finances legislation —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bunting: — to allow those involved to be fully resourced to bring those individuals to justice and —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. Thank you.

Ms Bunting: — those gangs to an end.

Mr Lynch: As a member of the Policing Board, I support the motion and the amendment. The motion is too narrow in its scope. Tackling serious criminality is not solved by police alone. However, they have an important role to play. These criminal groups and their activities are mostly embedded in communities that also suffer social and economic problems, including poverty, unemployment, educational underachievement, drug and alcohol addiction and poor mental health. The IRC report that was published late last year stated that that will require the twin-track approach that was set out in the first report: a policing and justice response side by side with a fundamental and sustained tackling of underlying problems in

those communities where criminal networks operate. The Chief Constable also confirmed at a recent Policing Board meeting that there is a need for an input from all relevant agencies. The IRC report goes further:

"The comprehensive tackling of"

criminal gangs

"must become an expressly stated and dedicated outcome of the Programme for Government".

8.15 pm

Where the police play an important role is in providing neighbourhood policing and implementing a key theme in the policing plan: policing with the community. That is done by building the relationship between the police and the community. By adopting that approach, the PSNI can demonstrate that they understand the needs and problems of the community. PCSPs play an important role, working with partners and communities so that the PSNI can help to make a positive difference to improve the lives of communities and individuals.

There is evidence to support the benefits of a sustained policing presence in communities in preventing crime and enhancing community safety. People feeling safe and having confidence in policing encourages cooperation with the police in the provision of vital information and the reporting of crime. That is an essential building block in the process of tackling criminal gangs.

If we take the example of Limerick, which was blighted by gangland crime some years back, community policing was particularly successful in building a better relationship between the gardaí and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In a 12-month period, figures showed a marked and continued decline in violent crime. There was also a twin-track approach in Limerick. The chief executive of Limerick County Council coordinated a programme to address the issues of social exclusion in the city. As a result, Limerick is a much safer city today. The twin-track approach is fundamental if tackling organised crime is to be successful.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I have listened to his comments on talking to the police. I find that interesting, given that he did not come very clean about his actions in 1986. He went to jail, obviously, for his part. Equally or more worrying is a comment in the book that

has been published by Mr Kelly, in which Mr Adams says, about telling the truth:

"There may, of course, be omissions in how the story is told. How could it be otherwise? I'm sure Gerry [Kelly] has no wish to go back to prison, or to be responsible for others going there. I certainly wouldn't blame him for that."

If we are going to have a twin-track approach and if we are going to tell the police, when will we have the truth about what everybody was involved in so that those who feed off our society have no justification for looking up to some people as though they were local heroes?

Mr Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr Lynch: I note the Member's remarks, but I do not agree with them.

There is a need to empower and support communities in resisting and rejecting paramilitary control. Sinn Féin agrees with the Independent Reporting Commission's recommendation, as set out in its most recent report, of a multi-layered approach to tackling serious criminality, including effective criminal justice responses along with community empowerment and a systemic and sustained response to the socio-economic issues experienced in the working-class communities on which the gangs prey.

We totally reject those who continue to engage in criminality, intimidation and control and give full support to the agencies working to close down criminal networks and activities. I call on the Minister of Justice to ensure that the PSNI and other agencies and community responses are supported and properly resourced to allow them to increase their efforts to address ongoing criminality.

I understand that these issues are complex and ingrained in the fabric of communities. They require new, dedicated outcomes in the Programme for Government. That is the best way to achieve success in ending criminality.

Mr Frew: I welcome the motion. As was mentioned earlier, the crime motions that we have before us today tell a tale about Members and how they have their fingers on the pulse of the community.

We have a responsibility in the House, as elected representatives, to be role models and to show society how we can behave, what we

should tolerate and what we should not. It is not good enough to justify actions of the past when actions of the same ilk happen today. It is not good enough to say that it was in the past and that it was OK then but is not OK now. It is not in the past. There are victims and survivors who live with this on a daily basis. It is not in the past. It is there day to day. Even if you come out and say that it is not right to bomb up a street, a town or a busload of workers and you condemn that now, does it not undermine your argument and is it not hypocrisy and duplicity when you go the next night to some shindig to celebrate a prison break or tell stories about taking a round in the leg when you were getting chased by the RUC and you managed to nip over the border?

There is an onus on all of us to tell people fairly and squarely that terrorism is wrong. It has always been wrong. It wrought death and destruction on our people. You are not any great saviours of your people; in fact, you hurt your own. There is absolutely no doubt about that. It is not in the past, because it is happening now, and it is challenging the whole House. We have a Finance Minister who just will not say the words, "Paul Quinn was not a criminal". The Finance Minister does not get it. It is not what he said years ago, in 2007, which really did slur the family and hurt them deeply. It is not what he said then; it is what he is not saying now. It echoes and hurts the —.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for allowing the intervention. Paramilitarism has left scars on families and communities. Will the Member agree that paramilitarism, criminality, coercive control and intimidation are wrong and always were wrong? Will the Member also agree that there is no place in the House, 22 years after the Good Friday Agreement, for anyone to give cover to blatant paramilitarism and coercive control and, by so doing, further victimise victims such as Paul Quinn and his family?

Mr Speaker: The Member has one minute extra.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I agree perfectly with that statement. I commend you in the SDLP not only now in the days and hours that we are in this place but for the years when you took the abuse in republican areas and from republican representatives for standing strong and saying that violence was wrong. I commend you for that: violence is wrong.

I will centre on hope — hope for the future. We are all moving on and getting older, but we are seeing a younger generation of politicians. I say

to those politicians now, especially those from the party opposite, that there is an issue that undermines the House. Of course, the debate is raging in the Republic of Ireland also, because that party might glimpse a bit of sovereign power, and, of course, that is a dangerous place for the Republic of Ireland to be. I plead with the younger Members of Sinn Féin to take away the shackles of the army council, to remove the coercive control that you are all under from the bogeymen in the shadows and to cut that loose and concentrate on pure politics to make our society better. You have the power, and you have the choice, if you choose to take it. I hope that you do, because no one else can do it but you. It is not right to condemn the actions of others and then say that it was OK in the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s. It was not.

To the young members of Sinn Féin I say, "Do not fall for the spin of the glorification of terrorism". There is no glory at all. There is no glory in being on the run. There is no glory in lying on the concrete floor of a safe house with no company but your conscience after you have done an act of criminality and terrorism. There is no company and no glorification in that. There is no glorification in being an informer and telling your agents all the information you know. It is true that terrorism was beaten in this place. It is true that the security forces strangled terrorism to the point where it could not operate. That is why we got a peace process. We should have known, when, only weeks after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, prisoners got out of prison with clenched fists and "Yo-hos", what we were going to be in for and the prolonged period of terrorism and criminality that we have had to face ever since. We want to see an end to it. There can be no toleration of it. It must end now.

Mr O'Toole: Initially, I was to speak in favour of the amendment tabled by my party colleagues, but, since we are in the fortunate position of everyone in the House agreeing with the amended motion, I do not have to do too much to convince people. When I wrote my remarks on the motion and our amendment, I naively imagined that it would not evolve quickly into a debate about the past in this place. Of course, in a sense, it is not entirely wrong that people talk about the past because, as we know, the past is intimately related to the present. However, in the spirit of discussing the amended motion, the broad scope of the motion put down by Doug Beattie and others is to be welcomed. The amendment that we have tabled offers a specific analysis of the context in which paramilitarism and criminality continue to thrive in communities across Northern Ireland. It

also, as my colleague Patsy McGlone said, details specific additional powers that should be quickly deployed to address this scourge on our society. I know that the Justice Minister is already thinking about how they can be deployed quickly.

In the last few weeks, we have talked a lot about how these institutions need to win the confidence of people here. We know that we need to manage resources better. We know that we need to deliver public services. We know that we need to focus on real, meaningful change to people's lives, not just to the lives of those in our particular tribe but to everyone's lives. If we are serious, we must recognise that too many working-class communities in Northern Ireland are forced to live under the heel of paramilitarism or, more specifically, criminal gangs.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I take him back to the comments of my colleague Ms Bunting about the way in which senior officials — whether it is the Parades Commission, the Housing Executive, the institutions and organs of the state — who engage directly with paramilitaries will never live in the communities that he describes. They will never live in the communities in which those paramilitaries operate. They rub shoulders with them and then get to go home to nice, middle-class communities where they do not have to deal with the behaviour of paramilitaries.

Mr O'Toole: I agree in part with what my constituency colleague said, and I will go on to talk a little about that. He is right, in the sense that working-class communities at the forefront of conflict are not people, to put it bluntly, like all of us, certainly not like me. I confess to being someone who did not live at the forefront of conflict. That is why there is an even greater onus on those of us in the House to deal with the issues that confront working-class communities.

We are 22 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, as several Members mentioned. The Assembly and Executive, sporadic though their functioning has been, are products of that agreement, and our existence is a good thing. However, if we are honest, many of the benefits of the institutions and our imperfect peace have not flowed to the working-class communities that were on the front line of the conflict. Too often, those communities remain under the coercive control of criminal elements who are either explicitly associated with paramilitary groups or are controlled by former members. Other Members, including my colleague Patsy McGlone and Doug Beattie, detailed vividly the

activities of those blinged-up brigadiers who go into their community, demand obedience and inflict nothing but misery.

I agree with Doug's original motion that the PSNI and law enforcement agencies must be resourced, and I welcome the more explicit public backing given recently by other parties in the Assembly to the PSNI recruitment campaign. However, we cannot pretend that ongoing paramilitarism and criminality exist in a vacuum. They are, to use a phrase that used to be familiar in this place, inextricably linked to the vulnerability of communities with high deprivation and low opportunity. Our amendment acknowledges that intersection and offers a more explicit suggestion for hitting the gangs where it hurts: in their pockets. Unexplained wealth orders are already available to the National Crime Agency, but they need to be made available to the Police Service of Northern Ireland as a matter of urgency.

8.30 pm

Paramilitary violence was always wrong. It always inflicted the greatest harm on the poorest and most vulnerable communities. That is still the case today. The glorification of violence is a problem and is wrong. We are nearly five years on from the Fresh Start Agreement, which pledged to end paramilitarism. Of course, we had the action plan, which came out a year later, and several other Members have detailed that and how it has been stalled by the absence of these institutions. We are one year on from the appalling murders of Ian Ogle in east Belfast and Lyra McKee in Derry.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that paramilitaries still control communities through fear and exploitation? That is evidenced by the fact that, over the past year, the numbers of paramilitary shootings are up by 46%, paramilitary assaults are up by 9% and bombings are up by 12%. Meanwhile, arrests are down by 22%. Does the Member agree that strategies are failing and that three years of stagnation has not helped matters and has allowed paramilitaries to gain a stronger foothold in society?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you very much. I will conclude my comments at that.

Mr Speaker: I call Andy Allen, and I thank the Member for agreeing to take the final two minutes.

Mr Allen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you outlined, I have only two minutes, so I will attempt to keep my comments concise and to the point.

As we heard from Members across the Chamber, individuals are masquerading as paramilitaries. They portray themselves as defenders of communities and as heroes, but that could not be further from the truth. They are nothing but cowards. They are criminals. They prey on the most vulnerable in society to create lucrative criminal empires that put profit in their pockets. As communities and political leaders, we must do more, and, collectively, we can do more. We can educate our communities not to support these criminal individuals by purchasing their knocked-off goods and advise them to turn their backs on the drug dealers and those who rule communities through fear.

I would like to quickly point to the murder, in my constituency, of Mr Ogle, which was mentioned by my friend, a Member for East Belfast, Ms Bunting. He was a family man and an east Belfast man through and through, and he was savagely and barbarically beaten and stabbed to death by individuals who portray themselves as protectors of our community. They left a man dying and bleeding, with his life ebbing away while they ran into the dark. Are those defenders of our community? Certainly not. I served in Afghanistan, where real men have gone. Those individuals are not real men; they are cowards. They prey on the vulnerable in our communities.

I would also point quickly to restorative justice. I have seen it in action, and it can help some of our vulnerable young people to move away from the clutches of paramilitary gangs. It can help them to move away from those brigadiers that my colleague Doug Beattie mentioned, who send out those young, vulnerable foot soldiers to do their bidding, while they profit from the misery of others. We can and must do more. Our actions need to speak louder than our words. It is OK. Across the Chamber, we can easily condemn bombings and shootings and highlight statistics, but behind those statistics are families, individuals and people who have had their lives ruined.

I pay tribute to the Ogle family, who have stood head and shoulders above the criminals. We need to support them in the days ahead. I call on the Justice Minister to review our bail system and to look at how we can tighten that up,

because individuals are being released, and in our malign society, we see paramilitaries being able to come out and intimidate families and witnesses.

Mr Speaker: I call on the Justice Minister to respond. The Minister has 15 minutes.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and amendment and allowed us to have a debate about something hugely important.

Paramilitary groups continue to exploit communities in Northern Ireland and to harm people through their criminality and coercive control. They destroy lives and hurt the people whom they so often claim to represent. It is right that we discuss the issues together and how we can make our community a safer and better place.

It is over 20 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, yet, unfortunately, despite the passage of time and the progress that we have seen made during the intervening years, paramilitary groups remain active and involved in activities that inflict serious harm. The brutal reality is that that includes murder. Andy Allen, Joanne Bunting and Doug Beattie raised two paramilitary-related murders in my constituency: that of Robert McCartney and that of Ian Ogle. The two families lived just yards apart. They both lost a loved one and, after that, continued to suffer victimisation at the hands of those responsible. I have met members of both families and will be meeting the Ogle family again later this month. I want to hear their concerns and respond to them if I can. I also met the family of Paul Quinn, whose pain on the loss of their son has been compounded by the smear attached to his name. I take this opportunity to call on anyone who has any information on any of those murders, or on the other paramilitary murders that have happened in our community, to cooperate with the police and bring those responsible to justice.

Sadly, another constituent of mine was named in this debate. I will reference just briefly the murder of Adrian Ismay. I will also mention David Black, after the targeting of prison officers from within prison was mentioned by Robbie Butler. That was raised in the context of the separated regime that exists in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. I assure Members that the Prison Service remains committed to finding ways in which to address what are very challenging issues associated with the

operation of the separated regime. It remains committed to keeping people safe, both within and outside the prison, not least prison officers, who are on the front line.

Paramilitary activity in our community involves beatings, attacks meted out to vulnerable members of the community, drug dealing, intimidation and racketeering. More often than not, the activity is driven by sheer greed, with disdain for the safety and welfare of the public, as Andy Allen rightly noted. We must not normalise it as an accepted part of Northern Ireland life. Paramilitarism is about making money by controlling and exploiting communities, particularly those who are most vulnerable. The law enforcement response led by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the laws, policies and processes relating to the criminal justice system supported by my Department are clearly an important part of the response.

Equally, to view paramilitarism as an issue to be addressed solely through a law enforcement response is to take a narrow approach and one that is unlikely to address all the issues effectively. Paramilitarism is a legacy of our troubled past in Northern Ireland, and there are many interlinking and systemic factors that need to be addressed so that, collectively, we can enjoy a society free of paramilitaries, their structures and their influence. That is a complex task, and it means facing up to hitherto divisive and difficult issues on a collaborative basis. It requires not just a strategy but political leadership in the Chamber and in local communities. As Members will know, the work has already begun through the Executive action plan, 'Tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime'. The plan was the Executive's response to the Fresh Start Agreement and to 38 separate recommendations made by an independent panel. Although the work was coordinated by a team in my Department, it is a cross-Executive effort to address both the harm caused by paramilitarism and the underlying issues that make individuals and communities vulnerable to their influence.

Activities under the action plan are delivered using four mutually reinforcing approaches: long-term prevention; building capacity to support transition; building confidence in the justice system; and strategies and powers to tackle criminality. I will touch on each briefly. Delivery partners are drawn not only from Departments but from a wide range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations, because it is by working together on that basis that we can make an impact.

I turn first to long-term prevention. That is aimed at creating a society in which paramilitarism has no place, and it involves supporting vulnerable people, particularly our young people, who are at risk of harm from paramilitarism and criminality. It is delivered through intensive mentoring and support, boosting the integration and rehabilitation of people with convictions, promoting public awareness and resistance to issues such as so-called paramilitary-style attacks, and empowering teachers and youth workers to support young people who may be most vulnerable to coercive control. A very positive example of work focused on steering individuals away from harm is the Probation Board-led Aspire project, which delivers interventions for young men aged 16 to 30 who are marginalised in communities and at risk of becoming involved in criminality and paramilitarism.

It is delivered in partnership with a range of organisations, such as NIACRO, Barnardo's and accredited restorative justice organisations. Peer mentoring, with targeted support for employment, training, housing, health and social services, is involved.

An initial evaluation of findings demonstrated the positive impact that it has not only on the young men themselves but on their families and communities. Similarly, the START programme run by the Department of Education and the Education Authority with community work organisations provides intensive support to young people who are at risk of involvement with or harm from paramilitary activity. It has had a significant impact on the lives of young people who might otherwise have been drawn into serious offending by paramilitaries who seek to exploit them. Those examples and the long-term-prevention approach more generally highlight the importance of addressing the varied factors that affect an individual's vulnerability to paramilitarism and organised crime, which was referenced by Gerry Kelly and others in their contributions. It is about improving educational attainment and employability, ensuring that mental health support is available, addressing issues around alcohol and substance abuse and working together better in early intervention, tailoring support to individual needs. The nature of the challenge is such that we have to work together across the Executive if we are to meet our ambitions.

The second approach is about building capacity to support transition. We need to develop capacity among individuals in communities and our society as a whole to resist paramilitary influence. Delivery in this area includes the role

of women in community development, creating opportunities for children and young people and better aligning our efforts in places impacted by paramilitary control. The Department for Communities and other community partners, for example, lead on the Women Involved in Community Transformation (WICT) programme by supporting women to improve their skills in areas such as leadership, mentoring, peace building and personal development. The Executive Office also delivers a broad range of projects designed to build community capacity as part of its Communities in Transition work.

It is important that, collectively, we take a more coherent, consistent and holistic approach to tackling paramilitarism by enhancing community resilience and providing the space in which new voices can be heard. Paul Givan, in particular, raised the issue of the police and other statutory agencies who are required, in certain circumstances, to engage with people in the community who set themselves up as gatekeepers. Whilst we recognise that people who have former paramilitary links are members of the community and have a right to express their opinions, it should be on the same basis as everyone else. It is important that we do not reinforce that status of gatekeeper for those who have coercive control over communities, and we should be mindful that engaging with them can send out negative messages to those who would otherwise want to help the police by providing information and cooperating with their inquiries into paramilitarism. Political leadership is necessary to invoke change and enable us to engage with communities in a way that bypasses those gatekeepers. The aim is not to exclude them from having their view heard but to ensure that they do not control who else can be heard. I welcome the strong statement to that effect by Andrew Muir, in particular, on that issue.

There are two other thematic approaches under the Executive action plan relating to the criminal justice sphere, one of which is building confidence in the justice system. We know that the pace of justice can impact on victims and witnesses who have been affected by paramilitary or criminal activity. It can affect communities who, understandably, want to see paramilitary offenders dealt with speedily by the courts. Central to that approach is work by my Department to speed up the justice system, and part of that will be through the reform of committal proceedings. It is a legislative priority for me, and I trust that Members will wholeheartedly support it when it is put before the Assembly later this year.

Other partners such as policing and community safety partnerships and community planning partnerships actively integrate concepts around lawfulness and confidence in the rule of law into their daily outputs. Paul Frew and Matthew O'Toole, as well as others, rightly said that historic narratives could have a crucial role on those engaged in or vulnerable to becoming engaged in paramilitarism today, and we should not let the past cast a shadow over the current and future arrangements. This provides a solid basis by working through those community organisations, to have a better understanding of how paramilitarism affects communities and to help inform our long-term responses.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Long: I want to get through this, and I am quite short for time.

The final thematic approach is about strategies and powers to tackle criminal activity. The key delivery partner here is the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF), which was set up in 2016 as a dedicated investigative capacity to tackle all forms of criminality linked to paramilitarism. Along with the PSNI, the National Crime Agency and HM Revenue and Customs, it has proven to be a valuable additional capacity and has delivered a number of operational successes over the years. In tandem, bespoke organised crime legislation is being developed as a means of enhancing the existing framework that criminal justice partners can draw on in seeking to bring offenders to justice. There are other important multi-agency collaboration structures in place to help tackle serious organised crime, including that related to paramilitarism.

8.45 pm

The Organised Crime Task Force, for example, which is coordinated by my Department, provides a forum for strategic leadership in response to organised crime, bringing together key law enforcement partners as well as providing a forum for engagement with other Departments, statutory agencies and a number of expert-led groups. A joint agency task force provides an important mechanism for law enforcement to work in partnership with their counterparts in Ireland to tackle criminality on both sides of the border.

Patsy McGlone and others referenced the issue of introducing unexplained wealth orders and the commencement of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 here. The commencement of those new asset recovery powers is a priority for me. I

want to see legislative consent for the 2017 Act achieved before the summer and full commencement of the powers before the end of this year. I want to ensure that the unexplained wealth order powers, and other powers under the 2017 Act, are available to the relevant enforcement agencies, so we are going to take forward the work to ensure that we can achieve the legislative consent of the Assembly as a matter of priority. Those measures, along with others already available under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, are important. They hit the criminals where it hurts: in their pockets. More than that, they help send a powerful message, particularly to those who may be vulnerable, that crime will not pay. That in turn helps reinforce community confidence in the justice system.

I am already reviewing specific powers to tackle organised crime in Northern Ireland. That was another action under the action plan for tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. Unlike in other jurisdictions, there is no explicit legislation in Northern Ireland to tackle serious and organised crime. We have therefore reviewed several legislative models and worked with law enforcement to develop draft proposals for Northern Ireland. They include offences of participating in and directing organised crime, as well as aggravated offences.

Today calls for the proper resourcing of the PSNI and other agencies to address paramilitarism. Other Members — I think Seán Lynch in particular — also emphasised the importance of community-based policing. The action plan has provided additional funding to a wide range of bodies, including the PSNI, and the nature of the funding reflects the complexities of the issues at hand. However, the current funding period for that action plan finishes in March 2021, so I hope that I have Members' support as I go to my Executive colleagues for continued funding.

As I have outlined, paramilitary influence is still a feature of day-to-day life here for some communities. That is not acceptable. We have to continue to challenge attempts by paramilitary groups to control people and communities and recruit into their ranks. We have to provide better prospects for young people who feel as if there are no alternatives. We must take every opportunity to develop individual, community and societal resistance to paramilitary influence and criminal harm, and we have to be open to new ideas and approaches about how we can develop the action plan. We also cannot shy away from the fact that it needs to be underpinned by a

fundamental positive shift in areas such as good relations and continuing to work against sectarianism. Clearly, this must remain a shared task across the Executive and Assembly.

In conclusion, I support the motion and the amendment. In doing so, I reiterate the need to continue to work on a collective, cross-Executive basis as a priority in our Programme for Government to tackle the wider issues so that we can reach a point where paramilitarism and its structures are confined to a very dark chapter in our history books.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is plainly in contravention of the most basic elements of democratic debate to have a discussion like this and not call a single Member from a non-Executive party. What does the Executive have to hide when it comes to paramilitarism?

Mr Speaker: I do not understand your question, because the Executive do not determine the time that the Assembly meets and discusses any business. The Business Committee, which represents most of the parties, sets the time for these debates, not the Executive or anybody else. Nobody is being excluded from debate here.

I call Dolores Kelly to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. She has five minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: I acknowledge the cross-party support for the amendment and the motion and thank the Members who took part in the debate. I particularly want to acknowledge the presence of the Ogle family in the Public Gallery, and the bravery of many families who have stood against paramilitarism: those of Paul Quinn, in particular, and Robert McCartney and Lyra McKee. What we see is the coercive control and silence — the omertà — that prevents witnesses from coming forward. It is never too late to come forward. I ask anyone who still has information to give it to the police to help them with their investigations and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The motion, the amendment and, indeed, the Justice Minister's response demonstrate the need for a collaborative approach and for political leadership. Many commentators and participants in the debate acknowledged that we as an Executive and an Assembly have a crucial role to play in supporting those who suffer the most and who have been left behind. Twenty-two years on from the Good Friday

Agreement, people are still suffering from the violence, extortion, blackmail, drug dealing and criminality of those who call themselves paramilitaries.

Many Members acknowledged the difficulty that the separated prison regime causes and the messages that it can send out. I note that the Justice Minister said that she is doing some work on that. I acknowledge the additional cost of such a regime to the prison and the public purse of, I think, some £3 million or £4 million annually, which has not been funded by the Treasury. No doubt, the Finance Minister might take that up in his deliberations with the Treasury over the coming days and weeks.

Unexplained wealth orders would go a long way in providing confidence to communities and to people who want to step forward. It is not enough today to just have unexplained wealth orders. We also need to look at the financial resources available to other paramilitary combatants in the past, at the affront to democracy across this island that we do not go after criminality and organised crime gangs right across society and at all those who have benefited, both today and in the past, from large-scale smuggling, waste management crimes and all those systems, as Andrew Muir so eloquently put it, that the British Government in particular turned a blind eye to.

Most, but not all, Members recognised the importance that former paramilitaries can play in transitioning. Andrew Muir also mentioned David Trimble's quote:

"Just because someone has a past does not mean they cannot have a future".

We all want to work towards enabling those people, who, as Christopher Stalford said, made a decision to engage in acts of violence, to transition, but environmental and other factors played a role in their getting involved, not least poverty and deprivation. Therefore, it is important that we help people across the community to make the shift from violence to being a positive influence in our communities.

Other Members talked about the Assets Recovery Agency. A challenge was laid down that it should be reinstated in Northern Ireland. I do not think that we would be opposed to that. We all know that over 40 criminal gangs are operating in Northern Ireland alone. The establishment of the NCA in Northern Ireland was the right thing to do, and the SDLP, in particular, played a key role in providing its code of ethics and accountability mechanisms to the Policing Board. At this point, I

acknowledge that I am a member of the Policing Board. We played a key role in establishing the NCA here, but we worry that its resources are spent going after the larger international criminal gangs and that it does not have sufficient focus here in Northern Ireland. That is why the Assets Recovery Agency played such a critical role.

I thank Mr Frew in particular for his acknowledgement of the SDLP's consistent opposition to violence, both in the past and today.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I have 10 seconds.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time will be up.

Mrs D Kelly: Yes. I acknowledge the positive contributions, and I hope that today shows that we are giving political leadership in the challenge to tackle paramilitarism in all its forms.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank all the contributors and caution that I am unlikely to give way as I do not think that 10 minutes will be sufficient for my comments.

I want to begin with the terminology, because we are all being very polite calling these groups "paramilitaries". That is the way that they are organised, but it is not their intent or their purpose. Their intent is terrorism. To prove it, let us look at the Terrorism Act 2000, which states:

"terrorism' means the use or threat of action where ... the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public".

I think that describes admirably all the groups that Doug Beattie listed when he opened the debate.

Terrorism is an absolute, as in it is absolutely wrong, and if, as some Members have done, you stray by saying that it is justified by the circumstances, you create a problem, because you may say, "Well, the circumstances have changed, so terrorism is no longer justified", but others do not. Others say, "Oh no, the circumstances still justify", and that is when groups like the New IRA murder people like Lyra McKee.

I am very glad to hear support for the idea that terrorism is an absolute, from people like Andrew Muir of Alliance, Matthew O'Toole of the SDLP and Paul Frew of the DUP. Paul went on, of course, to remind us that the IRA hurt its own, by tarring and feathering, kneecapping and taking coercive control of its community. That is not something that we hear very often from the Benches opposite, although in the 'Shared Ireland' podcast that I did with Linda Dillon, I was glad to hear her acknowledge the hurt and the legacy in her community that the IRA created.

This is not an attack by me on the IRA. Newtownards is the main town in my constituency, and we have every shade of unionist terror group, including the south Antrim UDA. What is it doing at the top of the Ards peninsula? Mr Muir made clear the impact of this, as the number of people that have been intimidated out of their homes in recent years has doubled because of those groups.

In moving the motion, Doug Beattie gave us a list of the terror groups, the attacks and the assault weapons. He reminded us that these days it is all about extortion, coercion, drug dealing and community control, and he gave the example of the murder of Ian Ogle. Of course, he also, rightly, reminded us that the House rejected his plea to change the segregated prison regime, leading to the ridiculous situation where a criminal goes in convicted of criminality only to assume the role of a brigadier of a terrorist organisation.

In moving the amendment, Patsy McGlone focused on unexplained wealth orders and the cracking down on what he called "Mr Bling". He reminded me of a friend who is a BBC producer who took his wife for a meal one night, and in came a very well-known loyalist "brigadier" with his entourage and sat at the next table. My friend got quite excited because he thought, "This guy has no idea who I am. I am a behind-the-scenes, faceless producer; perhaps I am going to learn a lot about this organisation". He did learn a lot, because they spoke very freely, comparing the local gymnasia, talking about the best holiday destinations and where to buy the best men's clothing. That was their motivation for being in their paramilitary or terrorist grouping.

There was an intervention from Dolores Kelly about the need to establish the truth from the past. But I remind her that, perhaps, the primary source of wisdom on that was the Consultative Group on the Past, the Eames/Bradley group, which stopped talking about truth recovery and said, "No, we have to talk about information

recovery". If we have a body like the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval, we must be aware that the terror groups are less likely to tell the real truth of what happened to people's loved ones and much more likely to tell you what they want you to think. They are responsible for some of the grossest human rights abuses, and they are embarrassed, and they will want to rewrite history to try to write those human rights abuses out of memory.

Gerry Kelly focused on socio-economic deprivation, and I do not disagree with him, but I have to say this to somebody like Mr Kelly: if you supported the IRA, you cannot blame others for socio-economic deprivation without acknowledging the deliberate economic carnage that the IRA inflicted with its bombing campaigns over three decades.

Joanne Bunting talked about the scandal of paramilitarism continuing 22 years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. I could say to her, "Yes, and 26 years on from the ceasefires". She underlined Patsy McGlone's analysis that people's motivation to be in those groups is for their personal lifestyle.

She gave us statistics for the number of people living in such communities who say, "We no longer want those groups — the paramilitary, terrorist organisations — to do what they claim they're doing, which is to keep us safe. Those days have gone."

9.00 pm

Hansard may prove me wrong, but I tried to listen to Seán Lynch very carefully, and I believe that he used the terms "crime", "criminal" or "criminality" no fewer than 15 times. I say to him that these things are absolute: if it is criminality today, it was criminality in the 1970s, it was criminality in the 1980s and it was criminality in the 1990s.

Matthew O'Toole, making, I think, his first contribution on the issue since joining us in the House, declined the opportunity to discuss and dwell on the past; rather, he focused on the inextricable link between socio-economic deprivation and the suffering of communities at the hands of these groups.

Andy Allen, in a short but passionate contribution, talked about the need to educate the community. There is always a temptation that the paramilitaries offer a bargain. Do we not all like a bargain? However, they are not bargains. People are being sucked in to

promoting and helping to establish, fulfil and fuel these terrorist organisations. I admire Andy because, as he said, he served in Afghanistan, where he almost made the ultimate sacrifice. For him to call those people cowards has a moral authority that I could never deliver.

The Minister, Naomi Long, talked about the need for a systemic approach to tackling the issues. She spoke of the need not just for a strategy but for political leadership: I agree with her. She dwelt at length on the Executive's action plan and its four strands. I listened carefully to the Minister, but I have to say — I do so with respect — that all I heard was about the inputs of government. There was nothing about the impact, and there were no outcomes. I suggest to the Minister that the victims — the people who are under the coercion of the paramilitary organised terror groups — are interested only in outcomes, not in the structures, strategies or systemic approaches. They want to see action that leads to outcomes that get these people off their backs.

I thank all the contributors. It has been a mature debate. We have discussed the issues in some depth. I thank Members. I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion. I thank the SDLP for the amendment, which absolutely adds value, and I am happy to support it. There is, however, another group whom we should be hearing from tonight. The people we should really listen to are in the Public Gallery. We should listen to the Ogles and hear what they have to say. I look forward, after the debate, to listening to them sharing their views on what, they think, has been achieved in the past hour and a half.

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

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that many communities across Northern Ireland are still living under siege from paramilitary gangs; reiterates its total rejection of those who continue to engage in criminality, intimidation and coercive control; gives its full support to the agencies working to close down criminal networks and activity; acknowledges that paramilitarism is being used as a cover for profiteering criminal gangs; further recognises that addressing the pervasive influences of poverty, deprivation and lack of opportunity in working-class communities across Northern Ireland is critical to releasing the grip of

criminals; and calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce unexplained wealth orders to allow the PSNI to disrupt and dismantle these gangs and to work with her Executive colleagues to fully resource the PSNI and other agencies to eradicate the influence of paramilitarism.

Adjourned at 9.04 pm.

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