



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 3 February 2020
Volume 125, No 5

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 3 February 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Private Members' Bills

Mr Speaker: I wish to make an announcement about private Members' Bills (PMBs).

Members will be aware that the current focus of our business is on providing time for Committees to conduct the vital scrutiny of the secondary legislation that Departments have laid over the past three years. At this early stage, I am also giving consideration to elements of how I manage Assembly business. I want the Assembly to be seen to be a platform for dealing with key issues affecting our community. The solutions to address those issues may often be brought forward by Ministers, but I want to ensure that Members also have the ability to be heard and to play their part in fulfilling the potential of the Assembly. That makes my role to determine the support arrangements to enable Members to develop private Members' Bills even more important.

Over recent years, the number of Members seeking to develop private Members' Bills has grown significantly beyond the capacity of the system, which was set up in the initial years of the Assembly; for instance, the number of proposals submitted in the first week after the 2016 election was 25, which is equal to the number submitted throughout the entire 2011-16 mandate. On previous experience, the average time to develop a proposal, produce a properly developed Bill and take it through the House is sometimes 22 to 24 months. Therefore, time is of the essence for Members to build on the momentum of the Assembly's return to be able to convert their ideas into possible legislation before the next election. In deciding my approach, I have taken both those issues into account, and today I am publishing the guidance for Members on PMBs. I will not go through all the details of the process here today, but there are some key changes to announce. First, the Bill Office will now contain an Executive Bills team and a non-Executive

Bills team. That will ensure dedicated support for Members. Secondly, there will be an increase in the staffing of the Bill Office from seven to 12. Thirdly, support will no longer be provided on a first come, first served basis. All distinct proposals that meet the requirements of the process will be supported. Where several Members submit the same proposal, they will be encouraged to collaborate on it. Fourthly, all Bills that have not completed the legislative process fall at the end of a mandate. However, proposals that Members began working on after the 2016 election may be submitted. In addition, Members will have the opportunity to demonstrate that some of their previous work from 2016 — for example, any consultation process that they had carried out — can be carried over and does not need to be repeated.

On that basis, the window in which Bill proposals can be submitted will open from tomorrow, Tuesday 4 February, until Tuesday 31 March. That enables some time, particularly for newer Members to familiarise themselves with the process. After submission, the Bill Office will work with Members to refine their proposals until the end of April. In producing the guidance, I have sought to ensure that enhanced work and support are available for Members. I thank Assembly officials who have worked to put in place the new arrangements to support Members.

There is also a need to look to the future, so I am writing today to the Chair of the Committee on Procedures. In 2016, the Committee on Procedures began a review of the PMB system that it was unable to complete before the Assembly dissolved in 2017. It would be beneficial for that review to resume. In addition to considering the process around PMBs and the support provided to it in general, I am asking the Committee to consider a number of specific issues. They include encouraging collaboration amongst Members across parties by enabling more than one name to be attached to a Bill to lead it through the House. I am also asking the Committee to consider what provisions should be in place for Bills that Members draft and present themselves,

independently of the Bill Office. Such Bills are, of course, in order, but I think that it is worth considering whether there is any inequity between Members who rely on support from the Bill Office and those who have access to independent or external support. There is also a public interest in ensuring transparency about how such support has been provided.

Finally, while I have been keen to ensure that there is a system that supports the rights of Members to bring forward legislation, I emphasise that Members must be mindful of their responsibilities. Taking forward a private Member's Bill requires diligence over a long period. Furthermore, the support for Members is provided through the public purse. I expect Members to make efficient use of that resource. They should not, therefore, submit proposals to develop a Bill lightly. I have given the Bill Office authority, if a Member does not meet the key milestones in the development process, to cease the development of that proposal, which will mean that it will progress no further.

Producing and enacting legislation is an onerous and time-consuming task, but it also offers the reward of improving the experience of those we represent. The arrangements that I have announced today are intended to provide a positive opportunity for Members to make new law in the next two years. However, those proposals are likely to be coming alongside a full programme of legislation from the Executive. Members will note the indication from the head of the Civil Service to the Executive Office Committee last week that 11 Bills are expected to come to the Assembly before the summer. I have written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an indication of when they will come to the Assembly to announce the Executive's legislative programme and to give the Assembly the chance to debate it. Therefore, given the time pressures ahead, I suggest that Members seek to take advantage of the opportunity for them to pursue a private Member's Bill at an early stage.

Matter of the Day

European Union Withdrawal

Mr Speaker: I have received a request, which has been granted, to allow a Matter of the Day on European Union withdrawal. Mr John O'Dowd has made a request to make a statement under Standing Order 24 on Matters of the Day. Mr O'Dowd has been given leave to make the statement on EU withdrawal, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to address this important matter, which has happened since the Assembly and all our Committees last sat. While, understandably, everybody knew that it was happening, it is still of huge significance to our society, our island, these islands and the politics within which we work; in fact, I do not think that there has been a more significant political event on this island since the partition of the state almost 100 years ago.

At 11.00 last Friday night, after 47 years' membership of the EU, we left the EU. While the sun rose in the morning afterwards, things have changed. We in the Chamber who are EU citizens and wish to remain EU citizens have lesser rights today than we had on Friday afternoon. That is of huge concern, because rights are sometimes an abstract matter until you go looking for them and realise that they have disappeared or are being eroded or their removal, in their entirety, is being planned. That is when it becomes a serious matter.

Brexit was the backdrop to our most recent political crisis; it was the backdrop to the crisis that meant the Assembly collapsed and did not sit for three years. Some may point and say that, now that the EU withdrawal Bill has been ratified and article 50 has been enacted, Brexit has gone and, therefore, the crisis has gone. It has not. It is only starting; in fact, when we heard the dialogue over the weekend from successive British Ministers around how they planned to approach the trade negotiations, we could see the old sores of the past beginning to open up again. The last thing this Assembly, this Executive and this society need is the reopening of old sores.

The reality is that the trade negotiations will prove more difficult than was the case for bringing about the EU withdrawal Bill. While a road map has been set out, it is clear that the time frame that has been set in place will cause huge difficulties for people, businesses and the economy across this island and across all these islands. We welcome the Irish protocol in the withdrawal agreement, but we do not want to see businesses slowed down, stopped or held up as they cross the island of Ireland or cross between Belfast or Larne and England, Scotland or Wales. We want to see our people and businesses flourish. We want to see prosperity at the heart of the lives of all of our citizens. The huge threat that hangs over all of that is Brexit and EU withdrawal.

I appeal to all of the parties represented here, who have many different views —.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Stalford: In a previous discussion around the content of the EU withdrawal agreement, I made my views known. I wanted to see the referendum result implemented; I wanted to see the United Kingdom leave the European Union as one country. Therefore, I do not wish to see internal borders inside sovereign UK territory.

It is time to bring the country back together. Included in that, I mean this part of the country as well. The extended establishment rearguard action in the aftermath of the referendum sowed bitter, bitter division in the country. It was foolish to think that the expressed wishes of 17.4 million people could simply be eroded through political or legal chicanery. Whether we like it or not, more people voted to leave the European Union than have ever voted for any political party or prospect on a ballot paper in the history of the United Kingdom.

Since that referendum, the country has been through an extended culture war. It is important that that is brought to an end. I voted to leave the European Union. I do not believe myself to be superior morally or intellectually to those who voted Remain, but Remain voters are not superior morally or intellectually to those of us who voted Leave. Some of the characterisation that has been made of people who voted Leave borders on hatred.

We are all free citizens exercising our democratic rights in a free country. We should be big enough and mature enough to respectfully disagree.

12.15 pm

The Prime Minister has made some very specific pledges, not only publicly himself but in the content of the recent political agreement. It is important that those pledges are upheld; it is important that he holds to them. We all recall — at least I certainly do — two Prime Ministers, this one and his predecessor, stating that no British Prime Minister could accept internal borders inside the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all of us, whether we voted Leave or Remain, to hold him to those pledges to protect business and trade in this part of the United Kingdom and to make a success of the future of our country.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you for allowing this matter to be discussed today. I also pay tribute to the Member for Upper Bann for raising it.

What happens in the next year, and in the years to come, is critical and fundamental to everyone in Northern Ireland — indeed, to everyone in Ireland and across these islands. As both Members who have spoken said, this is the first time that the Assembly has met and spoken since we left the European Union on Friday night. It is worth recording and giving witness to the fact that the majority of people in this part of the world did not vote to leave the European Union, and I say that with all due respect to my fellow Member for South Belfast who did vote to leave and, no doubt, holds his views with sincerity.

Northern Ireland voted to remain by 56%, to 44%. Through the withdrawal process and phase 1 of the talks, we have achieved a basic level of protection against a return to a hard border, at least for goods, on the island of Ireland. However, we have not seen much else. Those basic protections mean that we will not see a return to hard infrastructure on the border. We will not see goods checked as they move between Dundalk and Newry, but we might see disruption on the Irish Sea. We do not know what kind of disruption that will be. We do not know what goods will be checked. We have pledges from the UK Prime Minister, as the previous Member who spoke said, but it is worth all of us pausing and questioning the value of pledges from the current Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister has been speaking, this morning, in London about what he sees as his redlines for the UK in the trade negotiations. He has been setting out more redlines. In a previous life, I was involved in a UK Government that set down unhelpful, strident and counterproductive redlines, which led to a

response — a positive response from my perspective and that of people on my Benches — from the Irish Government and the EU that Irish citizens and EU citizens in Northern Ireland were not going to be abandoned and that protections would be sought by avoiding a hard border on this island. We now need solidarity from Dublin and Brussels. We also need British Ministers to pay attention to what this Assembly is saying about protecting our economy. We are a very long way from this deal being done. We have a huge amount of uncertainty, and now is the time for the various parties in this House to come together, where it is possible, and to find a common voice to get protection for all the people that we serve.

Dr Aiken: It is very clear that the United Kingdom has now left the European Union. Today, I have had the opportunity to listen to the Prime Minister's so-called vision for a trade deal. He is saying that there is no need for the UK to follow Brussels's rules, which creates more than a degree of uncertainty here in Northern Ireland, because, no matter what the rest of our country is doing, Northern Ireland will be following the majority of Brussels's rules as we go forward.

Indeed, today, we heard from one of the ferry companies, Stena Line, that it is looking at how it is going to manage potential customs borders and posts in the ports of Larne, Cairnryan, Birkenhead and other places. That should be a matter of considerable concern about where we are going to as well.

However, it is good to see, at long last, that the Northern Ireland Executive have set up a Brexit subcommittee after two weeks. It is one of the most fundamental issues we have and one of the most significant things we have to deal with. We have heard much of Norway, Switzerland, Australia and Canada-plus-plus-plus, but the Executive and the political parties, the wider community in Northern Ireland, the business community, agribusiness and academia, who actually understand the issues rather than just delivering rhetoric, must join together to get the best position for Northern Ireland. What I want to hear from now on is Northern Ireland-plus not Canada-minus or Australia-plus. We must do what is best for Northern Ireland.

I was a Remainer, but the reality is that the United Kingdom has left the European Union. We must get the best deal for all of us in Northern Ireland. We must have the best deal for every single citizen in Northern Ireland. To that end, we must work together, but there are only 11 months to go. There is a lot to do in a very short time. Now is the time for all political

parties and everybody to gather together to make that happen.

Ms Armstrong: I opposed Brexit. I did not think that it would be good for Northern Ireland, and I remain convinced that that is the case. However, now we have to rebuild and fill those gaps. There are uncertainties, and today our Prime Minister made a speech that may bring further challenges for Northern Ireland and, indeed, costs to this place.

We need the softest Brexit possible. Checks down the Irish Sea seem to be inevitable. We need to consider how we are going to deal with those and how we can encourage the rest of the UK not to leave us at sea, peripheralised and left on our own. We have heard from several businesses about how they will be able to continue, including from hauliers who are trying to get products across either a sea or a border on the island. We need to think about what is happening. There are uncertain parameters today. We may be dictated to over our heads.

Boris Johnson appears to be diametrically opposed to what is happening in Northern Ireland and listening to Northern Ireland's needs. So, in this place, we must come together in damage limitation mode to ensure that Northern Ireland is protected, it is Northern Ireland first, and it is Northern Ireland that takes the lead in some of those discussions. Our voice has to be heard.

I am disappointed that we did leave. Friday night in my house was extremely quiet. It was a night of reflection and a night of what was lost, but all is not completely lost. We have come together in the Assembly and have a purpose. We all agreed that we did not agree with the withdrawal agreement, and now it is time to set out our stall to make sure that, for life here to continue, we protect our businesses and our citizens. Brexit may have happened to us, but we will not let it hinder us.

Ms Bailey: On Friday morning, I listened to the weather forecast. The weather reporter told us that it was going to be a dark, dank day, and that is exactly how I felt, as, I imagine, many across Northern Ireland — the majority of whom voted to remain — felt. We cannot sit back and say that this was the democratic will because we know that there is confusion and chaos right across the population in the UK.

While my colleague in South Belfast is absolutely right to say that 17.4 million voted to leave, that cannot be a stand-alone figure because we must acknowledge that over 16 million voted to remain, yet we have no clarity

and no plan. In Northern Ireland, we are being held hostage to the fortune of a Prime Minister whom this House does not even trust, who led a campaign to leave that was full of nonsense and was found to have broken electoral law. He went further and was found to have acted illegally in proroguing Parliament to get his withdrawal Bill through. He has U-turned so many times on pledges and promises that we can expect the year ahead only to be full of more of the same.

When we put that together with the fact that elections for a new Government in the South will take place on Saturday — the polls show that no party will hold a majority and that the parties are likely to go into a process of trying to set up another coalition Government, which could string things out — we are really tight for time. If Boris Johnson and the UK Government are looking to have trade deals signed off within 11 months, they will need a magic wand. I have concerns for our future.

The workload for the Assembly and Executive will be huge. We have the opportunity to do something good and get something right. We know the emergencies that we need to address to look after the best interests of our people, particularly climate chaos and the changes required there, workers' rights and the right of people to free movement. There is a lot to do, and we are being lobbied hard. I hope that everybody can step up, speak with a collective voice and act in a collective effort in the best interests of all our citizens.

Mr Allister: There is something of a howling at the moon about Mr O'Dowd's contribution and, indeed, some others. The United Kingdom has left the EU. We are not going back. That is the reality. It is not a reality that is as fulsome and beneficial as I had wished it to be for Northern Ireland. The question that I voted on was whether I wanted the United Kingdom to leave or to remain; the question was not whether I wanted the United Kingdom to leave but to leave Northern Ireland behind in the EU, so, naturally, I am disappointed that, in some significant parts, that appears to be the outcome. To leave Northern Ireland marooned, colony-like, within the EU customs union to all intents and purposes and its single market for goods is to betray the principle that, having joined as one nation, we deserved to leave as one nation.

That came about as a consequence of many political shenanigans, most particularly by some who have had a lifelong ambition to break up the United Kingdom. It was greatly aided by the short-sightedness of the agri-food industry in

this Province and some from business in this Province, who hyperventilated at the thought of some fettering of trade between North and South but gave no thought to the resulting fettering of our trade to our biggest market: GB. Having worked themselves into a frenzy about protecting the minnow part of our economy southwards and ignoring the gigantic part of our economy east-west, they in part contributed to the sad spectacle that Northern Ireland is to be left marooned under the EU customs code and its tariffs and the rules of the EU single market, which we cannot change, and subject, in all of that, to the governance of the European Court of Justice. That is not the outcome that any of us voted for, and that is not the outcome that was on the ballot paper.

Mr McAleer: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Allister: I do not think that that is possible.

Ms Dillon: On Friday, I visited a project in Pomeroy that had availed itself of £5 million of EU funding. That project is about reconciliation; it is about bringing the two parts of our community together. My concern is this: who will replace that funding? Given some of the comments from Members in the Chamber about us, in the wake of the New Decade, New Approach deal, going to the British Government with a begging bowl, do they think that we should not ask the British Government to replace that EU funding? I know the difference that EU funding has made in my constituency, and I am certain that there is not one Member who would not be able to say that it has made a massive difference in their constituency.

Where is the money coming from? I have not heard any talk about that. We are talking about business and the agri-food sector, which is extremely important. Frankly, the comments from the previous Member to speak were absolutely disgusting, particularly the manner in which he referred to the whole sector. I held many meetings with that sector when the vote was first taken. The point that they made was that we could have no divergence from EU rules, because what really gives us an advantage here in the agri-food sector is the quality of our food. We will never be able to produce the quantity, but we have high-quality food. They made that very clear at that time, and your remarks are quite shameful.

12.30 pm

I would like to know what the approach of the House will be in relation to EU funding and what

the approach will be to going to the British Government, not with a begging bowl but telling them what they owe us here. They owe us in terms of New Decade, New Approach as well. The nonsense of trying to cover for the British Government's attempt to remove themselves from their responsibilities should stop here and now. We, as a House, need to ensure that all of the funding remains in place. Our voluntary and community sector and our rural communities will be absolutely decimated. We have a responsibility to all of those people and sectors across our constituencies. I ask for the support of the House in ensuring that the funding that will be lost to this place through this Brexit will be replaced by the British Government.

Ms McLaughlin: Friday 31 January at 11:00 pm was a moment that the people of Derry and across the North never wanted to see. We were forced out of the European Union against our wishes. We deeply regret that decision, but the UK has now left the European Union. Today, the real work begins, and the battle over barriers will begin. It is clear from Prime Minister Johnson's conversations over the weekend and earlier this morning that he believes that some of the barriers are worth it if they free up the UK to make trade deals around the world. That causes a real problem here in the North.

The EU has made it clear that any member that leaves the club will not have unfettered access. The two dominant issues will be the level playing field and governance. Any divergence will cause a border in the Irish Sea. Over the next few months, I appeal to all Members and to the Executive to work together. We need to protect our economy in Northern Ireland. It is weak as it stands. We need to support the business community in these uncertain times and work collectively to protect the interests of all.

Mr McAleer: I had not intended to speak in the debate, but I want to draw attention to some of the remarks made by Mr Allister. People employed in the agri-food sector are right to be annoyed and anxious about what is happening. We have had huge support for our farmers and rural communities from the EU; in fact, last year, the single farm payment — this goes for many years — accounted for over 80% of farmers' income. The threat of that being lost is causing huge anxiety in that sector of our population. In addition, we hear from the British Prime Minister that they plan to diverge and go completely off on their own. We will have a situation in which the British Government will enter trade deals with other countries that have lesser animal welfare standards than we have.

We run the risk of having our market here in the North — this is what farmers are afraid of — being flooded with inferior beef from other parts of the world.

It is really important that we protect our industry here. We have an all-island trade in the region of £1.2 billion in agri-food. I was at a conference last year where one dairy processor said that 55 of their lorries crossed the border every day to process dairy products. About 500,000 sheep are exported to the South and 500,000 pigs are imported into the North from the South every year, so there is huge all-island trade in agri-food. I do not blame people involved in the agri-food industry, which supports hundreds of thousands of jobs, families and communities, for being nervous at this time. Mr Allister and his remarks should not diminish that in any way at all.

Ms S Bradley: Like the previous Member, I was not intending to speak today, but I feel a duty to go on public record to support those who stepped forward at a time when there was absolutely no political lead in this place during a critical time in Brexit. I thank the representatives from industry who stepped forward and made it clear that all industry here had to be saved. We cannot politically pick over what suits and what does not, and we have a united duty to make sure that all industry is supported going forward.

Mr Buckley: Like some previous Members who spoke, I had not planned to speak on this Matter of the Day, but I think that it is important to do so because, from what I have listened to from some Members around the Chamber, you would forgive me for having the feeling that I am at a wake right now. Yes, indeed, Friday brought for me something of a bittersweet moment. It was sweet in the sense that it was the culmination of something that I personally had campaigned for and believed passionately in; bitter in the sense that the withdrawal agreement itself compromises the integrity of the Union that I cherish.

Collective decision-making will be required from the House and our political leaders to hold Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, firm to his commitment of free, unfettered access within the United Kingdom. That is something that we as a House should be united on. I welcome what has been said from across the Floor — we do not want borders, whether east-west or north-south — but we must be cognisant of the fact that Brexit has happened. The United Kingdom has left the European Union. It is now incumbent on us all to fight for the free, unfettered access that we rightly deserve.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes the debate on the Matter of the Day.

Assembly Business

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in accordance with paragraph 12(2) of schedule 1 to the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, nominates Paul McFadden for appointment as the acting Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: As Members are aware, the Public Services Ombudsman Act 2016 established and made provision about the office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The Assembly established the ombudsman's office to carry out the important and effective function of ensuring that there was a free, independent and impartial service for handling complaints about public services in Northern Ireland. The Assembly Commission believes that it is important to ensure that that service can be delivered. The 2016 Act provides that the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman is, by virtue of holding that office, the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman and the Local Government Commissioner for Standards. The 2016 Act delegates responsibility for identifying a person to be nominated by the Assembly for the role of ombudsman to the Assembly Commission. The 2016 Act makes similar provisions for the nomination of a person to carry out the role of acting ombudsman in circumstances where the ombudsman is not in post. The previous ombudsman, Marie Anderson, was appointed as the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland on 16 July 2019. On her appointment as Police Ombudsman, Ms Anderson immediately ceased to be the Public Services Ombudsman. On behalf of the Commission, I take the opportunity to thank Ms Anderson on behalf of the Assembly for her distinguished and widely recognised work as ombudsman since April 2016.

In anticipation of Ms Anderson's departure and as the Assembly was not sitting, the Assembly Commission agreed that it would be preferable to nominate a person to carry out the role of acting ombudsman and await the resumption of the Assembly to appoint an ombudsman for the seven-year term set out in the 2016 Act. The Assembly Commission, therefore, wrote to the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in June 2019 to seek a legislative means at Westminster to allow for the appointment of an acting ombudsman. That would have ensured that the important oversight role that is carried out by the ombudsman did not lapse during the period when the Executive had not been formed and the Assembly was not sitting. Subsequently, the Assembly Commission likewise wrote to the current Secretary of State on the same basis. While that legislative solution was not put in place, the formation of the Executive on 11 January 2020 now means that the Assembly can once again undertake its nomination role as envisaged in the 2016 Act.

The benefit of nominating an acting ombudsman is that the important oversight functions of the ombudsman's office can be carried out by the acting ombudsman and, at the same time, the recruitment process for the ombudsman can progress. A situation such as this was envisaged by the 2016 Act. Members may wish to note that the nomination and subsequent appointment of an acting ombudsman can last only for the period up to 15 July 2020.

At its meeting on 5 September 2019, the Assembly Commission identified the current deputy ombudsman, Mr Paul McFadden, as a suitable person to carry out the role of acting ombudsman. Members should note that the deputy ombudsman is not the same thing as the acting ombudsman. The role of deputy ombudsman is not a statutory role, whereas the role of acting ombudsman carries with it the range of legislative functions that are ordinarily carried out by the ombudsman.

Paul McFadden has been the deputy ombudsman for Northern Ireland for three and a half years, since his appointment in July 2016. As the most senior official in the absence of the ombudsman, he holds full administrative delegation of the ombudsman's responsibilities and has been the acting accounting officer since July 2017. Paul joined the ombudsman's office from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, where he was a member of the senior management team for seven years. He established and headed up the Complaints Standards Authority, implementing a streamlined and improved complaints-handling

framework across all of Scotland's public bodies. Paul previously helped to establish the independent Police Complaints Commissioner for Scotland in 2007, holding senior management responsibility for police complaints investigations.

The Assembly Commission is confident that Mr McFadden will be able to ensure that the important functions of the office of ombudsman can continue to be exercised effectively. He has agreed that, subject to nomination by the Assembly, he will fulfil the acting ombudsman's role until a successor ombudsman is appointed or —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: — until 15 July 2020, whatever comes sooner. I will give way.

Mr Allister: Will the Member clarify whether, once he is appointed acting ombudsman, he will continue as the deputy commissioner for local government standards? Is that possible?

Mrs D Kelly: May I come back to the Member on that point? The Commission hopes to meet at some time tomorrow or next week, and we will come back to the Member and the House on that point. Those are important functions that we need to ensure are followed through on. If his nomination is accepted today, we will see what ramifications it has for other staff in the ombudsman's office.

The ombudsman is appointed, as is any acting ombudsman, by Her Majesty The Queen on the nomination of the Assembly. Members, today, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, I seek the Assembly's nomination of Paul McFadden as the acting Public Services Ombudsman for a maximum period up to 15 July 2020. I ask the Assembly to agree his nomination.

Mr Speaker: No other Members have indicated a wish to speak, so I call John O'Dowd.

12.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: As Mrs Kelly said in her opening remarks, the Assembly Commission is determined to ensure that all the work of the ombudsman's office can continue until such time as a nomination can be made for the ombudsman. The nomination of the acting ombudsman means that the important oversight functions that can be carried out only with either an ombudsman or acting ombudsman in post will be in place from now until July.

In Mr McFadden, the Commission is confident that it has succeeded in nominating a candidate who will bring expertise and skill to the role. His nomination today is a positive sign that the Assembly is back in business and is carrying out its legislative functions. Subject to the Assembly's approval, the Assembly Commission wishes him well in his post.

In relation to Mr Allister's question to Mrs Kelly, it has been indicated by officials that, yes, he can continue in that role and carry out that function in conjunction with his current role.

In ending, I trust that Members from across the House will support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with paragraph 12(2) of schedule 1 to the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, nominates Paul McFadden for appointment as the acting Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Ms Armstrong: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Go ahead.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Speaker. This morning, while we have been in the Chamber, the Minister for Communities made a statement to the press about welfare mitigations. We were all told that the ministerial statement should have been available by 11.30 am. I have checked again and, as of this time, it is not available. I believe that the Minister has not followed Standing Order 18, under which there should have been an oral statement to the House. I do not believe that a Minister should announce it to the press before announcing it to Members.

Mr Speaker: The Member has made the point, and we will deal with that later.

Private Members' Business

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: First Stage

Mr Allister: I beg to introduce the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 01/17-22], which is a Bill to amend sections 7 and 8 of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and article 3 of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in relation to special advisers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, repeal the Civil Service Commissioners (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016, amend section 17 of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and to make additional provision for the functioning of government in Northern Ireland and connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: Members can take their ease for a minute or two while we change the Table.

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

Autism Training in Schools

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Pam Cameron to move the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the specific needs of pupils with autism in our schools; values and supports the role of all educators in ensuring pupils with autism have the best educational outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Education to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: 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 of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose

and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposers of the amendments will have 10 minutes to move their amendments and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mrs Cameron: Let me say at the outset how pleased I am that this is the first private Members' motion brought to the Floor since our return to the Chamber, and what better message to send out to our constituents than one that shows that we prioritise those in need, we champion better outcomes for all, and we support our educators in bringing through future generations.

Even while the Assembly was down, the work of the all-party group (APG), of which I am proud to be chair, continued. As many of you already know, the all-party group on autism was set up in 2008 to look specifically at issues relating to the autism community in Northern Ireland. The aim of the all-party group is ultimately to ensure that adequate support and services are available to the 30,000 families affected by autism and that the main issues are highlighted. The APG has witnessed the introduction of the Autism Act in 2011 and the resulting autism strategy. Autism NI's secretariat has led the lobbying for that, for which we thank them. Since the strategy was introduced, however, the APG on autism has also seen the many failures of the strategy. Those are outlined in the 'Broken promises' report of 2016, which I encourage you all to read.

The Autism Act is still the most comprehensive piece of single disability legislation in Europe, but it has failed to accomplish what we, as an APG, hoped that it would. We feel particularly let down by the resulting autism strategy and the accompanying action plans. Only one of the three action plans has been completed, although all three have a deadline of 2020. That stagnation in delivery is the legacy of three years without this place. Therefore, the onus is on us to correct it with swift and decisive action to make up for lost time.

The reality is stark. Childhood diagnosis of autism has nearly doubled in the past six years. Therefore, the lack of support and services has become more and more evident. For example, as outlined in the autism strategy, diagnosis is supposed to be made within eight weeks. However, we know that that is not happening in most areas, with many families waiting up to 18 months. We all know that early intervention is key to managing autism, but intervention is being delayed owing to lengthy diagnosis processes. Early intervention services are also

inadequate. They vary from trust to trust and, at present, do not support the complex needs of our families and children.

Education, however, is by far the issue raised most by parents and teaching unions, and, as we know, in the many related cases in our constituencies. The school environment is ultimately where autistic children spend the vast majority of their day. The all-party group has met the Ulster Teachers' Union on various occasions over the past two years. It has told us unreservedly that it cannot access adequate autism training provision through the Department of Education. In fact, the current president, Susan Thompson, reported recently:

"There are not enough courses. The timings of courses are inaccessible, and the fact that they are not mandatory is worrying."

Teachers and classroom assistants feel overwhelmed and are under-resourced to be able to work with children with autism, as they have not had the opportunity to gain the skills needed to do so. Therefore, the Ulster Teachers' Union, the National Association of Teachers and the National Education Union have said, unequivocally, that they are in full support of the immediate introduction of mandatory autism training in Northern Ireland.

Autism NI has the only autism-specific helpline in Northern Ireland and receives over 5,000 calls each year from autistic individuals, parents and professionals. Education is the subject of the vast majority of the calls. In 2019, the charity also conducted a survey relating specifically to education. From the survey, it was discovered that over one third of children with autism were on a reduced timetable. That can mean reduced for just an hour a day, or it can mean that they are in class for only an hour a day, which is totally unacceptable. It is even more unacceptable when one takes into account that 78% of autistic children are in mainstream classrooms. Currently, one in 30 school-age children is diagnosed with autism. That could be one child in every classroom. It should be seen as common sense that the person that children with autism are spending a large quantity of their day with understands them and is able to educate and support them in a way that fulfils their needs. For parents already anxious about the challenges that their child faces each and every day, the reassurance of having teachers fully trained as a result of mandatory training would provide additional comfort that their child will be supported in the best way possible.

I urge the Minister to act. The public support is widespread. In September 2019, an online petition created by the charity Autism NI that called for mandatory autism training was signed by more than 10,000 people in just a few days. An accompanying rally was held at Stormont. It was attended by hundreds and received good media coverage. We have a draft Programme for Government that states clearly that every child deserves the "best start in life". The best start in life for any child includes the best educational outcomes, but, for children with autism, we know that that is not the case. The autism strategy also states that all teaching staff should understand autism. Again, we know that this target has not been met. These are our children's lives that we are playing with, and their future.

Every autistic child becomes an autistic adult. We need to spend now to save later or risk many of our autistic adults ending up in mental health services, which we know are already under pressure. The UK's largest autism research charity, Autistica, recently reported that autistic adults are nine times more likely to die through suicide than the rest of the general population. I am sure you will agree that this statistic is horrific and unacceptable. Autism training makes good economic sense. With the right support and opportunities, we know that autistic young children can achieve and go on to live a fulfilling and productive life. Not only is it our moral duty to reverse the fate of a generation of children and young people with autism, but it makes good social and economic sense.

The UK statistic for autistic adults in employment is 16% for full-time work. This figure has remained the same for the past decade, showing that autistic people are not benefiting, and reaffirming that we must turn the curve earlier at every step of their journey towards adulthood and work. The NI Executive have a responsibility to make sure that autistic children can get the support that they need at the earliest opportunity — and we know that is from education — from people who understand autism. Autistic children deserve the same opportunities in life as their peers. We should all want to create a more inclusive environment for all our children, and autistic children and adults need to be part of that. Other parts of the UK have already implemented mandatory autism training for teachers, and Northern Ireland needs to follow suit or risk being left behind.

We are not asking for autism to be elevated above other disabilities or needs. We are simply asking for our children to have an equal playing field that can be afforded to the most basic right

of a good education. A friend recently shared a post on Facebook that said the following, and I am quoting again:

"Allowing a student with a hidden disability to struggle academically or socially when all that is needed for success are appropriate accommodations and explicit instruction is no different than failing to provide a ramp for a person in a wheelchair."

And how true is that? Would any child with any other disability be asked to attend a school that is not equipped, resourced or trained to support their needs? No, they would not.

It is important that this debate focuses on what the motion asks for: mandatory autism training. What is does not include is the nature of that training, and that is for the Department to consult on. What is important today, however, is that we get the commitment to introduce mandatory training, the form of which is for another day and would serve only to confuse the debate at this stage. I am asking the Minister of Education to introduce mandatory autism training for all teaching staff, to include those in training and those already in post, and classroom assistants in Northern Ireland. I also respectfully ask that any exploration period required be kept to an absolute minimum, because our children have waited long enough.

Miss Woods: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "Education" and insert:

"to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers, teachers and classroom assistants."

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Miss Woods: Autism, as we know, is a lifelong disability that affects the social and communication centre of the brain. It affects the way an individual relates to people, situations and their immediate environment. Many individuals with autism have difficulty processing everyday sensory information like sight, smells, touch, tastes and sounds. This varies from person to person.

Many Members will know someone with autism. The number of children identified with autism in Northern Ireland has increased year on year since 2012. According to Department of Health figures published in 2019, one in 30 school-age

children has autism and 78% of autistic children are in mainstream schools. That is, potentially, one in every classroom. Given this, and the inherent tendency in Northern Ireland of reactionary training for teachers, we should be pursuing a more proactive approach. Compulsory or mandatory training on autism would be a solid foundation to build upon.

1.00 pm

In 2012, the National Autistic Society for Northern Ireland carried out a survey of children with autism and their parents. Of the young people they spoke to, almost a third said that one of the worst things about school was that their teachers did not understand them. School is daunting enough for any child, as we all know, let alone one who feels that they are not understood. That puts undue pressure and stress on the student themselves, the teacher-student relationship, the wider interaction in the classroom with others and on the relationship between the teacher and the family. More widely, it adds to mental health pressures.

After speaking to a good friend of mine in Bangor called Aaron about his experiences in school and with tech, he told me that he would like to see the mental health of children and young people with autism talked about, as they are often forgotten —.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. On the point of mental health, does she agree with me that one of the sad realities of a lack of autism training in schools is that many parents are overwhelmed when dealing with the spill-out at home, and that has had an adverse impact on their mental health?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his question. I completely agree. Parents have enough pressure on them, let alone dealing with a situation where, say, the teachers are not involved or do not understand what is going on at home.

Aaron stated that, if teachers were more aware of how to deal with pupils with autism and had mandatory training in their issues, their mental health would be better understood. The research conducted in 2012 also showed that expertise in schools remained patchy and that many teachers did not get the training, knowledge or resources that they needed to help children with autism. Almost one in five parents indicated dissatisfaction with teachers' understanding of how to support children. More recently, Autism NI stated that one third of parents coming to them for advice on their

children's education said that they were on a reduced timetable at their current school. I agree with the chief executive at Autism NI that that is entirely unacceptable. Autism is categorised as a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and under the Autism Act (NI) 2011, where reasonable adjustments must be made in all public organisations, but we know that that is not happening in many of our schools. All our children should be given the best possible start in life, and a child with autism should not be disadvantaged when it comes to their education.

How can children with autism not be disadvantaged in their education if we continue with the current opt-in training culture? Adequate mandatory training for teachers would mean that the special education needs of all children and young people, including those with autism, were met and would be an important first step to help transform the lives and prospects of future generations of children with autism. The reason why mandatory training is so important and why we have tabled the amendment is to make sure that teachers and classroom assistants work towards a whole-school approach in supporting children. It is of note that, in September 2019, the Government announced that all health and social care staff in England would receive training in autism and learning disability, working towards a whole-healthcare approach. I would like to congratulate those who campaigned on the issue — specifically Mencap and their Treat Me Well campaign — and the all-party groups that have been formed. I hope that this can be fully realised in Northern Ireland too. Could this not be rolled out to our educators to better people's experiences in a school setting as well?

Research conducted by Ulster University in the greater Belfast area in 2003 found that a majority of staff felt they had inadequate training to equip them to meet children's particular needs and reported a lack of knowledge and skills to help those children. Teachers and classroom assistants are fully supportive of the motion. All of the teachers' unions in Northern Ireland support the introduction of mandatory autism training. I note that, in the autism strategy 2013-2020 and action plan 2013-16, support funding for autism-related training for those in the preschool sector is listed, as well as the publication of guides for teachers in classrooms and some school and parent resources. However, training should not be limited to those in the preschool sector; it should be extended to all those training to be teachers or classroom assistants and all those currently qualified. The initial teacher training programme in the rest of the UK covers a wider

variety of the skills that teachers need to teach the curriculum, and, in 2016, the UK Government added a teacher training framework which ensures that SEN is covered, including how to support children with autism.

We have had time to find ways in which we can improve provision of support for those in our schools who have autism, so the time for exploring options is over. What we need now is concrete action for teachers and students. That is not to say that we do not have any resources in Northern Ireland: we do. The Department invests substantial resources in the training provision at Middletown autism centre, but, while that is to be commended, it is not sufficient and does not meet the growing demand, nor is it compulsory. Providing support to schools, including the continuing professional development of staff, has already been identified in previous strategies and action plans. The Assembly should push on with this by compelling the Minister of Education to include autism training as part of core teacher training. Assembly questions to the Minister have shown that it is not possible to know how many teachers have received the current training, but, with mandatory training, we know that we can and will ensure that everyone has received the same level of training.

In September last year, a petition was signed by over 10,000 people online asking the Department of Education to introduce mandatory training. A rally attended by people with autism, parents and teachers was held here on 11 September 2019, making their voices heard. We have much to do here to strengthen the Autism Act and ensure its proper implementation. We should listen to those 10,000 people today, and that is why we call on the Minister to introduce mandatory autism training as an important step in delivering for our young people and supporting our teaching staff.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Karen Mullan to move amendment No 2.

Ms Mullan: I speak in support of the motion and in favour —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member must move the amendment first and then resume her seat.

Ms Mullan: I beg to move amendment No 2:

At end insert:

" , and for teacher training colleges to introduce a compulsory module that includes this training during the postgraduate certificate in education."

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other contributors will have five minutes. The Assembly should note that amendment No 1 and amendment No 2 are mutually exclusive, so, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question shall not be put on amendment No 2.

Ms Mullan: I speak in favour of the motion and amendment No 1. I believe that our amendment strengthens the motion but also that we should show a united front today.

As my party's education spokesperson and a member of the all-party group on autism, I have heard from many in the education sector, parents, young people and the wider community who are calling for greater autism awareness and training. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities. If we are to go about realising that, making autism-specific training mandatory for our teachers is a step in the right direction.

In the North, one in 30 children has a diagnosis of autism. The vast majority of those children are educated in a mainstream setting, which shows the need for autism training for teachers and classroom assistants. In my city of Derry, Derry City and Strabane District Council and our two main shopping centres have led the way in making our public venues inclusive for all. Part of that has been training all front-line staff in autism awareness. If we can do that in our public and private sectors, why are we not providing that training to our teaching staff, who have our children in their care anywhere up to 30 hours a week?

Our teaching staff want to be supported to provide the best care and education to our young people and to be more equipped to do so. The role of the teacher is evolving; they are, increasingly, working with children with complex needs, and introducing this training at the start of their journey will, no doubt, serve them well throughout their career. For that reason, our amendment would strengthen the motion to include a compulsory module during teacher training. Introducing that in teacher training colleges is a pragmatic step that could be taken and would have an impact for a relatively low cost.

In October last year, I met the Department and asked them to look at options, including costs. One such option to be explored is assigning one of the allocated teacher training days, which would reduce the cost of teacher cover. Widening out the training to include compulsory disability training should also be included.

Today's motion and debate is the start of what is required, but we now need action. Parents and young people and our teaching staff need action from all of us. The Autism Act was brought in in 2011, and yet we continue to see an increased number of children and young people in particular waiting years for diagnosis and support services. I call on the Minister to acknowledge that there is a crisis in special education needs provision and that many teachers actively seek this training. By supporting the motion and amendment No 1, we would send a positive message to the sector as well as to families.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move on to the list. Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members that contributions are limited to five minutes, although, if you take an intervention, you will get an additional minute.

Mr McGrath: I am pleased to speak in support of the motion and the amendments. We do not really see a major difference between the amendments, so we are happy to support them as we go along.

As Members will know, the SDLP has campaigned for many years — from 2002, with the work of John Fee MLA — for increased autism support. That culminated in the Autism Act (NI), which Dominic Bradley brought forward in 2010 and which began to operate in 2011. Sadly, the potential of that Act to transform people's lives has been compromised not only by a lack of financial support but by a lack of ministerial decision-making over the past three years. With that in mind, I warmly welcome the fact that, today, we are in the Chamber discussing the issue.

The need for this type of training is long overdue. The huge increase in ASD-related diagnoses in recent years should serve as a wake-up call about the urgent need for such provision. We in the House and, indeed, the Minister must listen to the will of people here. Diagnoses have trebled in a decade. Schools and autism services struggle to meet an ever-increasing demand. From speaking to teachers and parents in my constituency of South Down, I know that there is a clear want and need for mandatory autism training in our schools.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Member giving way. I stand as your South Down colleague who has heard that message resonating. Does the Member agree that, although that critical training is the first and right step, it must be properly resourced — I take the point about not getting into the detail today — and real cognisance needs to be taken of the conflicting time pressures on the teacher in the classroom? I say that as somebody who has come through teacher training. The pressures in the classroom can put a very different slant on it. I urge, going forward, that we recognise that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Yes, certainly, and we see that resources are required when we look at the scale and the numbers of young people affected. Some of the statistics that I will mention later will certainly highlight how some form of resource will need to go alongside it.

One eighth of the annual education budget, which is, I think, about £270 million, is being spent on supporting children with special education needs, including autism, but we can do more. The Department of Health tells us that one in 30 school-age children lives with ASD, and 78% of those children are in mainstream schools. That is a huge number of young people across the North in all types of schools who have to deal with the issue.

According to the Children's Law Centre, the number of parents experiencing difficulties in receiving support for their children has increased. There are teachers and classroom assistants who, through no fault of their own, do not understand the complexities of autism. That has led to children who need targeted support being at times given detention, excluded from class or, ultimately, expelled from school. We cannot allow that to continue. The Children's Law Centre also said that, five years ago, it dealt with 400 cases relating to special education in schools compared with 1,600 cases now, so there is a very obvious need that we need to address.

The vast majority of staff, teachers, classroom assistants and support staff who work in our schools are among the most caring and considerate individuals in the North. Like many other roles such as nursing, they do that with a sense of passion beyond their sense of duty. Teachers and classroom assistants whom my colleagues and I have listened to fully support the motion today. All the teacher unions, as was

mentioned, also support it, but we have to make sure that this is not simply a box-ticking exercise.

There is concern among some that that is what this could become if it is just a quick half-day exercise. We need to make sure that any training is done properly.

1.15 pm

At the same time, however, we need to do something. I always remember the story about what can happen when the bell rings at the end of class. There might be so much noise in the classroom that, if a homework were to be issued at that stage, children with autism might not be able to process the instruction that they were given, and that could lead to them going home and potentially having a meltdown. That can cause a lot of stress in the home. If teachers are equipped with very small tips such as that, it could help massively in the classroom, especially for the 78% in mainstream education. A half-day exercise might be very quick, but it could equip our teachers and classroom assistants with some really helpful insights into how to help children.

It has been said that living with autism is simply a different way of experiencing the world. A person living with autism may see, hear, feel, taste and touch the full vibrancy of the world around them, and that is witnessed most keenly in the classroom. Although it is a different way of experiencing the world, it can also be overwhelming. We must be sensitive to the needs of those living with autism and ensure that we have done all that we can to facilitate a sensitive, understanding and informed learning environment. I urge each of you to support the motion.

Mr Butler: I support the motion and the amendment. As a member of the APG on autism perhaps this past four years, I have become increasingly aware of the disadvantage faced by our young people with autism. We know that, in Northern Ireland, we face higher levels of autism than the national average. In fact, the Department of Health figures from 2019 state that we now have one in 30 school-age children with autism. When we look at the average classroom size, we see that that means that just about every classroom in Northern Ireland will have at least one child who may require adjustment or support.

The timeline for action stretches back more than 10 years. In 2009, Minister McGimpsey published the ASD strategic action plan and

later commissioned the Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network (RASDN) to implement the strategy. That should have provided the momentum required to get us further than where we are today. Further ministerial announcements followed, and progress has been made, but much momentum has been lost and a proper, collegiate, cross-departmental strategy has perhaps been lacking.

My constituency office, as I am sure that of other Members, handles a multiplicity of issues, and children with autism and other spectrum issues figure high on the list. When, as an elected representative, I seek to help, I share the frustrations of parents and carers at the speed of response and, at times, the utter exasperation of teachers who are clearly seeking to do the best that they can do for their pupils.

I am delighted that the Ulster Teachers' Union is supportive of the introduction of mandatory training. From conversation with teacher friends, I have been convinced that that is the only way forward. The pressures faced by teachers are many, but surely an element of awareness-raising training for the profession in a mandated form, accessed at initial training and revisited through refresher events, can only help alleviate the growing pressures.

The majority of our children with autism are taught in mainstream education. To be accurate, it is 78%. Therefore, to try to dilute who is trained and where they are trained would be to ignore the struggle of our children in the education system across all our communities.

Every child deserves the "best start in life", as stated in our Programme for Government. That being the collective aim of the Executive means that we need to take a collegiate approach in order to ensure that our children are not disadvantaged in any way. Therefore, if we are serious about achieving that aim, we must ensure that all teaching and assistant staff are equipped and informed to help them fulfil their role. To do less would be to lower the bar to such an extent that we may fail before we even begin.

As mentioned by Members, it was incredible to be part of the elected group that was in attendance when a petition of over 10,000 signatures was delivered to Stormont in September 2019. The rally was attended by parents, teachers, activists and, most importantly, autistic individuals. It was a testament to the public body of support for this motion and the wish that it becomes a reality.

I will finish on this very important point, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The future of the individual children with autism hinges on the support they get in their early and formative years. This is a partnership between parents, society, teachers and other agencies. However, when we reflect on the outcomes in their future life, and the barriers to work and further education they face, we must effect change, and we must do it now. I support the motion and the amendment.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion and amendment No 1.

I have been the Alliance Party health spokesperson since 2016, and since then barely a day has passed that the subject of autism, and the needs of the children living with it, has not been raised with me, so this is good news. Certainly, there is a higher level of public consciousness of this condition and the steps that need to be taken forward.

Last November, in my own constituency, I attended the opening of the National Autistic Society centre in Carryduff. I know there are MLAs in the Chamber today who were also there. It is the first centre of its kind in Northern Ireland, designed specifically with the needs of people living with autism in mind. The advantage of having this centre, which is a step forward, is not only that it provides space for people with the condition and their carers, but it also plays a role in enhancing the awareness raising process to ensure that people with autism are better catered for in daily life, not least when they are accessing public services.

In fact, we are approaching a decade since the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which requires reasonable adjustments to be made by public organisations. Unfortunately, this has not happened across the school estate due to the various difficulties in managing the process efficiently. However, it is worth emphasising that the Act, and other legislation, clearly requires equal treatment for children with autism in the education system. As my colleague has just pointed out, the last Programme for Government also gave a specific commitment to giving every child the "best start in life". The motion correctly reflects the fact that we need to achieve the outcome envisaged in the legislation by making sure that everyone is aware of it and suitably trained. We are keen to strengthen it a little to emphasise that this is something that must be done, rather than just explored. I do support Ms Cameron's recommendation that this should be consulted on, because it is both our legal and moral duty to do so.

Furthermore, teachers have no issue with this, and, as we have heard today, the teaching unions are very much in favour of mandatory autism training. We are also keen to emphasise that this needs to include trainee teachers, because it needs to be there from the start of their education journey. New teachers entering the profession will have the advantage of growing up in a society which is already more aware of autism than ever before. They will no doubt be the first to say that specific training will be very useful. Of course, the reason that all teachers need to be trained is that they will all come across autism. On average, almost every class will contain one child living with autism, and the vast majority of children with autism are within our mainstream education provision.

The most compelling reason for supporting the motion is not connected to teaching or legal obligations, but it is the simple reality that so many people living with autism do not end up in full-time employment. This must be, at least in part, to do with inadequate support from the start of their education, as well as the ongoing lack of awareness of the condition, despite recent advances. By enabling people with autism to have more choice and control at the outset, including of education pathways and healthier lifestyles, we can set them on the road to a more independent life, with the same opportunities in learning and employment as everyone else.

No one here today is arguing that this first step will solve all the problems around autism. We need to investigate better mental health provision, better workplace support and ongoing better public awareness of not just autism but the effects it has on pupils' lives. However, this is one step that will be hugely significant, not just because it has an impact on early life, but because it will send a very clear message from this Assembly that we want people living with autism to have exactly the same chances as everyone else. I commend this motion and amendment No 1.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity today to speak on this very important issue. I thank my colleague Pam Cameron for bringing the motion to the House. I also thank the Members who tabled amendments. Those go some way to strengthening the motion, so they are very welcome. I will support the motion whatever happens.

I, too, have been an active member of the all-party group on autism over the past number of years. In the three years when we had no Assembly, the all-party group on autism was extremely active in calling all the Departments

to account and writing to them and asking just what they were doing to support not only children but adults living with autism. It became apparent very early on that Departments were falling short of what they were required to do under the Autism Act and strategy.

We, as MLAs, cannot just blame those Departments for falling short; we have to take some of that blame, especially over the past three years when we have not been here to call those Departments to account. I am so glad that we are back here, doing the job that we need to do. This is our first motion, and we make a commitment here today not to take our foot off the pedal but to call all Departments to account.

Going back to the motion and mandatory training for teachers, Mrs Cameron mentioned in her speech, as did others, that, when the National Union of Teachers gave evidence to the all-party group, it became very evident that we were failing our children and our schools, and they were crying out for help. In some primary schools across Northern Ireland, perhaps only one teacher has had autism training. Therefore, it is incumbent on the Minister to bring about that change in order that we deliver for vulnerable children who need our help.

When we got the information packs and the research packs, it was interesting to look back at the number of Assembly questions that have been asked over the last 10 years on mandatory autism training. There have been many, and the same answer keeps coming back. One of the points in that answer is Middletown. I have been there, along with some of my all-party colleagues. Pam and I had a bit of a road trip that day because I was directing and I got us lost, but we found it eventually, and it is a fantastic place. It does wonderful work, but it is not the answer. The answer is wider than that. The answer is to invest in all our teachers so that they get the help and support that they need.

I also praise the voluntary and community sector and the work that it does in meeting that unmet need. I also praise all those parent-led groups in our communities. We all have them, and we have all visited them, in our constituencies. Parents are supporting one another to try to navigate through the education system and the health system, and, sometimes, that is the only help that they have.

Other colleagues will know that special educational need comes up in our constituency offices time and time again. I have had many

meetings over the years about children, specifically around autism, who are not receiving the proper attention that they need. So, this is something that we need to add on to the mandatory autism training. The other Mrs Bradley mentioned in her intervention that, if we have this and mandatory training, once a child is diagnosed, those services need to follow the child. There is no point in having a diagnosis only to find out that the services are not available. I recently visited some schools in my area, and there is a recurring theme, which is special educational needs services. It is all well and good having a diagnosis, but unless we have support for those children and their families, we will not have done what we set out to do.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: Yes.

Mr Butler: Thank you. I love your passion for the subject. We know that mental health issues exist across the suite of primary education and with our young people, but there is an even greater propensity for mental health issues among young people with autism. Do you agree that perhaps there is a double win here if we can support our young people in their journey with autism and the, at times, hidden mental health issue that also exists that sometimes is not recognised?

1.30 pm

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I was going to say to the Member, "Thank you for that extra minute", but he nearly spoke the whole way through it. *[Laughter.]* I absolutely agree with the Member, and it is something that the chair of the all-party group brought up as well: in mental health, early intervention is key, especially for children who have additional needs. Early intervention can save money in the long term. Of course, we are not all about saving money; we are about saving lives too and improving quality of life, so that was a good point.

I have little time left, but I want to say that one of the schools in my area is Cedar Lodge, which is for children with additional needs, especially autism. We need to do more to support those special educational schools; it

does not just stop at the door of our mainstream schools.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I have been a member of the APG since 2008. I will stick to the mandatory training, but I am delighted that the Minister is here, because I hope that, after this debate, he will take the lead on all of this. A lot of us know that a strategy and a plan arose from the 2011 Act, identifying the responsibilities of each Department. The previous Member mentioned this: we hope that the Minister will take the lead on this and show the other Departments the way, because, for a number of years, we have been trying to get the right services for people with ASD.

I thank Autism NI and the National Autistic Society, plus all the people who have helped for a number of years with the administration of the work of the APG. A lot of good work has been done. For years, they have helped us to compose questions. Some days, we get the right answers, but, more often than not, we do not make enough progress. Listening to the comments of many of the contributors to this debate, I think that we are going in the right direction. There are two reports that I want to mention on record, because it is important to do so for the people who have helped us a lot to bring us to where we are. Hopefully, as I said, after this, the Minister will take on board the comments of the group and we can move forward with the chair and all the people associated with the group and work with the Departments.

The issue of mandatory training goes back to a report that was launched in the Long Gallery in 2012 entitled, 'A* for Autism: Make every school a good school'. That report highlighted the difficulties that children with autism experienced in the education system here. Education, as we know, is a fundamental part of every child's life. It gives children the opportunity to learn about the world they live in and how they can play a part in this world. It should be a time when children feel safe and happy and confident about building relationships and friendships and being able to make the most of their abilities and talents. It should help them to develop independence and prepare them for a bright and happy future.

In the research for the report, parents told us that they wanted an education system that is ambitious and believes their children can achieve; gives their children similar opportunities to other children; understands and supports their children's needs; allows their children to develop friendships and life skills;

allows their children to enjoy good mental health; and prepares their children for life. Those are what any parent would want for a child with or without autism, but, unfortunately, collectively we have left them down.

In 2016, the National Autistic Society NI, in conjunction with Autism NI, published 'Broken Promises', a report that highlighted the failures in the delivery of the autism strategy going back to 2011 and the difficulties that children and young people experienced in the education system. A call was made for mandatory autism training for teachers and classroom assistants. Given that every teacher — this is no slight on teachers; I do not want them emailing me about this — will teach multiple autistic children during their career, that puts those children at risk of being taught by teachers who have not chosen to educate themselves in their own time. If mandatory training were introduced, its quality would be fundamental. It is not enough to simply raise awareness of autism; teachers must also understand autism and be schooled in the techniques and strategies needed to teach a child with autism and all its associated complexities. Mandatory training would be a first step towards addressing and meeting the needs of pupils with autism.

We will not divide on the motion. Everybody has spoken very well. I support the motion and amendment. I reiterate that I hope that the Minister will take the lead on this and ask for support across the Departments that have a role and responsibility across the autism spectrum.

Mr Middleton: I thank my colleagues for tabling this important motion. The fact that it has been tabled at such an early opportunity sends a signal as to how important the issue is not only to us but to wider society. I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber today. We hope that he will take on board the valid points that have been made by all contributors so far. I also pay tribute to Autism NI, the National Autistic Society and all the fantastic organisations that, over the past number of years, particularly the past three years, have kept their shoulders to the wheel. The fact that the all-party group on autism has continued to meet has been mentioned. That is valuable and important work, and, hopefully, that will pay dividends in what we will see over the coming weeks. Like my colleague, I recognise the Circle of Support organisation in my constituency and the many parent-led organisations that do fantastic voluntary work. The support that they provide is very important.

There is no doubt that there is widespread support for the motion. We know that, just last September, a rally was held here at Stormont. We know that there was an online petition with over 10,000 signatories. It is a hugely emotive issue. We, as elected Members, and the Minister need to ensure that it is delivered on, and I hope that that will happen over the next number of weeks and months. As colleagues mentioned, teachers and classroom assistants have indicated their support for the motion. All the teachers' unions in Northern Ireland support the introduction of mandatory autism training.

Many of us in the Chamber, including me, have family members with autism. We know about not only the challenges but the opportunities that that brings, whether that be at the initial assessment stage, through education or as they move into the workplace. As my colleagues said, we know of the delays around assessment, but, when that assessment comes, it is vital that the services follow, right through education and into the workplace.

According to recent Department of Health figures, one in 30 school-age children has autism in Northern Ireland. Of those, 78% are in mainstream schools, not special schools. Given those figures, it is vital that the teaching force in Northern Ireland receive current, relevant and up-to-date training to assist them in delivering a curriculum that allows every child to reach their full potential. It is vital that no child is left behind. Only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment in the UK, even though 78% do not have a learning disability. Many of those say that that is an adverse effect of a lack of support during the school years and of not receiving a full education, with mental health deteriorating as a result. That gap needs to be filled. Over the past couple of years, I have met individuals with autism who now work in the public sector, some in very exciting roles. We need to ensure that we can encourage people with autism to get into workplaces and ensure that people are mindful and understanding of their requirements and needs. In closing, I urge Members to get behind the motion and, indeed, the amendments, whichever way they fall.

Mr Durkan: The introduction of mandatory autism training for all teaching staff was the subject of a petition that many Members have mentioned already today. It was organised by Autism NI last year. We saw the obvious, in my opinion, need for such training and supported the petition. I am sure that other Members did, and I was one of over 10,000 people who signed it. I take the opportunity, as Gary did, to commend Autism NI for the work that it has done, continuously and consistently

campaigning to improve services and support for those living with autism.

I must say, however, that I was dumbfounded at the response from the Department of Education to the petition. It was deemed that the proposal to increase provision in schools in line with a significant rise in autism diagnoses was premature. On the contrary, the need for that type of training is long overdue. The exponential rise in autism- and ASD-related diagnoses in recent years is testament to the urgent need for provision. From speaking with teachers and parents, as others have done, in and beyond constituency, I know that there is a clear demand and desire for mandatory autism training. The Minister must listen, where his Department would not, to the public and to the evidence. As Colin McGrath told us, diagnoses have trebled in the past decade, and autism services struggle to meet the ever-increasing demand. Indeed, I contend that it was the Department's response that was premature. It was made without giving due consideration to the inarguable statistics relating to the severe lack of adequate autism services in education.

When it comes to autism, it seems that we need to foster a change of attitudes not among the general public but among the powers that be. The issue needs to be progressed, and I welcome the motion as a means of doing so. When it comes to education, no child should be left behind. We must create an education system that provides fair and equal access for all. Members who spoke previously have lamented the failure so far to deliver on the promises and potential of our Autism Act, but we cannot blame that just on the fact that we have not been here in three years. Long before that, pressure on autism services and a lack of autism support was becoming unbearable, and the cracks that were showing are now growing.

In my constituency, there was uproar and outrage last year when I uncovered the fact that the Western Health and Social Care Trust was unable to use its allocation of funding for the autism pathway project and that money was sent back, despite the fact that we had in that trust area over 800 people waiting on a list for assessment. That befuddled many, particularly those working hard in the community to support individuals and families with autism, and we are lucky to have several of those organisations in Derry. Gary Middleton mentioned Circle of Support, and Parents of Older Children with Autism (POCA) and the Jigsaw Project are another couple that do sterling work. I was glad last week to have it confirmed to me by the Western Trust that significant steps had been

taken and were being taken to address its huge shortcomings in that area.

There is a danger that, because the demand for diagnosis has become so huge, meeting the demand for diagnosis becomes our sole focus or our Holy Grail. Paula Bradley said that many families discover, to their disappointment and confusion, that, once they have won their battle or, in many cases, war for diagnosis, they are left in limbo. There are inconsistencies across trust areas. We need to ascertain what works best where and try to replicate that across the board.

We also have to be mindful that it is not only in schools where support is required and where hugely positive interventions can be made. We need to look at the support that can be given to families at home, especially in those early days after diagnosis, and how we can help families to prepare, adjust and cope better.

1.45 pm

To conclude, we certainly support the motion and amendment No 1. In terms of how the training should look, I would say that it should have input from individuals who are living with autism in both its design and its delivery. It is also worth highlighting that the better our staff in schools can cope with autism, the better it will be for all pupils in our schools.

Mr Robinson: First and foremost, I thank my colleagues for tabling this very important motion and, indeed, the amendments. I am sure that all MLAs in the Chamber recognise the challenges that come with autism. Therefore, it is essential that all staff working with autistic children realise that they are appreciated and valued by the Assembly.

Looking through the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, I have been struck by the interdepartmental working that is required to ensure that people with autism have the best possible services. One Department specifically named in the Act is Education. This is entirely correct. Teachers have a challenging role, but when a child with autism is in the class, an additional level of expertise is required to ensure a good level of education for that pupil. It is therefore eminently sensible that teachers are given the tools required to achieve the best education possible for the specific pupil. Regardless of what disabilities or problems pupils have, they all deserve to attain their maximum possible potential in an educational setting. Ensuring that teachers and classroom

assistants are given the correct training is a step in achieving that.

We are all aware of the challenges that local education faces in general, but I ask the Minister to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training to ensure the best possible educational outcomes for all pupils, even those on reduced timetables. One parent has told me that an entire class will benefit from such an approach, as the training aids the staff in dealing proactively with autistic pupils and minimises the time required to deal with a specific pupil. All pupils will therefore benefit from teachers receiving training. Minister, I appreciate that budgets are very tight in your Department; however, some investment in this aspect of teacher training will provide tangible and very worthwhile benefits for those children with autism. I support the motion.

Mr Carroll: I put out word to my constituents about this topic, and I have been overwhelmed by messages, emails and responses from people with autism, parents, teachers and classroom assistants. I am sure that other Members are the same. Indeed, it is fair to say I have been inundated on the issue since I was first elected to the Chamber in 2016, almost four years ago.

It is very clear that our current system is not working for too many people with autism and many with other learning disabilities. Education workers who have been in the field for years tell of a dire situation within our education system, where fundamental problems see children left under-supported. Too many are unable to get statemented, too many are left with no offer from a school each September because of their statement, and too many do not get the proper educational support even when they have been statemented.

All those failings can have serious impacts going forward. We see people with autism experiencing mental health problems because of a lack of support services, and we see children underachieving educationally because of a lack of provision. We also have working-class families being forced to pay privately to get their children diagnosed with autism. None of this is good enough, and it is totally unacceptable.

None of this touches on the impact of under-provision and misrepresentation outside of school time, such as the fact that people have to fundraise to pay for respite or even basic facilities and services, or the fact that negative and harmful stereotypes about people with autism are still perpetuated in society.

Disgracefully, autism was used last week by a Fine Gael elected member as a slur on somebody else in the general election campaign in the South. Too often, the term has been used as an attempt to delegitimise Greta Thunberg's campaign and as a slur against her. People with autism deserve much better than that, but, unfortunately, on these issues they are being failed.

We absolutely endorse training and education as essential criteria for supporting people with autism, but we also know that much more must be done on top of that to slash waiting times and to address the wider issues such as underinvestment in education in general, bigger class sizes and a lack of access to classroom assistants, to name but a few.

We are clear that, whatever mandatory training is put in place, it must not be a tick-box exercise but must be wide-reaching and encompass all the research that has been found to support children with autism. It should be adaptive to react to the different levels and types of support that different pupils with different needs require. We must ensure that the development of this training programme has the input of people with autism and of teachers and classroom assistants who are across the current failings in the system and who know that, because of educational attainment or gender, some children can be overlooked or dismissed as acting out.

We absolutely must ensure that our teachers and classroom assistants, who do the utmost to support their classes and their children and who are already overworked and due a pay rise, see the necessary investment in education to ensure that children with autism get the support they deserve in a sustainable way. To do that, we must address the underspend in education. Without extra support, extra funding and extra classroom assistants, the whole provision of extra training may be futile, because under-pressure teachers and assistants may not have the time or space to put the whole thing into practice.

Finally, and importantly, we have to be careful that the provision of mandatory training for autism in mainstream schools is not used as an excuse to shut down special needs schools. In 2018, I led a campaign alongside teachers, classroom assistants, trade unionists, parents and pupils of special needs schools in Belfast against the closure of special needs schools, and I have no doubt that, if plans emerge again to try to shut down or amalgamate special needs schools, a similar campaign will be back

on the streets of our city of Belfast, with all the ferocity that existed before.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House should take its ease until then. The Minister has been allocated 15 minutes to respond, and the Members who will make winding-up speeches on the amendments have been allocated five minutes each. We are less than 10 minutes away from 2.00 pm, so I suggest that the House takes it ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Brexit: Movement of Goods

1. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any discussions they have had with the Department for Exiting the European Union regarding the movement of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. (AQO 1/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Following the recent debate in the Assembly, the deputy First Minister and I wrote to Secretary of State Barclay to advise that the Assembly had not agreed that the United Kingdom Government should legislate on its behalf in relation to aspects of the withdrawal agreement Bill. We also took the opportunity to highlight that we will be engaging with the Government to ensure that the commitments around unfettered access in the New Decade, New Approach agreement are fulfilled. We also expressed our concern that the UK Government were in breach of the Sewel convention, under which they should not normally legislate on devolved matters here without the Assembly's consent.

Our junior Ministers also highlighted the need for commitments around unfettered access to be delivered when they attended the EU Exit Operations Cabinet Committee, which is chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP. At last week's JMC (EN) meeting, the deputy First Minister and I again explained the importance of unfettered access for our businesses within the UK internal market, and a commitment was given that there should be a dedicated work stream to take forward issues relating to the protocol. Aside from ministerial-level engagement, I am aware that my officials and officials from other Departments are consistently articulating our needs to their colleagues in Whitehall. Members will be well aware that there have been contradictory statements by the UK Government and the European Commission on the implications of the protocol for the movement of goods from GB to Northern Ireland. The deputy First Minister and I have written to the Prime Minister, pointing out that, on the face of it, the

protocol and statements from the European Commission seem to create legal obligations to apply checks that would fall on us as a devolved Administration and asking for urgent clarification of his Government's plan on this point.

Ensuring the freest possible movement of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, as well as unfettered access for Northern Ireland goods to Great Britain, is a top priority for us, given the integrated nature of supply chains. It is also important to ensure that Northern Ireland businesses remain competitive and that costs for consumers do not rise. I assure the Member that we will continue to ensure that our requirements around unfettered access, competitiveness and the integrated nature of our economy are understood right across the UK Government.

Mrs Barton: Will Northern Ireland businesses and farms continue to operate under EU regulations?

Mrs Foster: As the Member is aware, we are leaving the European Union in a different way, insofar as the single market regulations will continue to apply to Northern Ireland. We want to find out whether that means that there will be checks coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. It is important that we understand the nature of those to make sure that we have the unfettered access that has been promised and that there are ways in which we can communicate what we need for the Northern Ireland economy through the many JMC processes that have been put in place.

Mr O'Toole: The First Minister is correct that Brexit and delivery of the Northern Ireland protocol in the next year — in fact, in the next eight months — will be completely critical to businesses and households here. Is she satisfied that the Northern Ireland Civil Service is adequately resourced to deal with the extraordinary complexity of implementing this novel protocol? Will she give an update on that resourcing and the attention that she and the deputy First Minister are giving to it?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I put on record my thanks to the Civil Service, which took up the burden of representing Northern Ireland at a lot of the Joint Ministerial Committee meetings when we did not have an Executive or Assembly in place. It was a difficult job for them to undertake, because, for those of us who know, many civil servants cannot take political opinions on these issues and they had to play it with a very

straight bat. I put on record my thanks to David Sterling and his team and Andrew McCormick for their work.

Going forward, resourcing is, obviously, something that the deputy First Minister and I will keep a close eye on. We decided to go to Cardiff ourselves last week, because we wanted to make sure that we were fully up to date with what was going on in the discussions. It is fair to say that there was quite a robust discussion between the devolved Administrations and the Westminster Government. We will continue to keep a keen eye on the matter so that we can be supported by our civil servants. If there is a need for more resource, we will certainly put it in place.

Ms Armstrong: The First Minister mentioned the trade sector, but the service sector also imports and exports. What consideration has she given to and what discussion has she had about the service sector under Brexit?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know that we rely on the Department for the Economy to give us a breakdown of the different sectors, and we have received that from our Economy Minister. In looking at the sectors, the goods sector — the manufacturing sector — is the most important by volume. We realise, however, that the service sector will be very important as well. We have not forgotten about that; indeed, at our first meeting of the subgroup on Brexit tomorrow, we will look at the way ahead on all those matters.

HIA Victims: Compensation

2. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when compensation payments for victims of historical institutional abuse will be made. (AQO 2/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I pay tribute to the hard work of the campaigners. It has been a long and difficult journey, and it is their commitment that has got us to this point. The process took too long; yet, I am pleased for the victims of that terrible abuse that we have got to this point.

It is planned that the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board application process will be open to victims and survivors at the end of March 2020. The redress board multidisciplinary panels will be available to sit from the end of April, with the first approved awards to follow shortly thereafter. Work to deliver on those challenging timescales is proceeding at pace.

Ms Dillon: Will the First Minister also confirm where exactly the money is coming from? That is a concern that has come to me from the victims' sector. Whilst we have been given guarantees that it will happen and reassurances that the money is there, we have no detail of where it is coming from.

Mrs Foster: I reassure victims that the money will have to be found. We have given a commitment that we will follow through on the report and the many recommendations that were put in place, and we intend to do that. We will engage on the issue not only with the Westminster Government but with the many institutions that have been involved throughout the years. It is incumbent on those institutions to step forward as well, not only in a moral way but to make financial redress. That is something that we will continue to take up.

Mr McGrath: Will the First Minister give an update on the appointment of the Commissioner for Survivors of Childhood Institutional Abuse?

Mrs Foster: We are in the process of doing that. If the Member bears with me, I will get him the details. The role of the commissioner is not only to assist victims and survivors through the redress process but to examine the support services available. Work is ongoing to appoint the commissioner, and the interim advocate continues in the absence of one. The public appointments competition for the post will be launched shortly. A competition usually takes about three to six months after an appointment is advertised for, so I presume that, once the appointments process starts, it will be anything between three and six months for the commissioner to be in place.

Ms Bunting: What engagement has there been with the institutions and religious orders regarding their contribution to funding the costs? Also, will the Executive Office make recommendations to have the Kincora files opened? In circumstances in which the inquiry found no state collusion, dates of 2085 and 2060 seem excessive and would mean the victims of that depravity will likely not live to see the files opened.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. In terms of the first part of her question, we — the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — want to engage directly with the institutions. The head of the Civil Service wrote to six of the institutions on 25 November 2019 about how we might share costs and about those institutions making

records available. However, the deputy First Minister and I believe that it would send a strong message if we both engaged with the institutions as well, and we intend to do that.

In terms of the latter issue that the Member raised, she knows that the inquiry devoted a number of days of oral hearings to looking in a rigorous way at what went on in Kincora boys' home. The Hart report detailed a range of system failings leading to systematic abuse by authorities and staff. For those victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse from Kincora, it is important to emphasise that they can make applications to the redress board for compensation. As I said, that will, hopefully, be in place by March 2020.

I am certainly happy for the Member to engage with officials or with me in relation to the other specific issue she raised about the opening of files.

New Decade, New Approach: Coordination

3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they plan to coordinate the implementation of New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 3/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As an Executive, we are very mindful of the need for timely and effective implementation of the New Decade, New Approach agreement. The commitments in the agreement are a challenging and ambitious programme, requiring effective governance arrangements to ensure delivery. Officials will bring forward proposals for the establishment of a dedicated programme to coordinate and drive forward this work in a formal and structured way.

Mr G Kelly: Like us all, the Minister will know that agreements are one thing and implementation is an entirely different proposition. I hope that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will bring regular reports about implementation and the timescales that she mentioned in her answer.

Mrs Foster: Annex F of the document lays out the arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the agreement. There is an acknowledgement that, just as the Member has indicated, it is one thing to have an agreement but it is another thing to implement it. Therefore, there is a need to have implementation review meetings that will include the Northern Ireland Executive party leaders. There will be quarterly meetings. The first meeting was meant to be

held before the end of January, but, as we are only up and running, I imagine that that will happen in the next couple of weeks. Then we will look at an implementation programme and timetable to be agreed at that meeting. Of course, the UK Government and the Irish Government will be involved as appropriate, according to the three-stranded approach, and then quarterly updates on progress will be published. That is important as well, in terms of openness and transparency: that we publish the implementation of the agreement.

Mr Allister: It is certainly a new decade, but does the First Minister really think that it is a new approach? Does she really think that her partner in government, Sinn Féin, is committed to making Northern Ireland work as a part of the United Kingdom, or is the real commitment to use the institutions as a stepping stone with the hope and expectation that, before the decade is out, they can progress the extraction of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom even further?

Mrs Foster: I say to the Member that everyone has their own political philosophies as to where they would like to see Northern Ireland in 10 years' time. He knows very keenly that the deputy First Minister and I have different views on where we would like to see Northern Ireland, but, in terms of the common ground, we want to see work being done to deal with the issues identified in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. He will know that that concentrates on health, on education and on the fact that we need more and better jobs and that we need to look at our infrastructure. It is important that we focus on what unites the people of Northern Ireland, and what unites them is that they want to see a functioning Executive that delivers for all of its people.

Mr Beattie: Given the First Minister's freshly articulated concerns about legacy proposals in the Stormont House Agreement, was she as surprised as the Ulster Unionist Party was when they were contained in the deal?

2.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I say to the Member that I always find it helpful when we are talking about documents to go back to the original document, and I have before me the Stormont House Agreement. In that agreement, at paragraph 30, it states:

"The body will take forward outstanding cases from the HET process, and the legacy

work of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland".

Part of the difficulty at the moment is that the HIU has lost the confidence of victims and survivors. That concerns me greatly, and, so, in my capacity as DUP leader, I wrote to the Secretary of State about that matter last week. When you look at the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, you will see that it talks about the fact that there needs to be an intensive process of engagement. I think that we do need an intensive process of engagement, because it is important that we deal with legacy. We cannot allow it to continue to be an open wound in Northern Ireland. Legacy needs to be dealt with, and it needs to be dealt with in a way in which everyone feels a part of it and has a stake in the process.

Brexit: Executive Subcommittee

4. Dr Archibald asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the terms of reference and membership of the Executive subcommittee on Brexit. (AQO 4/17-22)

12. Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on establishing the Executive subcommittee on Brexit. (AQO 12/17-22)

13. Dr Aiken asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on establishing the Executive subcommittee on Brexit, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 13/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 12 and 13 together. All Members will appreciate that ensuring Northern Ireland's interests are properly represented as we move forward through the next stage of Brexit negotiations is of paramount importance to us. The Executive subcommittee on Brexit issues will be a key structure in the coordination and development of our response. The deputy First Minister and I have tabled proposals on the subcommittee to Executive colleagues, and I am pleased to advise the House that the Executive agreed to the establishment of the subcommittee and approved its terms of reference.

A copy of the terms of reference will be placed in the Library, but, in summary, the subcommittee will support the Executive by providing a forum for collective discussion and consideration of the implications of EU exit on Northern Ireland in relation to influencing negotiations. It will also agree Northern Ireland

policy positions and devolved responsibilities for consideration and decision-making by the UK Government and Joint Committee, as well as developing proposals to maximise our influence and any opportunities arising from the withdrawal agreement, including the Northern Ireland protocol. It will also commission an assessment of the impact on the institutions and on relationships North/South and east-west.

The subcommittee will be chaired by the deputy First Minister and me, and the other core members are: the Minister for the Economy, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the Minister for Infrastructure, the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health. Those are the Ministers of the Departments most greatly impacted by Brexit, and that membership satisfies the commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement that all parties on the Executive should have representation. Other Ministers can be invited to attend should items of particular interest to their portfolio be discussed.

It is intended that the first meeting of the subcommittee will be held tomorrow, and I am confident that the wide-ranging membership of the subcommittee will allow us to consider Brexit in a holistic way.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. On Friday afternoon, I met Border Communities Against Brexit, and it was keen to emphasise the need to engage with stakeholders in the next phase of the negotiations. What measures will be put in place to ensure that sectors can have an input into the work of the subcommittee?

Mrs Foster: As we are only having our first meeting proper tomorrow, I imagine that this is one of the issues that will come up: how we engage with other stakeholders, experts and people who want to send us information on how they see matters developing, as well as, of course, looking at our own agenda for how we move forward. So, I am sure that we will consider that at the subcommittee.

Ms McLaughlin: You talked about engaging with other sectors throughout the process. Will there be a formal structure whereby you get advice from academics and businesses in order to plot the way forward in the coming months?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I have no doubt that the voice of businesses will be heard, as it has been heard

right throughout the process. I want to pay tribute, indeed, to those involved in businesses, the retail sector and all of those different business organisations — the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Chamber of Commerce — that have raised their voice about the many issues that have been raised as a result of our leaving the European Union. I have no doubt that we will continue to engage with them. As I said, we have to have our first meeting tomorrow, and, following that, we will set out an agenda as to how we intend to engage with all of those people.

Dr Aiken: If we are, in the Prime Minister's words today, and pardon the accent:

"ready for the great multidimensional game of chess ... limbering up to use nerves and muscles and instincts that this country has not had to use for half a century."

will the First Minister and deputy First Minister give assurances that they will update the Assembly on progress regularly through the proper channels, and not go straight to the media?

Mrs Foster: As the Member is aware. Well, I am not sure that he is aware, but he should note that we are here talking about the setting up of the subcommittee on Brexit. There has been no press release that I am aware of on the matter. We have our first meeting tomorrow. The Executive Committee will have scrutiny of the work of the Brexit subcommittee, because, of course, the Brexit subcommittee reports back to the Executive Office, which, in turn, will be scrutinised by the Executive Committee. I am sure that we will also be on the Floor talking about a number of issues, because the complex nature of where we are at this time will require us to have ongoing dialogue with many Members, as well as with the Ministers involved in the Brexit subcommittee.

Regional Trauma Network

5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of a regional trauma network for victims and survivors of the Troubles. (AQO 5/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The regional trauma network is a partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors aimed at improving access to high-quality trauma services. The Department of Health leads on health and social care aspects

and the Executive Office supports the provision of care, support and treatment to victims and survivors. Peace IV funding secured by the Victims and Survivors Service has supported the establishment of a network of health and well-being caseworkers for victims and survivors and will support the roll-out and delivery of the regional trauma network. We hope that phase 1 of the service will be launched in the coming months.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for her response. I am sure she will join me in welcoming the financial support that is now being given to those victims who were injured through no fault of their own — something that has been long fought for. Will the regional trauma network, as developed, meet the requirement and expectation of the Stormont House Agreement?

Mrs Foster: I believe that it will. It is a network that continues to be rolled out. I met a victims' group in my constituency on Friday, and they told me that there is continuous dialogue between the Executive Office and the victims' groups. That is very good. I know that there has been frustration that it had not been moving along as quickly as it should have been, but I think that there has been good progress in the past couple of months in relation to governance structures, for example. The victims' groups still have a number of limited concerns, particularly about exclusivity, but we hope that we can work through those difficulties in the coming months so that the regional trauma network can become a real and lasting legacy to all of those who have suffered as a result of violence.

Mr Nesbitt: Miss McIlveen's question describes the regional trauma network as a service for victims and survivors rather than a more general service within the NHS, which is open to all. That is my understanding of its genesis and its purpose. Does the First Minister agree that the regional trauma network is specifically for victims and survivors of the conflict?

Mrs Foster: There have been differing interpretations of the original commitment in the Stormont House Agreement. I have mentioned that there is ongoing engagement between our office and many of the victims' groups as to whether the network should be open to all those who have significant psychological trauma or whether it should be exclusive to victims and survivors. I know that the Member has had a very clear view in relation to this issue. Of course, Health has a different view, because it takes the view that access to the network should be based on clinical need rather than a

patient's background. However, this is something on which we need to continue to work to try to find a solution, because it is important that we find a solution with which victims feel content and happy.

Mr McGlone: What discussions has the First Minister's Department had with the Irish Government in relation to the provision of regional trauma centres to address the legacy of the conflict across the entire island?

Mrs Foster: I do not have the detail with me, but I am happy to write to the Member.

Ms Dillon: My question on the regional trauma network is similar to Mike Nesbitt's question. We have been leading a number of conversations with TEO and the Department of Health, and we understood from the last meeting that, as part of the Stormont House mechanisms, there was some movement with the regional trauma network not being exclusively for those who were injured by the conflict but, first and foremost, for those who were injured by the conflict. Will the First Minister confirm whether this is how we are moving forward?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. It is my understanding that those conversations are continuing. Our Department is working closely with the Department of Health, the Health and Social Care Board and the Victims and Survivors Service to ensure that the network delivers on the Stormont House Agreement by increasing access for victims and survivors to mental health services, which they need. The issue the Member identifies is whether it is exclusively for those victims and survivors or primarily for those victims and survivors, and we need to continue to work on the issue.

Mental Well-being and Resilience: Working Group

6. **Mr Middleton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their Department's role in the new working group on mental well-being and resilience. (AQO 6/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I am very aware of the Member's keen interest in this subject. I am pleased to inform him that, this morning, the Executive agreed to establish what will be known as the Executive working group on mental well-being, resilience and suicide prevention. This takes forward to the next stage the commitment made

by the Executive Committee at their meeting on 22 January 2020. The deputy First Minister and I will attend meetings of the working group. I hope that we will be able to contribute valuable knowledge from our Department's experience of supporting a wide range of programmes that strengthen provision and capacity in this critical area. The Minister of Health will convene an early first meeting of the working group.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their commitment in this area. Will the First Minister give a commitment that the views of our many mental health experts in Northern Ireland will be taken into account in the progress of the working group?

Mrs Foster: I can certainly say that we will listen very carefully to what clinical experts have to say. For those of us who do not have the expertise, the Executive Committee as a whole felt that we needed to send out a clear message that we hear the many voices of desperation around mental well-being and the need for resilience and suicide prevention.

We want to send a clear message that we are listening to those voices but, more than that, that we want to do something tangible about those issues. We will engage with experts, and we already intervene through Executive Office programmes and through many of the Departments across Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that we have been struck, since the Executive have reformed, about the very real, tangible need to do more in relation to this important issue.

Ms S Bradley: I welcome the announcement of the Executive working group. What consideration has the First Minister, along with the deputy First Minister, given to the appointment of a junior Minister for mental health and well-being?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. The deputy First Minister and I have discussed this issue. However, we believe that we should all be mental health champions. The cross-ministerial group on suicide prevention from the last Executive was located in the Department of Health. On this occasion, we felt that we should have it in the Department at the very centre of government to send a strong message that all the Ministers, from the First Minister and deputy First Minister and including all those who sit round the Executive table, are taking the issue of mental well-being seriously, and that is why we felt that it is important to put it in the Executive Office. We are not closing

our mind to other structures in the future, but this is our first attempt to send out a message that we want to deal with the issue in a meaningful way.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Brexit: Ethnic Minorities

T1. Mr McHugh asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures they will put in place to ensure that our society is welcoming and accommodating to ethnic minorities and new communities in the context of Brexit. (AQT 1/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The first thing to say to the Member is that we are all ambassadors for Northern Ireland, as MLAs individually, and it is important that we articulate the view that all our citizens, whatever their background, are very welcome here. I was, as I am sure he was, appalled at the attack in Omagh at the weekend. I do not have the full details of it, but it appears to have been a hate-crime attack, and it is something that I condemn wholeheartedly. We must do that in order to make sure that people realise that we are a welcoming society here in Northern Ireland and that we value the input of people, regardless of from where they come.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I, too, condemn entirely the attack in Omagh. We as a nation have always been very welcoming. We are well known as the nation of the céad míle fáilte. Will the First Minister look to increase the budget to address what might be a developing problem?

Mrs Foster: It is something that we keep under review when considering our budget. As well as that, in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there is to be set up an office of identity and cultural expression. That new office will promote cultural pluralism, respect for diversity, including Northern Ireland's ethnic, national, linguist and faith communities. It is a very powerful statement in and of itself that we want not only to recognise the Irish identity and the British identity but to recognise those people who are of neither identity but who live here in Northern Ireland and whom we want to make sure feel welcome.

New Decade, New Approach: Executive Office Support

T2. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Executive Office is fully in support of all aspects of the New Decade, New Approach deal, including the Irish language legislation and the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement proposals on legacy. (AQT 2/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I have already indicated that there are some issues that we need to deal with in and around the Stormont House Agreement. This is the part that concerns the United Kingdom Government. It states:

"As part of the Government's" —

that is, the United Kingdom Government —

"wider legislative agenda ... The Government will now start an intensive process with the Northern Ireland parties, and the Irish Government as appropriate, to maintain a broad-based consensus on these issues".

That is something that we need to be very much alert to and to make sure that it happens.

The Irish language piece is, of course, part of annex E, on "Rights, language and identity". That is in the framework. I have already mentioned the office of identity and cultural expression, then there is the Irish language commissioner and the British commissioner. Therefore, all those are in that context. We have to recognise and make space for all our identities here in Northern Ireland. That is something that the Executive Office is committed to doing.

Mrs Barton: First Minister, I thank you for your answer. Can you give me any idea of what discussions have taken place in the Executive Office about those issues?

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, we have been in office since 11 January. In response to a substantive question from Mr Kelly about the implementation of the agreement, I stated that we will be setting up various processes to make sure that the agreement is implemented, and that is the way that we will make sure that things are taken forward.

University Sector

T3. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the small size of the university sector and the shortage of graduates in our labour market and how challenging that is to the economy, whether they agree and what they intend to do about it. (AQT 3/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As the Member will be fully aware, that matter was part of the discussions in the run-up to the New Decade, New Approach agreement. We have committed to expanding university provision at Magee in line with commitments made. I presume that it is Magee that she is talking about. It is a wild guess. We have committed to the graduate-entry medical school as well, which, as I understand it, also has cross-party support.

Ms McLaughlin: At the Economy Committee last Wednesday, we were advised by a senior civil servant that there was not an adequate business case for the expansion of Magee. She specifically said that there was no business case, no funding and no desire to do it at this time, based on the unfinished business with the north Belfast campus of Ulster University. Does the First Minister have an opinion on whether this is a priority for the Executive?

Mrs Foster: Many of the issues that the Member raised are, of course, matters for the Minister for the Economy. I have no doubt that she will come forward in relation to how she is going to deal with the commitments in New Decade, New Approach. There are difficulties, which the Member is aware of, that will need to be dealt with. She also knows, particularly from her background, that when we go to do anything in government, we need a business case and we need to process that. Those are matters that would probably be better taken up with the Minister for the Economy.

Brexit: NSMC/BIC Assistance

T4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister about the role of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in facing up to the challenges presented by Brexit and whether, if those matters are approached in a positive manner, through the NSMC and the British-Irish Council (BIC), those bodies can be of assistance. (AQT 4/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I suppose the short answer is yes, both North/South and east-west. The new Brexit subcommittee will commission some

work on the institutions in Northern Ireland but also on what is happening North/South and east-west; it is important that we have a clear view on what is happening. The Member may remember from his time in the last Executive that, at the North/South Ministerial Council, we had a good discussion on Brexit and moving forward. It is useful to have those conversations, and I am a big advocate of using the British-Irish element of the Belfast Agreement in the way that it should be used. It previously was not, possibly because people were meeting up in Europe or whatever, but there is an opportunity to use the British-Irish Council model to have that engagement between Westminster, Dublin, Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and the smaller islands that are part of the BIC as well.

Mr O'Dowd: I have no difficulty with that response: east-west and North/South relationships on these islands are vital across a range of issues. Particularly in relation to Brexit, it is important that we use our influence wherever we can. So, whether that is North/South or east-west, I have no difficulty with that.

Mrs Foster: Yes, and we will use our influence on those matters. It is also important to say that the deputy First Minister and I intend to use our influence, now that we are able to attend the Joint Ministerial Committee meetings again, to put forward the specific needs of Northern Ireland, particularly in the context of the Northern Ireland protocol. That will be challenging, so we need to use all those processes to make sure that our voice is heard.

Pensions: Victims and Survivors

T5. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they are satisfied that there will be sufficient budget provision on an ongoing basis to cover pensions for victims and survivors, given the Secretary of State's commitment on the issue over the weekend. (AQT 5/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I welcome the laying of the regulations on Friday by the Northern Ireland Office. As the Member knows, the regulations provide that a board be established to oversee the scheme. Our officials are working with other Departments to progress the implementation of the scheme by May 2020. Whatever about the money, which I am going to come to, the deadline to have all the architecture in place is very challenging. We do not get any extra finance from Westminster to deal with this issue. That is something that we intend to

continue raising with the Government at Westminster, because, at present, it is my understanding that the money will come from the block grant.

Mr Lunn: I thank the First Minister for that answer. Pension payments, by their nature, are open-ended and difficult to predict. Is there any estimate for the total cost of the scheme?

Mrs Foster: Ordinarily, I would say that the Member is right about the amount, but I understand that it has been capped between £2,000 and £10,000 in relation to a top-up of perhaps other pensions that people may be already in receipt of. It is difficult to put a figure on the scheme at present because, of course, we do not know how many people are suffering from psychological trauma, and, therefore, those people will have to be referred to the redress board. It is something that we will have to keep under consideration as the scheme becomes live at the end of May.

Mental Health Champion

T6. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in line with their commitment to mental health and well-being, including their response to the call for a junior Minister for mental health, whether they would consider appointing a mental health champion as an independent service, as suggested to the Health Minister in a previous mandate, rather than us all being mental health champions. (AQT 6/17-22)

Mrs Foster: All those things will be considered in our new subgroup. There is a real willingness to look at all and any ideas that come forward as a way to deal with those very serious issues in our society. We will certainly not pretend to have the monopoly on wisdom when it comes to dealing with huge societal issues. We want to take as much information as we can and try to do what we can with the limited budget that we have. Let us be honest: it is not always about budget when we come to deal with these issues; it is about sending out very positive signals about leadership and the fact that we are listening to people's concerns.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I pay my respect to you both for stepping forward on this issue. I ask you to do everything that you can to support the Minister of Health in that collegiate approach. Will you make a commitment to doing so?

Mrs Foster: We absolutely make the commitment to support the Minister of Health. As I said, up to now, suicide prevention was led by the Department of Health. There was absolutely nothing wrong with that, but we wanted to send out a signal that it was coming from the very centre of government and that we were taking the issue very seriously. We look forward to working with Robin and all the other Ministers on the subgroups so that we can move ahead.

Pensions: Victims and Survivors

T8. **Mr Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the Secretary of State's announcement at the weekend, when the first payments will reach the victims and survivors of the Troubles. (AQT 8/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As I indicated to Mr Lunn, we are on a very tight schedule to get the architecture in place by the end of May 2020. We hope that we will be able to have applications through by then. I hope that it will be mostly a paper-based scheme, avoiding the need to have assessments face to face, but, in some of the more complex areas, we may need to have those. I listened carefully to what the Victims' Commissioner said about that issue this morning. I very much hope that, rather than it being an intrusive process, it will be as easy as we can make it for victims and survivors.

Mr Clarke: I thank the First Minister for her response. The announcement at the weekend goes some way to restoring the confidence of people who were injured during the Troubles through no fault of their own. However, given that there has been a historical problem with the definition of "victim", is there any further work that can be done so that there is no ambiguity and those who perpetrated murder in this country can be dealt with in a different way?

Mrs Foster: I think that the Member will realise that the Executive Office Ministers have different views on that matter. Undoubtedly, each of the political parties will make their views known on the definition of "victim" to the Secretary of State because the legislation is Westminster-based.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a second or two before we move on to questions to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

2.45 pm

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

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Brexit: Basic Payment Scheme

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assurances he can provide farmers that their businesses will not be negatively impacted by the loss of the basic payment scheme following the withdrawal from the European Union. (AQO 15/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the Member's interest in the subject. I am sure that all the farmers in North Belfast will be delighted with her putting the question down.

I will be making an announcement shortly on the arrangements and funding for direct payments in the 2020 scheme year. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, at the end of December 2019, confirmed that the UK Government will provide the same financial support to CAP pillar 1 for 2020 as for the 2019 scheme year. Last week, the Northern Ireland Assembly agreed a legislative consent motion on the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill. This allowed the provisions of the UK Bill to extend and apply to Northern Ireland and to provide continuity for direct payments for the 2020 scheme year. The Bill has now completed its stages in Parliament and became law on 31 January. On that basis, I expect the 2020 scheme year to operate in a broadly similar way to 2019. In relation to future years, the Conservative Party manifesto stated that funding for farm support would be maintained at existing levels until the end of this Parliament. While the schemes themselves may change across the UK, I anticipate that the funding levels will be maintained up until 2024. My Department will continue to work on developing policy in the longer term, and I will be looking at what future payments can do to support sustainable farming and our landscape.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister should know that I have been following the issue of single farm payments in North Belfast eagerly, given the announcement that he made last week, so it should come as no surprise to him.

On the matter of ensuring that the basic payments are maintained, will the Minister

make arrangements to meet the British Treasury, particularly in the light of Brexit, to ensure that the payments are not detrimentally impacted?

Mr Poots: I have already raised the issue with the Prime Minister, particularly the fact that Northern Ireland, as a producer of around 10% of food in the UK, cannot go down the route of a Barnett formula being applied to this. That would be 2.8%, which would be a huge, detrimental loss to the farming community here. I further raised that with Theresa Villiers, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and I raised it this morning with Minister Duncan. Thus far, I have got good feedback from all three, and I will continue to press that issue.

Mr O'Toole: Brexit threatens the very fabric and foundation of agriculture, farming and rural communities in Northern Ireland. I know that the Minister supported Brexit — that is his right — and he is entitled to celebrate it, but, since we know that Brexit threatens the majority of farmers' income in Northern Ireland, notwithstanding the statements that he has made about the next few years and the partial guarantees that we have over farm income, and that there is the threat of cheap food coming in as a result of trade deals that Boris Johnson wants to sign around the world, while I would not want the Minister to recant his support for Brexit, can I ask him that he use his office and the platform and role that he has to stand up for the closest possible alignment between the United Kingdom and the European Union? That is, I am sure, what the Ulster Farmers' Union and all farming representatives will tell him.

Mr Poots: I take the Member's remarks as being condescending towards the farming community, because the feedback that I got from the farming community was that they extensively backed leaving the European Union. If anybody wants an evidence base for that, I should say that the farmers' union held a meeting at Balmoral to which 600 farmers turned up and there was a 90% vote in favour of leaving the European Union. Farmers know more about what will affect them and their future than the Member who asked the question, representing South Belfast and having only returned from London to do so.

I would say that 80% to 90% of the regulation in Europe is currently also the case in Australia and large parts of North America and other key areas. Regulatory alignment already exists in many areas. However, are you telling me that, for example, the slurry ban has been good for

Northern Ireland? It has not. Farmers have not been able to get out and do that activity for the past month when the weather lent itself to doing it. Are you telling me that it is a good thing that farmers have to request permission to clean out a sheugh and a departmental official is supposed to give that to them? Are you telling me that it is a good thing that a farmer is not allowed to plough over the winter because of soil erosion, which does not exist in this damp climate? Those are not good regulations, and I would happily diverge from what Brussels has instructed us to do. Many of the 2,800 regulations that have been imposed on us since 1974 are not fit for purpose in Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair: The Minister will be aware from the debate last week on the legislative consent mechanism that there is real concern out there that the measures emanating from that LCM do not totally cover all the pillars that are covered by the existing CAP. What action has the Minister taken to address that? If he has not done so already, will he meet the Ulster Farmers' Union to discuss that?

Mr Poots: I am meeting the farmers' union tomorrow. If they have issues of concern, I will be happy to listen. All the evidence that I have found shows that we will be able to carry out everything that was in the CAP pillar 1, with one exception, which is a very good exception: because of EU rules, in October 2019, we gave farmers 70% of the funding; in October 2020, because we are out of the European Union, we will give 100% to farmers. I do not think that the farmers' union will object to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Flooding: Compensation

3. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the granting of de minimis aid for farmers affected by flooding in the Sperrins in 2017. (AQO 17/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the difficulties experienced by the farmers affected by flooding in 2017. In the immediate aftermath of the flood, workshops were held in affected areas to provide advice and practical support covering farm management issues and land restoration. Technical bulletins were also issued, and, more recently, officials have met local residents to explore well-being and business development matters.

In terms of financial assistance, in 2017, the Department took steps to make enhanced advance CAP payments at a rate of 70% to help to alleviate cash flow issues experienced by farmers. In addition, the Department approved force majeure declarations on affected farmland that had been submitted for basic payment scheme support at the time, thus ensuring that there was no reduction in those payments due to flood damage. DAERA has since provided half a million pounds of funding to the Loughs Agency to carry out remedial riparian fencing works in the worst affected areas. That repair work commenced in November 2019 and is ongoing. Under its statutory conservation and protection remit, the Loughs Agency continues to undertake work in the affected areas.

Ms C Kelly: Will you give any timeline for when the funding will be issued to affected farms?

Mr Poots: The funding that was identified has been issued. The Department has been carrying out work on fencing that was damaged during the flood since November.

Mr T Buchanan: Will the Minister advise how, in the event of any aid package, all farmers who were affected — some were affected a lot more than others — will benefit fairly and equitably?

Mr Poots: The official recommendation is that we do not do a scheme; let us be clear about that. If we were to do a scheme, it would be a hardship scheme, which would be based on ministerial direction. Ministerial directions are used exceptionally, but, nonetheless, they are used. I used ministerial direction in a previous Department and was criticised by the media for doing it. In that instance, it was to give capital money to the Northern Ireland Hospice and to Mencap for two absolutely brilliant schemes. I was criticised for diverging from the advice of officials. If I were to do a scheme in this instance, it would be something that diverged from officials' advice and something on which I would have to give ministerial direction to do, on the basis of hardship. I have not taken that decision at this point.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, you will be aware that other areas have flooded extensively over the past number of years and some of that flooding has impacted on the local fishing community around Lough Neagh. Will any consideration be given to other industries, such as the fishing industry?

Mr Poots: The Member has just highlighted one of the problems that I would have in going

against the advice of officials, because they are concerned about setting precedents. The Member has just demonstrated that this will not be confined to one area. If I take some action, others may use that as a precedent to take further action in later times.

Dr Aiken: Will de minimis aid continue to be an issue now that we are no longer a member of the EU?

Mr Poots: I can do that if I wish to, but I need to be convinced of its merits and of the true hardship that has come about as a result of what happened. There is a lot of merit in the argument being made by Members for West Tyrone that there has been real hardship caused, but, nonetheless, it will be a challenging decision for me to make and one that I want to give absolute thought to.

Ms Bailey: It is good to hear that the Minister is signalling his willingness to stick to ministerial direction. Will he be just as keen to stick to the direction from the House? I think of his decision last week not to call an inquiry into the Mobuoy waste dump despite unanimous support from all in the House to do so.

Mr Poots: That is not particularly relevant to the question. The Member will find that I am a very independent-minded person, but I also like to think that I am reasonably fair and try to take everything into account. I can deal with the issue that has been raised at the appropriate time and under appropriate questions.

Animal Cruelty Register

4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans to speak to Executive colleagues and his counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom about an animal cruelty register. (AQO 18/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. I am sympathetic to the creation of a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences. However, responsibility for doing so is not entirely within my gift, as conviction data is strictly controlled and managed by the Department of Justice. The matter has been considered in detail by my Department and the Department of Justice as part of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which was published in February 2016. The creation of such a register is very complex and would require data protection, human rights and

prohibitive cost issues to be overcome. My officials have engaged with the Department of Justice on the matter and will continue to do so in order to explore whether the issues could be resolved. I am minded to raise the issue with my ministerial colleague Naomi Long, who has responsibility for the Department of Justice, in the first instance.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's reply, but horrific and often stomach-churning incidents of animal cruelty have been reported in recent times. The impediments that you raise are fair, but there is an urgency in getting past them and finding a way of moving forward. Obviously, it is a changing world, but will the Minister, in his role on the Brexit committee, commit to giving an assurance that he will find ways to make sure that the culprits have no place to hide and that he will work with the UK and Irish Governments to find a way of making a register a real, live document?

Mr Poots: I wholly appreciate the Member's view, which I share. I will outline a few of the difficulties that have been faced in other jurisdictions. In England, DEFRA has fielded similar requests and encountered similar difficulties to those found in Northern Ireland regarding access to information in a register and important legal issues around data processing and transfer.

DEFRA's view was that the Police National Computer is, to all intents, a register of offenders, though access to it is limited exclusively to the police. The RSPCA and local authorities, therefore, do not have access to the information except for limited purposes.

3.00 pm

In Wales in 2017, the Government created a ministerial task and finish group, which was chaired by the RSPCA, to explore options for an animal offenders register for Wales. The group produced a number of recommendations but was not able to recommend the development of an animal offenders register, and that view was accepted by the Minister. It found that there were significant barriers to the creation of the register — for example, the legal obstacles to data sharing that could not be overcome — and it stated that, where registers had been established, there was absence of evidence to prove their effectiveness. In particular, the group observed that, increasingly, animal welfare agencies in the USA, which first introduced registers, were concluding that they do not work.

The Republic of Ireland does not have any plans to introduce an animal offenders register, and the Scottish Government have no plans to develop a register. I actually would like to develop the register. I will engage with Minister Long to see whether we can lead the way on and overcome this issue, but I do not want the House to think that this will be easy. Clearly, if others have tried it and have not been able to deliver it, it is hugely complex.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister prove himself to be a Minister for animal welfare by introducing comprehensive anti-animal cruelty legislation that will include a ban on hunting with dogs and the use of snares?

Mr Poots: We have previously demonstrated how we support animal welfare. I was very heavily involved, as a Member of the Assembly and a member of the Justice Committee, in bringing forward the toughest legislation on cruelty to animals anywhere in these islands. So, I do not think I have to prove myself to the Member. I have already demonstrated what I am worth on these issues. We will look logically at all these matters.

Mr Clarke: I listened carefully to what the Minister said about these registers not necessarily working in other areas. I concur with that. Will the Minister, with his colleagues, work against those who finish up on a register to make sure that the penalty for those involved is much more severe than names being recorded? Many of us know the names that would appear on it anyhow.

Mr Poots: We probably all recall the awful case of Cody the dog. My colleague Mr Givan was heavily involved in raising all the issues surrounding that case, which ended in a custodial sentence. In my view, the individual who caused such suffering to that animal should never be able to be allowed to keep an animal again in his life. Other incidents have come across very clearly on our news screens over the years. People have been successfully prosecuted, and what we heard from those prosecutions is truly awful. We need to take action where we can against people who go out of their way to be cruel and do real harm to animals. One of the actions I want taken against them is that they are never able to keep animals. That is why I have substantial sympathy with the Member who asked the original question, because having a register may be helpful in allowing us to do that. I am just saying it is going to be very difficult to create it.

Waste Disposal Offences

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many people have been convicted of illegal waste disposal offences in the last five years and how many of those went to prison. (AQO 19/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Since 2015, 52 people have been convicted of illegal waste disposal offences through the criminal courts. Of the 52 convicted, one person was sentenced to a custodial term of six months' imprisonment.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that that ratio of effective deterrent by way of prison sentence is disappointing? This is a scenario where very severe harm has been done by illegal waste disposal, and to find that only one person has paid with their liberty is surely disappointing. Since much of this illegal waste came, we are told, from the Republic of Ireland, what progress has there been in securing recompense from the authorities in the Republic for these matters?

Mr Poots: The Member raised two valuable issues. In terms of recompense, 17 sites were identified as having waste that emanated from the Republic of Ireland. Of those, 11 have been repatriated. Six have not. Those sites go back in excess of 10 years, because the repatriation work started when I was Minister, which was from 2009 to 2011. It started as a result of me writing to the European Commission as a Back-Bench MLA, I think in 2006. That is a course of work that started and was never completed, so once the new Minister is in place, I will be making a phone call wanting to know when they are taking the waste from the other six sites.

One of the recommendations of the Mills review after Mobuoy was that we work through the Department of Justice to persuade the judiciary of the seriousness of waste crime not just to the environment but to the economy of Northern Ireland, and to encourage them to ensure that sentencing for those offences was comparable with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. There is huge money to be made from waste crime, and slaps on the wrist will not cut it when dealing with these criminals.

Mr Durkan: Miss Bailey beat me to the question, but maybe I will beat her to the answer if I can ask the Minister to outline the rationale behind his decision to dismiss calls for a public inquiry into the huge illegal dump at Mobuoy, how that happened and, potentially, how that was allowed to happen.

Mr Poots: It is actually very appropriate to raise the question under this one, so I am happy to answer Mr Durkan — and Miss Bailey in this instance. Even though the question came from somebody else, the sentiment came from her.

The Mills review was established subsequent to that decision in the Assembly, and it identified a number of issues. I find that inquiries tend to be slow, expensive and laborious, and they very often deliver us answers that we already knew quite a number of years in advance, so public inquiries are not always the answer. These are the recommendations, and people can make a suggestion if something has been missed, and I will be happy to listen:

"The DOE should make the outcome of a waste sector that complies with the law, protects the environment and underpins resource efficiency, a priority.

Develop a comprehensive strategy, with a detailed action plan, to achieve this outcome, which initially focuses on preventing waste crime.

Create a new single Directorate within NIEA to bring together the existing regulatory and enforcement teams along with a new Intelligence Unit to achieve this outcome.

Adopt and develop the concept of 'intelligent regulation' in order to be sufficiently adaptive to deal with a range of operators, from the criminal to the compliant.

Change the current appointment and recruitment processes to allow the targeted recruitment and appointment of staff with the right aptitudes, skills and experience to carry out regulatory work. This should be supported by structured training, professional development and a defined career structure.

Review in an integrated way the need for additional powers to carry out this work by means of a Task and Finish Group and involving all relevant DOE units including Planning with legal support and input from the PSNI."

Have I another 40 seconds, Mr Deputy Speaker? Thank you.

"Make it harder for waste to fall into the hands of criminal operators by strengthening the Duty of Care provisions, Fit & Proper

Person Test and systems for monitoring and analysing waste flows.

Limit the number of waste authorisations to the number necessary to meet Northern Ireland's projected waste needs and create the necessary new strategic waste infrastructure which can be more easily regulated and monitored.

Make changes to the current planning enforcement policy to no longer allow the granting of retrospective planning permission for sand and gravel workings.

Work through the Department of Justice to persuade the Judiciary" —

Well, I have done that one.

"Create a new sanction in the legislation to make the polluter pay to remediate or remove illegally deposited waste.

Ensure that the DOE works more closely with other Government Departments and Agencies in Northern Ireland, with the other Environment Agencies in the UK and Ireland and through relevant European organisations and initiatives".

There are a lot of things there that we could and should do.

Mr Butler: I hope the Minister's answer will be briefer this time round. In the light of the professed collegiate approach across all parties of the Assembly to protect and cherish our environment, will the Minister commit to a review of the judicial penalties for illegal waste disposal with the Minister of Justice and go further to invest in an additional aspect of education as a preventative measure for future-proofing?

Mr Poots: Fines have ranged from £100 to £40,000, and there has been a range of suspended terms of imprisonment sentences and community service orders being handed down in the criminal courts, and the majority of convictions have been on indictment at the Crown Court. We need to ensure that the penalty matches the crime, and if the crime is something where people are making hundreds of thousands — even millions of pounds — and they get a penalty of £10,000, that is not appropriate. That is something I am happy to work through and look at with the Department of Justice to ensure that the polluter pays heavily.

Mr Buckley: The Minister is well aware of the large-scale dumping of illegal tyres that I had to deal with in my constituency, at The Birches in Portadown, last week. Will he outline what his Department can do to help support rural communities that are very often left with the aftermath?

Mr Poots: The Department has a polluter pays principle, but identifying the polluter in these instances is incredibly difficult. I have been aware of this happening in quite a number of locations, even in my constituency, where a truckload of tyres is driven into the countryside, tipped in a lane and someone else has to pick up the responsibility of dealing with that. It is grossly unfair.

When I was in the DOE, there were lots of opportunities to deal with waste tyres in a way that, I believe, would have been beneficial to the environment. I regret that, some 10 years later, we are still dealing with the same problem, and there have not been the advances in dealing with waste tyres that there should have been. Obviously, the tyre companies receive money from every individual who has a tyre changed, and therefore we should be able to identify where each of those tyres goes. In instances where the companies' records do not stack up, we should be able to look at prosecution.

Mr Muir: In relation to illegal dumping and environmental crime, what plans are there to devolve more powers to local government so that they can enforce this? They are at the coalface in relation to a lot of this.

Mr Poots: I am happy to work with local government on the issue. At the minute, the NIEA takes the lead on this issue. I am not sure that it is a power that local governments necessarily want, but it is something that I am prepared to talk to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association about. If we can do it a better way, I am happy to look at doing it that way.

Miss Woods: Does the Minister agree that a budget of £143,000 per annum for cleanup of smaller scale waste deposits is enough, where the offender cannot be identified, and that that budget is being used, not reactively but effectively, to stop illegal dumping?

Mr Poots: That is a relatively small budget, and it is used in instances where we are not catching the people. Having a larger budget for that purpose may not be well placed in that, ultimately, we want to take action to stop it

happening in the first place. If it does happen, we want to take action against the individuals who did it. This is the last resort, where neither of the first two options have worked. Therefore, we do not really want to see a huge amount of money expended on cleaning up after other people's bad behaviour.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Mr Robinson, we may be able to get your question in briefly here.

Farm Business Identification Numbers

6. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will review the process for allocating identification numbers to farm businesses. (AQO 20/17-22)

Mr Poots: Case numbers were required by European Commission regulations and, as we have now left the EU, my officials will take the opportunity to review the allocation process. Where possible, they will simplify and streamline the process to reduce both the administrative burden on farmers applying for business ID and the length of time that they have to wait for ID after applying, while still making sure that business IDs are only allocated to authentic farm businesses.

The process of allocating business IDs allows my officials to ensure that funding goes to genuine and separate farm businesses and that farm businesses are not artificially created to claim grants to which they are not entitled or to avoid legal obligations at farm level.

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

Mr Robinson: Does the Minister agree that members of the young farmers' scheme who have been working on the farm and are taking it over or inheriting it are disadvantaged by the six-year rule under CTY 10, which prevents them applying for planning permission for a dwelling, and that could seriously affect their ability to operate their business?

3.15 pm

Mr Poots: Each farm is allowed to make an application every 10 years, and that goes with the farm, not with the individual. If there are two separate and distinct farms, they will be able to apply for two sites every 10 years. However, it

needs to be the case that there is a separate and distinct farm unit.

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

Down Royal: Funding Difficulties

T1. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he is aware of the funding difficulties facing Down Royal park, given that he will be aware that Down Royal is the only racecourse that offers grade 1 racing in the North, holding the unique place as the shopfront of the Irish equine industry here, with over 1,000 thoroughbred horses and breeders and a direct spend by the sector that is estimated by Deloitte to be between £170 million and £212 million per year, albeit that, unfortunately, Down Royal's status has been put in jeopardy due to difficulties it has experienced in drawing down funding from the horse racing fund. (AQT 11/17-22)

Mr Poots: Down Royal is in my constituency, and I am aware that a change in ownership is being used as a reason not to pay the money to Down Royal. That is entirely wrong, in my opinion. Whilst the ownership has changed, the functions and purpose of the racecourse have not changed. I support the industry — the betting and gambling industry — paying up to Down Royal in this instance.

Ms Ennis: I accept what the Minister says and that he is aware of the issue. Will he commit to sorting out the funding issues for Down Royal park? How will he prevent such an issue arising in future?

Mr Poots: Yes, we will continue to work on the issue and to see whether we can amend the regulations around it, so that, if an ownership changes but the purpose continues to be the same, others will not be able to drop out of previous agreements.

Farm Income

T2. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the steps his Department is taking to address falling farm income, which fell by a staggering 25% between 2018 and 2019 and is further compounded by the uncertainties created by Brexit. (AQT 12/17-22)

Mr Poots: When it comes to falling incomes, we live in a scenario of global markets. In some

years, we will do better, because others have been less fortunate. Sometimes, there will be major floods. In Australia, for example, there have been major fires this year. Those things generally have an impact on global prices. In the last year, however, as the Member said, prices have fallen by over 25% and that is from a pretty low base in the first instance.

In the United Kingdom, in particular, there are three groups that benefit from food production: the farmers, the processors and the supermarkets. The consumer has to pay for what is offered. The farmer always seems to be the one who gets the poor return vis-à-vis the processor and, in particular, the supermarkets. Some of the things that are being imposed, particularly by the supermarkets, are grossly unfair, and they will lead to farmers receiving very poor prices.

I make the argument that the Assembly has adopted a policy of Fairtrade to ensure that coffee farmers, for example, in South America or farmers who produce quality fruit in west Africa and so forth get a decent price for their goods: we should ensure that farmers in Northern Ireland get a decent price for their goods as well.

Ms C Kelly: Does the Minister recognise that the ending of the areas of natural constraint compensatory payment is a further blow to the income of hill farmers?

Mr Poots: That decision was taken some years ago, and it finally closed in 2018. Going forward, we need to look at new ways of providing support for farmers. I indicated to the Committee on Thursday that hill farmers are so important to our ecosystem, our environment and the production of quality goods that are often finished down in the lowlands, but, nonetheless, the role of hill farmers is critical going forward. I want to devise a scheme beyond 2020 that is good for all farmers. I want it to be good for hill farmers, because I do not want them to be left behind.

Independent Environmental Protection Agency

T3. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when he envisages the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency, in light of the commitment given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. (AQT 13/17-22)

Mr Poots: Obviously, we are having a debate on that issue later. We know that an Office for

Environmental Protection is being established in GB. In all of that, is an independent environment agency in place of or in addition to the NIEA? Is an independent protection agency to oversee, for example, what the European Commission would have overseen? Is it, therefore, something that would be done alongside the NIEA, or would we see it entirely replacing the NIEA? We all need to have that discussion at Executive level to see the best way forward.

Mr Muir: With that office being established in England and Wales and with there already being an agency in Scotland and one in Ireland, do you not think that there is a risk of Northern Ireland being left behind on the British Isles with regard to environmental governance, especially in light of our exit from the European Union?

Mr Poots: We have some very good environmental standards in Northern Ireland, and the NIEA works hard on many of those things to ensure that we do our jobs well and the environment is protected. I am not opposed to an independent environmental protection agency, but I want to look at all the issues around it to see what is the best way forward. I know that, for example, in Aberdeenshire, with an independent environmental protection agency, a decision on an incinerator was passed in six months, whereas, in Northern Ireland, 10 years later, they are still arguing about one. There is the suggestion that things may be a lot tighter as a result of having an independent EPA, but they may not be. Such an agency may be less inclined to have political influence put upon it, from wherever it happens to come, be it from people who want less regulation or more regulation. We all need to look at the matter seriously, and I am certainly not ruling it out.

Air Pollution

T4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to tackle the growing threat of air pollution, given the clear evidence that it is at dangerous levels across Belfast, with, for example, the Stockmans area of West Belfast being one of the worst flashpoints for pollution levels. (AQT 14/17-22)

Mr Poots: Certainly, one of the greatest areas of air pollution is transportation. Combustion engines are, I suppose, the greatest source of that. The Member has indicated that there are problems in an area where cars are not moving very quickly, so going ahead and addressing one of the blockades to the movement of

vehicles, which is at the Westlink/M2 interchange, would be hugely beneficial.

I also think that looking at how we can support more electric cars on the road would be beneficial. Currently, we provide all the electric points at a public cost. I know that that is being done on a 50:50 basis in the Republic of Ireland, so the private sector contributes to that. We need to be flexible and ready to move and assist people to move to electric cars. In Northern Ireland, we produce well over 40% of our electricity from renewable sources. When cars run on electricity here, there is a genuine good coming from that. However, 37% of electric in Germany, for example, comes from coal-fired power stations, so moving to an electric car in Germany may be more harmful to the environment. Northern Ireland has ploughed ahead with renewable energy, so we have a great benefit from moving down that route.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his reply. I add that investment in cycling and public transport is very important. Are the Minister and his officials happy to meet me, alongside some of the residents of the Stockmans area, to talk about what he and his Department can do to alleviate the air pollution levels?

Mr Poots: Of course we are. I am here to serve Members, because they serve the people of Northern Ireland, so I am happy to meet the Member.

Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, it is a North Belfast question.

T5. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the delays to the Northern Ireland food animal information system (NIFAIS). (AQT 15/17-22)

Mr Poots: Sorry, the Northern Ireland —?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Food animal information.

Mr Poots: I am not exactly sure of that one, so I will take a note of it and reply in writing to the Member.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is NIFAIS.

Mr Poots: OK. I will reply in writing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I presume that you will not require a supplementary question [*Laughter.*]

Ms Ní Chuilín: If the Minister wants to know about NIFAIS, I can meet him after topical questions to give him an update [*Laughter.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That was a supplementary, all right, to the Minister.

I call Mike Nesbitt for a question.

Mr Nesbitt: Lucky old me.

Fishing Industry: Visas

T6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the fact that the local fishing fleet is so dependent on foreign national workers, for his assessment of the negative impact of last week's ruling from the UK's migration advisory committee, which recommended that tier 2 visas should not be granted to the fishing industry. (AQT 16/17-22)

Mr Poots: I was with the fishermen in Portavogie last week. I thank Harry Harvey for being in attendance at that meeting. In particular, they raised the issue of the skills base in fishing and the fact that the people who are being brought in are recognised not as skilled workers but as labourers. Given the complexities that are involved in preparing and making nets, in the catching and identifying of fish and in all that goes with that, those involved should be recognised as a skilled workforce. Consequently, that is something that we will press on the national Government. Sadly, a lot of our young people have left the fishing industry as a consequence of the common fisheries policy and of the actions that the European Union has taken. When the United Kingdom gets its waters back — its 200-mile limit — there will be limitless opportunities for the fishing industry. Therefore, we need those people to come and support us until we get our young people back into fishing.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answer. When we do take back the powers and leave the common fisheries policy, does the Minister believe that the new policy should be set by Westminster or devolved to Stormont?

Mr Poots: The policies on fishing and on what takes place on the waters will be set by the devolved Administrations. However, policies on migration will remain in Westminster. It is

therefore up to us to maximise our influence with Westminster to ensure that the right policies are applied to support what is, in Northern Ireland, an industry that is very good at producing high-quality food for the many people who live in cities in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Woodland

T7. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action he is taking to increase woodland across Northern Ireland, which stands at around 8% and is the lowest in Europe. (AQT 17/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Member is right in pointing out the figure of 8%. However, we have some of the higher margins when it comes to hedgerows. You could drive through parts of Scotland and England and see various pieces of woodland, but alongside the road there is nothing. We have a lot of hedgerows, but I am committed to increasing the number of trees that are being planted. Currently, my Department plants around 2,000 hectares a year: we want to increase that significantly.

We are planting around 2 million trees per annum, but there are great opportunities to increase that.

3.30 pm

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

Mr Blair: Very briefly, does the Minister agree that there should be a joined-up approach on that with councils, NGOs and voluntary bodies to increase the woodland and, of course, the number of hedgerows?

Mr Poots: Yes, we have written to all those bodies and all the Departments asking them to contact their arm's-length bodies, local authorities etc, to see what opportunities there are to plant public land with trees. So, that is something we are already doing, and I encourage the Member to encourage Departments to come back to us quickly, because the sooner they come back to us the sooner we can get on with the job of creating more woodland, which will be a great carbon sink.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Minister. Before the next questions, I ask Members to take their ease while there is a change of Chair.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Communities

Historical Sites: Protection

1. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her Department's responsibilities and legal standing in the protection of historical sites. (AQO 28/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I thank the Member for this important question. A society that understands the past is stronger for the future. Therefore, it is important to me that my Department helps communities to enjoy and realise the value of our historic environment. My Department's relevant powers and responsibilities are set out in two pieces of legislation: the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects Order 1995; and the Planning Act 2011.

Under the legislation, my Department has a duty to maintain 190 state care monuments and to facilitate access where possible. My Department is responsible for compiling a schedule of historic monuments, and there are currently approximately 2,000 scheduled. Scheduling provides additional protection through the requirement for scheduled monument consent before carrying out any alterations to these monuments.

My Department is responsible for drawing up a list of buildings of special architectural or historical interest. Currently, we have around 8,900 listed buildings. Making alterations without listed building consent is an offence. My Department must be consulted by planning authorities on applications that affect listed buildings and historic monuments, and also on draft local development plans. I will be engaging with councils in the time ahead around those local development plans as they progress.

My Department also has special powers regarding enforcement action for unregulated work to protected places and buildings and to fund activities relating to the historic environment. In the use of its powers, my Department seeks to work closely with relevant communities and stakeholders to ensure that we strive to hand down to the next generation the rich heritage we have inherited.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Minister, for a comprehensive answer. I ask you to please bear with me on this one. Knock Iveagh is a

regionally important prehistoric burial site just outside Rathfriland that dates back to 3500 BC. It was later used as an inauguration site for early medieval Irish kings and is scheduled for protection under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects Order 1995.

Since 2013, the historic environment division, which is one of yours, has failed to protect this site, allowing significant development to take place. If it were not for the Friends of Knock Iveagh, our heritage on that site would now be destroyed. Therefore, what action is the Minister going to take to fix the Government-sponsored vandalism of Knock Iveagh so that the ratepayers of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon are not left out of pocket due to her Department's failures?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your supplementary. I commend those organisations and campaign groups at a grassroots level that work to protect our heritage and environment. I am aware of the Knock Iveagh issue. In 2017, a telephone mast was erected. My Department consulted the council, and there was successful enforcement action. Obviously there are ongoing issues around the wind turbine, which was also erected in 2017. That was from a previous planning permission from the Department of the Environment at that time, dating back to 2013 and which my Department was not consulted on.

Obviously, since then, planning powers have been transferred to local authorities. I engaged with my Department this week, and it is keen. We have been having ongoing engagement with the local council looking at the issue and the planning that was granted, and I will continue to do that, while also liaising with the Department for Infrastructure around the impact that that is having on that historic site in the time ahead. I give a commitment to you. I am happy to sit down and engage with you and to meet with the community group to see if we can get a resolution in taking this matter forward.

Ms Armstrong: When I contacted officials in the Minister's Department while this place was not sitting, they stated that they did not have enough resources to adequately protect and take preventative action against owners of historic sites like Kircubbin harbour in my constituency to prevent them being destroyed through lack of upkeep. What action will the Minister take to resource her Department so that it can take legal action to require private owners to fulfil their responsibility to look after such sites?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your question. A number of funding streams have been in place since 2016, particularly around historic environments, and one is the historic environment fund. We provide funds of over £800,000 per year to look at those issues. Whilst I recognise that there are constraints, some of that is because of austerity and the impact on budgets in my Department. Just under £300 million has been taken out of the Department over the last five years. There is a broader conversation to have in the Executive, looking at the block grant and the impact of austerity. I give a commitment that I am looking at all of those in the budget-setting process going forward, ensuring that we have the necessary resources in place but also ensuring that those most in need are prioritised. If there are specifics that you would like to raise with me, I am more than happy to meet and provide follow-up information.

Mr Speaker: Questions 7 and 12 have been withdrawn.

Universal Credit: Waiting Times

2. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the average waiting time for an initial universal credit payment. (AQO 29/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This is a crucial area, and, obviously, since I came into post three weeks ago, it has been high up on my agenda. Members of this Chamber have raised concerns, and also groups who work at the coalface of this issue. Thank you for raising the question. It is a serious problem for people who are claiming universal credit for the first time.

When the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was here a few weeks ago when the institutions were re-established, I made it clear to him that welfare reform was hurting many of our people, and particularly the most vulnerable in our society. I reiterated to the Prime Minister that austerity and the attack of welfare changes was punishing poor people for being poor. I think that that is playing out, and not just here; we are also looking at the consequences of that approach in England, Scotland and Wales, where the poorest people are suffering.

Each week, approximately 860 new claimants for universal credit are due to receive their first payment, with 95% of those paid at the end of the first five-week period. Whilst I am pleased that my staff are able to make sure that most people get their first payment when it is due, I do not believe that it is right to make people

wait that long in the first instance, so there is a critical factor that needs to be addressed. I believe that waiting five weeks for the first payment is wrong. It is clear that I need to state that. It also creates real hardship for families, forcing many into debt and having to use food banks. Again, we hear those stories on a daily basis.

Ultimately, I want to deliver a welfare system that is compassionate, and that sits with the New Decade, New Approach deal, where we are saying that we want to have politics that is different, is compassionate and protects the most vulnerable, and a system that is based on objective need to ensure that those who need it get it. My approach is to embed a human rights-based approach in the Department when looking at issues of social security and dignity. I have engaged with a number of welfare groups and campaigners over the past couple of weeks, and among the key points that were raised was the way in which people's dignity is stripped from them when they go through these processes and the impact of universal credit. That is something that we need to deal with collectively.

A range of flexibilities and mitigations that were agreed by the previous Executive are helping to offset some of the worst aspects of welfare reform here. One of those is the universal credit contingency fund, which is unique to here. Other places, such as England and Wales, are looking at the mitigations that we were able to secure, because they are having an impact, albeit they do not go far enough.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to wind-up her remarks.

Ms Hargey: The fund is available to anyone who is making a claim for universal credit and is experiencing hardship, and, to date, it has paid out over £1.5 million and impacted on 7,500 lives.

There are serious issues with universal credit. I have given a commitment to the Human Rights Commission; Professor Eileen Evason, who led on the first round of mitigations; and the Cliff Edge Coalition that I will look seriously at the issue in the time ahead. I also want to engage with Members to look at what further progress and mitigations we can make as we move forward.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members and the Minister that there is a time limit for contributions.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for her very detailed answer. As she knows, the delays often extend to three months, which, in some cases, on top of all their other financial pressures, can see clients facing eviction from their homes. What does she plan to do to streamline the process? Will she implement a repayment plan for those who have availed themselves of an advance payment? The entire repayment of that loan is being taken from the client's initial universal credit payment and that often results in extended hardship and means that it takes clients longer to stabilise their finances. Will the Minister consider implementing a repayment plan?

Ms Hargey: Yes, those are the issues that I will be looking at over the coming weeks. Obviously, there are repayments up to 12 months for the advance payments and they can be extended to 15 months under exceptional circumstances. From October 2021, that will extend to 16 months, but we can do more. I will engage with the grassroots who have been impacted by this to look at what the Department can do to set protections and look at changes that we can make. I commit to doing that and I will announce plans in the coming weeks on how I will take that forward.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far and congratulate her on her post, as I have not addressed her since she took office. The Minister in her first answer mentioned, among other things, food banks. Since some parties here voted to introduce welfare reform and universal credit, how many food banks have opened here and how many people have been forced to access them for vital support?

Ms Hargey: I do not have the exact numbers on food banks, but I can follow that up. As I touched on earlier, the welfare agenda and making cuts was ideologically driven by the Tory Government. We do not have our own fiscal powers and we are reliant on a block grant. People will remember that, back in 2016, when this issue was on the agenda, threats to the block grant were made and penalties imposed on a regular basis because there was no agreement.

We have the mitigations in place. I made an announcement today, which I will speak to in answer to another question, on extending those mitigations. I will also be engaging with food banks to find out the intelligence from the people who access those services. What more can we do to protect people? Are there further mitigations that we can look at? Are there fundamental changes to the welfare and social

security system that we need to make? This is about protecting the most vulnerable and prioritising those who are in greatest need and that is something that I will lay out in the time ahead. Importantly, I will be engaging with those in the sector on the ground who are working with and talking to the people who have been directly impacted.

3.45 pm

Mr Allen: I am sure that we, as constituency MLAs, have all seen the impact of welfare reform and universal credit right across our respective constituencies. Is the Minister confident that the IT infrastructure for universal credit is suitably efficient to deal with the number of claims coming through? Will it be able to deal with the capacity of claims when universal credit is fully rolled out across Northern Ireland in respect of new claimants and those on legacy benefits?

Ms Hargey: Thank you for your question. This is an issue that I first raised when I went in to the Department. Obviously, we have not seen the full roll-out of universal credit. We have been looking closely at the pilot in England. We need to ensure that we have the IT systems in place, particularly where we want to mitigate and protect against the worst excesses of the austerity agenda. I have asked officials to look at what additional measures we need to bring in and to ensure that those are costed. I will provide that information in the time ahead. I know, from the questions that he has sent me, that the Member has a keen interest in that. I am more than happy to sit down with you, as I move forward with new proposals, to seek your advice and recommendations and to hear about the experiences of the claimants who come in to your office. I am keen to sit down and have a chat with you.

Ms Bailey: It is great to hear the Minister saying that she will make announcements in the near future about any potential changes that she can make to the awful process that we now have. She said that an announcement will be forthcoming, but does she have powers to make changes, for example, for people who make claims for universal credit and are suffering life-limiting or terminal diagnoses, such as cancer? I have been working for over two years with people who have been forced through the process, are still getting turned down and have to appeal the decision. Does she have the power to, for example, not force that on those people any more?

Ms Hargey: Thank you for your question. I will have a meeting this week with a number of people who have been impacted by the cruel policy of the six-month rule. It is something that I will look at in the time ahead. Obviously, all of that is subject to budgets, because we do not get the additional money through the block grant. I will look at further mitigations to protect the most vulnerable. I will outline my plans, but, importantly, I will look at co-design with the community and voluntary sector and the advice sector and also those who have been directly impacted: the people on the ground who receive those social security protections. I want to listen to them in the time ahead and consider what else we can do. It is not always a financial solution. Obviously, money is one part of it, but we could make fundamental changes to the system to make it easier for people to access and receive the support when they need it. I will look at that issue in the coming weeks.

Social Clauses

3. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Communities whether social clauses will be included in all capital contracts to ensure social value for the beneficiaries of departmental investment. (AQO 30/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for her question. The Executive policy of integrating social considerations into contracts defines public-sector commitments to incorporate social clauses into public procurement. The buy social model has been operated by the strategic investment board since 2016 and has proven to be an effective means of providing targeted recruitment and training opportunities for long-term unemployed people, apprentices and students. Social clauses are intended to provide genuine, sustainable training and employment opportunities and are not to be seen as a source of low-cost labour.

I am committed to the promotion of the buy social model to incorporate social clauses into construction and services contracts according to the relevant thresholds as set out in the procurement guidance. I will also do other work cross-departmentally around a social value Act, which is an important piece of work. I have experience from working in local government of looking at local government strategies around inclusive growth. It is a critical point as we move forward that contracts cannot be looked at just in terms of low cost. We need to look at the impact that they have on social value and on targeting objective need, and also at issues around how we change the culture and use public procurement and contracts to do that on

issues such as a living wage, where we mark up those employers who are living wage employers to try to create a more just economic model and system.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. We all recognise the immense benefit of local and social clauses. I welcome the fact that she is working cross-departmentally on a social value Act. Will she ensure that the Department follows international best practice to maximise the impact of social clauses?

Ms Hargey: Yes, I will look at those best practices and take them forward in the time ahead.

Ms P Bradley: We have had social clauses under various Ministers in what was DSD over many years, and those social clauses, on many occasions, were not fit for purpose and did not have the real value that was intended. In going forward, will the Minister talk to the Minister for the Economy to look at those skills and trades, which will help our communities not only in the next few years but for many years to come to build capacity among those communities in those skills and trades?

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for making an important point. I have written to the Minister for the Economy to pick up on a number of those issues, so I hope that we will meet in the coming weeks. This is one of the issues around the skills and employability agenda that we will discuss in the time ahead, so hopefully we can move forward on those issues cross-departmentally.

Mr Stalford: I welcome the Minister to her place and wish her well. She and I both served on Belfast City Council, and she knows that the experience there with social clauses was not a universally positive one. People point to the skyline of Belfast and its expansion as a sign of the progress that we are making, and that is true. Does the Minister agree that it is essential that inner-city communities, such as the Markets, Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, the Village and Donegall Road, see the benefit of major government contracts and that it is not simply measured by extra buildings going up? Does she agree that social clauses, properly implemented, will be a useful way of ensuring that those communities see the benefits of major infrastructure projects?

Ms Hargey: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member. Thank you for your question. It should be about the social value that is added and

particularly about targeting objective need. I fully agree with that, and I will look closely at that in the time ahead.

Library Services

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of restricted opening hours, as a result of budgetary constraints, on the delivery of library services. (AQO 31/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I acknowledge and appreciate the great work that Libraries NI delivers on behalf of my Department across a network that includes 96 libraries, 16 mobile libraries and a home-call service. Libraries NI contributes to well-being right across the community through its health, education and other extended programmes. Unfortunately, due to continued budget cuts over previous years, not all libraries provided late-night opening over the summer period in July and August, some smaller libraries closed for a week during the summer period, 14 larger libraries reduced their opening hours over the Christmas period from 23 December until 31 December, and the remaining 82 libraries closed over the Christmas period from 23 December to 1 January inclusive. In all cases, Libraries NI has tried to minimise the impact on services to those local communities.

Recent innovations include the introduction of Lego clubs in the majority of libraries to encourage a wide range of users, such as fathers and their children. This initiative aims to promote social engagement, help to deliver motor skills, improve communication skills and nurture individuals' self-esteem through collaboration and creative thinking. Other programmes being delivered include rhythm and rhyme sessions for parents and children in every library, knit and natter and tea and newspaper activities, which promote social inclusion, particularly for older people.

Libraries NI also offers support for people seeking employment to find jobs, to prepare curricula vitae and to make online applications through internet access and Wi-Fi, which are both offered free to the public. While I appreciate that, due to budget cuts, some libraries have reduced their opening hours, they continue to deliver real valuable services across the whole community, and I am keen to engage in this area in the time ahead.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her response. I very much appreciate the great service that Libraries NI provides, despite challenging finances. I also welcome the cross-

departmental work to provide the pilot out-of-hours service, particularly in Saintfield in my constituency.

Will the Minister give an update on the much-anticipated and long-overdue redevelopment of Newtownards library, please?

Ms Hargey: I do not have that information. I have asked for a breakdown of all the current library programmes. I will follow up that question to you in writing.

Welfare Reform

5. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on welfare reform mitigations. (AQO 32/17-22)

Ms Hargey: From the outset, I should state that as an individual, an MLA and, indeed, a Minister, I am opposed to austerity. That will come as no surprise to anyone. I also believe in compassion and human rights for all our people. Those things are embedded, not just in the Good Friday Agreement but in New Decade, New Approach. All the decisions that I make will be based on objective evidence and need. Therefore, I welcome the question, which provides me with the opportunity to set out my stall.

This morning, I announced that the Executive have agreed to my recommendation, in line with New Decade, New Approach, for the urgent extension of the bedroom tax mitigation beyond March 2020. The mitigation scheme provides financial support to people who would otherwise have lost out as a result of welfare cuts. That is an estimated 38,000 households or families that receive the supplementary payments that protect them from the bedroom tax.

In the coming weeks, I will introduce legislation to extend the essential mitigation, which will continue to safeguard more than 38,000 of the most vulnerable households in our society from the harsh welfare cuts that we have seen. The proposal will cost £23 million per annum. Aligned with that, over the coming weeks, I will bring forward regulations on the other strands of the existing welfare mitigations, such as the benefit cap and those transitioning from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. The cost of that will be around £17.3 million per annum. However, other mitigations need to be looked at, and we need to review the mitigation measures that we committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

I will continue to liaise with stakeholders and work with them on co-design and on how we move this necessary work forward. I acknowledge and thank the organisations that I have met in the past few weeks. I have prioritised this area of work.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to conclude her remarks, please.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Human Rights Commission, Cliff Edge Coalition and Advice NI, to name but a few.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she ensure that the advice sector is adequately resourced so that those who are dependent on welfare benefits will receive their full entitlement?

Ms Hargey: I have asked that the regulations for the mitigation payments also continue the vital annual funding of the advice sector. It is critical that we have advice available for those in crisis.

I have to say that there are also skilled staff in the Department and in the local jobs and benefits offices. I encourage any Member who finds someone in need to access independent advice or to go through local jobs and benefits offices. I am keen to ensure that the resource for the advice sector is retained.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's comments on social sector size criteria. It will be novel to see the party opposite vote for regulations this time, because they left that responsibility to the House of Commons the last time.

Will the Minister give an assurance that the underspend, for at least the past two years, of £136 million for mitigation measures is still in place and is money that will be available? What will she do in the Department to ensure that there is no further drain on public finances and that the money that was allocated is used?

Ms Hargey: It is an area that I am looking at. The last round of mitigations that were secured played a vital role in protecting the most vulnerable. They were developed over a very short period, of around five weeks, and then introduced.

There were some elements of that that meant, when you looked at it, that the tax system would have taken some of that money if we had paid it out, so, in effect, it was not going to protect the most vulnerable. Announcements I will make in the coming weeks will be around working with

the sector and with people who have been impacted, and any future mitigations we want to bring forward will be to really test what works well and develop mitigations that protect the most vulnerable and the larger number of people in our society. I will roll out my plans and my approach to that in the coming weeks.

4.00 pm

Mr Carroll: Given today's announcement that the bedroom tax mitigations will be extended, what does the Minister intend to do to help those who lost their supplementary payments when they moved to a house with the same number of rooms because it suited their outstanding needs — for example, people who had to move to a different accommodation to make sure it suited and could accommodate their disabilities? What will she do to ensure that people who have lost out on their supplementary payments will be supported?

Ms Hargey: Thanks for your question. This is a critical area and one that I was acutely aware of. I have closed that loophole in the system, and, therefore, any change of circumstances around moving will now be mitigated for in the new proposals going forward.

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

Benefit Fraud

T1. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Communities to explain why one of the first decisions she took upon becoming a Minister was to do away with the long-standing custom and practice of publishing the names of those legally convicted of benefit fraud in Northern Ireland. (AQT 21/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The first thing is that it has not been long-standing custom and practice; this was introduced again only in 2011. From 2007 up until that period, that custom and practice did not exist. Benefit fraud is a serious issue that my Department puts a large resource into, but names associated with benefit fraud are already published in the system that adjudicates on those issues — the court and criminal justice system — and that is where it should rest.

I have engaged with the rights sector over the last couple of weeks, and they feel that this creates an air of demonisation of poor families. I wanted to ensure that we militate against that.

When you look at the social security budget, you see that it is £6.1 billion and less than 1% of that is around benefit fraud. I want to focus more on the Make the Call campaign, where, in 2018-19, we secured £43.1 million of additional benefits that people were entitled to and had not claimed. We also want to look at issues of official errors and how we can reduce that, because, in the same year, the adjustments were £22.5 million, which, in many ways, outstripped the issue around benefit fraud. That is where my focus needs to be. I am about protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring that people get the access to the social security system that they should. That is notwithstanding the benefit fraud work that still goes on, but I do not see the need for me to publish that on my website. That is already done through the Court Service.

Mr Buckley: I recognise what the Minister said, but does she realise that this has left many law-abiding citizens asking this question, which I will put to the Minister now: where do the Minister and her Department stand on criminality and transparency?

Ms Hargey: I have set that out clearly: we have a resource that looks at issues of benefit fraud. There are prosecutions, and the figures stand for themselves. I will ask the Member a question back. You can start asking questions around NAMA and the property portfolio, where billions were wasted. When we look at tax avoiders, we see they are not listed on a system. We can start to look at all those issues. When you look at the money, you see that this is less than 1% of a £5.1 billion budget. It is an issue of proportionality, and I do not think it is proportionate to look at the most vulnerable. We need to look at those who, in terms of tax avoidance, have billions upon billions in offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands. That is where our focus should be, and it should be proportionate.

Benefit Fraud

T2. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Communities a similar question, with her indulgence, given that she outlined her rationale and reasoning for stopping the publication of the names of people who are convicted of benefit fraud, to elaborate, if possible, on when people are convicted of other types of fraud, how many times their names are published — once, twice, three or four times — particularly following convictions for theft of small amounts of money. (AQT 22/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have some of the figures on convictions for benefit fraud over the last number of years. It is a figure that has declined in recent years. In '16-17, 280; '17-18, 316 — there was a slight increase; and then '18-19, 191. I will get the rest of that information in written form and send it to you.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate the Minister's response. For the purposes of clarity, perhaps she could also try to get some figures on error. We often hear about fraud; we rarely hear about the errors in the system. In a previous question — I think Joanne Bunting asked it — we heard about errors in relation to universal credit and the impact that that has on people. It would be good to have those figures also.

Ms Hargey: On errors, recently the official adjustments figure was £22.5 million, so it is not a small budget. The fraud figure is £56.2 million, but the figure for those who are not getting the benefits that they are entitled to is £43.1 million. My focus is on reducing the error but also ensuring that, through the Make the Call line, those who are entitled to unclaimed benefits actually receive them.

Sign Language Bill

T3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Communities, after welcoming the use of the sign language interpreter in the Chamber, for an update on plans to introduce a sign language Bill. (AQT 23/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member who raised the issue of the signer and the Ceann Comhairle. It is good, and we should definitely use it in the time ahead. I am aware of the British and Irish sign language framework being put in place; work around that is ongoing. I am meeting departmental officials again this week to look at a timeline for that legislation. That will start to develop over the coming weeks and months. I will update the Committee and the Chamber once I have a more definitive timeline.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her positive response. It leads by good example. Will the Minister ensure that the entire Executive and all Departments are kept on board in any discussions as the Bill progresses to ensure that everybody across the board is bought into it?

Ms Hargey: Yes, I can give a commitment that I will do that.

Neighbourhood Renewal Budget

T4. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department is working to ensure that the neighbourhood renewal budget for the community and voluntary sector will be in place for this year to guarantee continuity of service. (AQT 24/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have had an initial meeting on the neighbourhood renewal programme budget. As someone who was previously employed under that programme and who lives in a community that is impacted by it, I see the amazing work that neighbourhood renewal partnerships do. Obviously, we are in the middle of budget-setting processes, but it is to ensure that the budget, as is, will not be reduced in any way. I will have to look at how we develop that programme in the time ahead and, importantly, at how the neighbourhood renewal programme beds into the anti-poverty strategy that I will bring to the Chamber.

Mr McCann: As the Minister is aware, for the past number of years, the community and voluntary sector has had to issue protected notices to its workforce because of uncertainty in budget allocation. Can the Minister assure us that that yearly disaster, which has a huge impact on the community infrastructure, will be dealt with urgently and that her Department will move to a three-year funding cycle as soon as possible?

Ms Hargey: Multi-annual budgeting is essential; I know that it is in New Decade, New Approach. There are, obviously, some system issues in moving to that agenda, but it makes sense. If you work in the most deprived communities trying to develop programmes, you cannot do that in 12 months. We need to give greater certainty and assurance to the projects that work at the coalface. I will look seriously at that in the time ahead and at the rights of those employed in the community and voluntary sector, who have had issues with not getting a pay rise. There are other issues about workers' rights. I have already tasked my officials to compile a report on those issues and how I, as a Minister, can proactively address them, ensuring that workers' rights are at the heart of what we are trying to do.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

GAA Coverage on the BBC

T6. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister for Communities, on behalf of the 250,000 GAA

members in Ulster, whether her Department intends to work with the BBC, the GAA and other stakeholders to tackle the inequalities that exist in the coverage of Gaelic games by the BBC, given that the Minister will be aware that, in 2018, she launched the Fair Play for Ulster Gaels campaign, which was borne out of the intense frustration from the GAA community across Ulster that the BBC, the broadcaster to which we all pay a licence fee, was not reflecting the popularity of Gaelic games in its TV and radio coverage. (AQT 26/17-22)

Ms Hargey: It is an issue that I am acutely aware of, and I am aware of the impact that the GAA, like other sports, has on our young people, communities and society as a whole. I will meet, as part of my portfolio, the BBC in the coming weeks, and it is one of the key issues that I will raise with them. I can come back and update the Member and the Chamber on that.

Ms Ennis: I appreciate that, Minister. I would like to bring to your attention — Members will be aware of this — the absurdity of geo-blocking, which we are all subject to in the North. Can I ask the Minister, alongside the Minister for the Economy, to look at that and, perhaps, work with RTE, the GAA and the BBC to tackle that issue?

Ms Hargey: I give a commitment that I will raise that.

Housing: Omagh

T7. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for Communities to ensure that the housing waiting list and housing stress for Omagh has a town and rural dimension to ensure that rural dwellers are not overlooked. (AQT 27/17-22)

Ms Hargey: That is an area I will look at in the time ahead. I will set out my vision and approach on housing, whether the waiting list or the social housing programme. A key component will be that housing needs to be delivered on the basis of objective need in terms of where the greatest need is. The housing programme needs to be aligned to that. I have asked for a geographical breakdown of those statistics, and I will meet officials again this week and next as we firm up our housing approach and policy; indeed, I will engage with the Minister directly on the specifics of your area.

Ms C Kelly: I look forward to working with the Minister and, indeed, with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to ensure that housing

need is reflected throughout the local development plan process for that council area in the near future.

Ms Hargey: This is also a critical issue. I will engage with the 11 local authorities, particularly on the emergence of their local development plans, housing being a critical component. It is also highlighted in the New Decade, New Approach deal that we radically need to increase the amount of public housing that we are making available. That has to be in the areas of greatest need. Local development plans need to be aligned with that, particularly looking at access to public land. It is my firm view that public land should be used for the greater public good, and one of the greatest public goods is the provision of housing. It is a basic, fundamental human right, and it will be a key focus for me and my Department in the time ahead.

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Emergency Housing Stock

T9. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to review emergency housing stock. (AQT 29/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I will look at that in terms of the access to and availability of emerging housing stock, along with key strands of housing work, allocations being another one. I know that we did not get to those questions, but I will set out in the coming weeks what my approach and vision will be in the time ahead. I will follow that up with you, and, once I make that announcement, there will be more information.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome that commitment. I am sure that the Minister would agree that, often, emergency accommodation is highly unsuitable for certain individuals. I think of young females with young children, vulnerable adults and people affected by domestic violence.

I welcome her commitment to look at the issue. Does she agree that hostel accommodation, in particular, can be very unsuitable for some individuals?

4.15 pm

Ms Hargey: It is definitely a critical area. I spoke at the Women's Aid conference last week about changing the conversations, and one of the critical areas was housing. Security of tenure, which is part of the allocations, and the

points system are issues that I will be looking to address. Domestic violence is not listed as an area that is pointed out in that, so I am keen to review all of this. Supporting those with complex needs is important. At the Executive awayday a couple of weeks ago, with the Departments of Health and Justice, we agreed that we needed to work across the Executive to ensure that we are providing the support and resource to those who need it the most. That will be a priority for me.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Members should take their ease momentarily, please.

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

Economy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): On a personal level, I welcome the Minister back to the Chamber.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Renewable Heat

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her approach to renewable heat in light of the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to close the renewable heating incentive scheme and replace it with a scheme that will effectively cut carbon emissions. (AQO 42/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I ask for your indulgence, for a moment, to say that it is good to be back in the Northern Ireland Assembly. What a great privilege and yet a great responsibility to take on the Economy portfolio. I look forward to working with Members and, in particular, to working with the Chair, vice chair and the Committee as we try to take forward some very difficult and, at times, some very exciting issues in relation to the economy.

I thank the Member for his question. Closing the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme is a complex matter. There are cases before the courts. There are also state aid issues and other matters that need to be carefully thought through. My officials are preparing papers, outlining all the issues, that will be brought to the Executive as soon as possible. I am determined to find a way forward on RHI that is fair to participants who have acted in good faith but also to taxpayers who are funding the scheme. Work to bring forward a new

renewable heating scheme will be taken forward as part of a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. It is important that we get on with the decarbonising of heat as a way forward to meeting our net zero carbon target in 2050.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer. I also want to congratulate her on her appointment. I am not going to congratulate her on losing her last job; we have lost great influence in Europe, in terms of our three MEPs, but that is a matter for another day.

On the RHI scheme and its closure, I accept that the Minister has research and paperwork to do, and, obviously, we await the outcome of the RHI report. Whatever replaces the RHI will have to protect the taxpayer, but it also has to be environmentally friendly, and serious concern has been raised that not only was RHI bad for public finances but it was not meeting its environmental targets.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for the question. In the Executive, we have set a fairly onerous target of zero carbon emissions by 2050. We are in a process, and there is a call for evidence on a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. We are doing reasonably well in relation to electricity: about 45% of our electricity is generated from renewable sources. We are not doing so well in relation to heat. It is, therefore, really important that we find a fair and equitable way forward on this RHI scheme and also a renewable heat scheme for the future that commits us to our current targets but deals properly and appropriately with all the issues. I am determined that we will take our time to get the issues right and that there will be no repeat of the mistakes of the past.

Ms McLaughlin: I appreciate the complexity of closing down the RHI scheme, but has the Minister been able to communicate with the 1,200 businesses that are engaged with the project about imminent closure — or not imminent closure? They have to make other arrangements, and it is important that they are informed the whole way through the process of closure.

Mrs Dodds: For me personally, the answer is no. I have not engaged with those businesses. I am relatively new in post, but let me set out some of the complexities and issues that will have to be dealt with as we move forward on the scheme.

Currently, there are two reviews of the scheme: a tariff review that arose out of the House of Commons Select Committee report and a

hardship review. Those reviews are due to report reasonably soon, and I will share the information on their outcomes with the Committee for the Economy as soon as it is available to me. We also have a voluntary buyout option for current participants, which closed on 8 November 2019. I understand that there are 96 applications under assessment by the Department in relation to those participants, but no offers have yet been made. However, in taking the scheme forward, we will obviously have to consider their position in the overall context of what we do.

We have to deal with a number of complexities right now, as well as setting out a new way forward for renewable heat for the future. I look forward to doing that, and I know that my officials have engaged with scheme participants. I want to ensure that we engage with those participants in a fair and compassionate way that addresses the issues that we have experienced in the past.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the Minister to her new post. As a member of the Committee for the Economy, I look forward to working with her as we try to build the economy of Northern Ireland. Will she give us an assurance that the future of RHI will be fully considered and assessed and that existing tariffs are now under control?

Mrs Dodds: The outcome of the tariff review is due reasonably soon. The scheme has a current spend of around £7 million out of a budget of just over £28 million, so the actual spend of the scheme is under control. We need to look at the recommendations of the tariff report, and we will plot a new way forward when we have all the information that is available to us.

Mr Lunn: The New Approach deal — I forget the full title — identified the need for the rebuilding of trust and confidence in whatever scheme is brought forward. A big part of that would be, obviously, how we compensate the perfectly bona fide and legitimate recipients of the current scheme. Can you give us any idea of the amounts of money anticipated to be involved and of where that money may be coming from?

Mrs Dodds: At this stage, it is too soon to say how much the closure, or any potential closure, of the RHI scheme might cost. I intend to bring forward a paper when we have resolved all the issues and when we have the hardship review and the tariff review. I will do that in a transparent and open manner so that we can

collectively consider how best to take the issue forward. I am positive, given the current financial situation, that the costs of any closure or any future scheme will be of the utmost importance and interest, not just to the House but to the Executive.

Mr Allister: I congratulate the Minister on escaping the European Parliament.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Allister: I will not go any further than that.

On the glib suggestion of closing the RHI scheme, does she accept that that will drive current participants back to fossil fuels? Indeed, the reduction below an economic level of the current subsidy has driven many on to fossil fuels.

Secondly, does she recognise, particularly from two pieces of litigation in England — the former Department of Energy and Climate Change cases against Friends of the Earth and the Breyer Group — that a scheme cannot be closed without compensation? Therefore, there will be a cost to the public purse.

In regard to those matters, she said that there are two reports: the Cornwall Insight report and the Buglass report. Did I understand her correctly when she said that her Department has not received either? There certainly is an impression given that it has.

Mrs Dodds: I have not received the results of the hardship report or the tariff report. I understand that the tariff report is due imminently, in which case the outcomes will be shared with the Committee, and we will take them forward.

On your first point about fossil fuels, you are absolutely right: we need to be very careful that how we proceed going forward does not encourage further dependence on, or a return to, fossil fuels. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document indicated that closure of the scheme should be considered. I, along with my officials, will of course bring forward all the options for the scheme, and the Executive can then take an informed decision on how best to proceed. I am committed to helping us have a low-carbon economy in Northern Ireland. I have no desire to increase the use of fossil fuels. That is why I urge us all to get engaged with the energy strategy. There is a call for evidence to inform that strategy. It is very important that we develop a strategy for Northern Ireland that

makes us competitive and as environmentally sustainable as possible.

Dr Aiken: I join others in welcoming the Minister to the post. I have just one issue. How many RHI boiler installations have been inspected to date, and how many have been found to be compliant?

Mrs Dodds: I anticipated your question: to date, almost 600 sites on the scheme have been inspected. It is hoped that 880 sites will have been inspected by the end of June and that the remaining ones will be done by the end of the year. The inspections are complex. When the whole scheme is done, there will be a full picture on the issue of compliance. There is some information available on that. I will ask my officials to brief the Committee on compliance and on the inspections done to date.

4.30 pm

Brexit: Import/Export Position

2. **Miss Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy, following the withdrawal from the European Union, whether she will clarify the position of those businesses locally engaging in import and export. (AQO 43/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for your question. The protocol in the withdrawal agreement will set the terms for our trade in goods. Many issues important to that trade, where businesses will want clarity, are not devolved. Issues like unfettered access to the UK market, the treatment of goods entering Northern Ireland from GB, access to labour and access to UK trade agreements are all the responsibility of the national Government. It will be the UK Government and the EU that will agree how the protocol will be practically implemented. The UK Government, however, have committed to including the Executive on the UK delegation for the joint committee, and I will be working with colleagues to make sure that we maximise our influence on that forum. I have already taken part in the United Kingdom trade forum with Minister Conor Burns and counterparts from Wales and Scotland. That will be hugely important in ensuring that we have full access to UK trade deals, as promised by Prime Minister Johnson. Last Monday, I met Michel Barnier here, in Northern Ireland, and, of course, I met him in the European Parliament in the middle of the week. Again, I raised those issues of how we treat goods coming into Northern Ireland.

This is an issue of the absolute, utmost importance. It is imperative we work together to make sure these issues are dealt with in the coming months, and there is very little time to work on them. Let me assure you that I will be working with the wider business community, the Committee and Ministers to ensure that Northern Ireland's case is forcefully represented and its interests protected as we go forward in this transition period.

Miss Sheerin: I am thinking specifically of some firms involved in parallel importation, so they import a product into the North from an EU state, repackage it here and export it for trade in the Twenty-six Counties, which is, obviously, another EU state. I am wondering about this, because I know of a firm in my constituency that is worried at the minute and does not know how to prepare for the future. When will they receive detailed guidance? Will the Minister's Department be offering that?

Mrs Dodds: If the Member writes to me with the specifics of that case, I will, of course, be very happy to have officials look at it and see how we can make progress. I understand that one of the greatest things for businesses going forward is to have certainty about how they do business, the manner in which they do business and the forms and processes etc they have to go through to do that business. So, I will be very happy to respond individually.

As an aside to your question, it was interesting to see this morning that the Prime Minister and the European Commission set out their opening positions on negotiations on the future economic relationship between the UK and the EU. Clearly, that was set out for a negotiation purpose. There are key issues for us that will be very, very important going forward. Again, it is absolutely important. This is the key issue for the Northern Ireland economy that we will need to deal with going forward. Unfortunately, because it is a negotiation, the situation can sometimes appear more fluid than businesses want.

Mr Stalford: I welcome the Minister to her place and give her every best wish going forward. We look forward to welcoming her to the Committee this week. As well as engaging with local businesses and giving them advice on import and export, one of the key priorities of her Department will be the promotion of exports from Northern Ireland. Can the Minister outline how she sees Invest NI tying in with that and what plans she has for a revised international strategy to encourage businesses in Northern

Ireland to take advantages of the opportunities that Brexit will provide?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is hugely important that we recognise that. Sometimes we talk of the difficulties, but Brexit will present new opportunities as well. By far the most important market for Northern Ireland is the GB market. Around 70% of everything that we make, grow or produce is sold within the United Kingdom. About two thirds of everything that we bring into Northern Ireland is from GB, whether it is for the marketplace or the high street. Securing access to those markets is the most important thing and is uppermost in my mind, so that the Prime Minister's promise of unfettered trade becomes a reality. The Prime Minister also promised us in his statements that we would have access to future UK trade deals. That is why, last week, I participated, alongside Conor Burns, Minister at the Department for International Trade and our counterparts from Scotland and Wales, on the issue of setting up a UK trade forum.

I want Northern Ireland to benefit from global Britain. I want Northern Ireland to be able to take part in those trade deals. As an aside, this week I am meeting a delegation from Qatar to strengthen trade relationships with that part of the world. There are many exciting opportunities going forward and we will work to maximise those, not just to protect Northern Ireland and GB, but to work on our global profile.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the Minister to her position. She has a busy period ahead of her. No independent economic forecaster has ever produced a credible forecast that shows an economic benefit, either to the United Kingdom or Northern Ireland, from leaving the European Union. I ask the Minister, as a matter of urgency, that she asks economists in her Department to provide robust economic analysis of the various scenarios that face Northern Ireland in the years ahead, including possible GB/NI east-west barriers. Can they produce independent economic analysis that she can bring before the Assembly that we can use to debate the best possible future for Northern Ireland and how we affect the negotiations she has talked about?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Undoubtedly, the Member takes a particular view of Brexit. However, Brexit for us in Northern Ireland is a fact: we have left the European Union. What we need to do is to work together to ensure that Northern Ireland maximises its potential in the years going

forward, so that is absolutely my most important priority at this minute in time.

There are many economic analyses of where we might be in any particular scenario. Some of those have not worked out particularly well or even been that accurate in relation to the impact of Brexit. However, what we will do, when we see how the joint committee develops, how the negotiations develop and the exact nature of the trading relationship between the UK and the EU, is bring forward our own analysis and recommendations.

As an add-on, my own particular view of this is that we may have left the institutions of the European Union, but we have not left Europe. We will still continue to trade with Europe; we will still continue to work on security with Europe; we will still continue to work on the really important issues, such as human trafficking, and on many other items. It is absolutely important that we move ahead, maximise our potential and grow Northern Ireland's economy.

Mr Stewart: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her new role and look forward to working with her on the Economy Committee. The Minister will be aware of the comment over the weekend from Stena about its concerns about limitations at the ports here in Northern Ireland. Is it likely that extra space for checking goods will be required at ports in Northern Ireland? What discussions has the Minister had with port operators on those matters?

Mrs Dodds: In deciding what we need to do in Northern Ireland, we will need to see the outworking of the protocol. The Prime Minister has promised us unfettered access. The Executive need to hold the Prime Minister to his word and let us see what unfettered access means. I understand that ports see both restriction and opportunity in the situation that we are currently in, and I will be talking to them in the future to ascertain their exact needs.

Reval2020

3. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will engage with the hospitality sector on the impact of Reval2020, the revaluation of business rates. (AQO 44/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. The tourism and hospitality sector has experienced steady growth since 2013 and plays an important role in the Northern Ireland economy. In 2018, there were an estimated five

million overnight trips in Northern Ireland. Estimated expenditure associated with those trips was a record-breaking £968 million. As Minister with responsibility for tourism, I am aware of the potential impact of the proposed rates revaluation on the sector. It is my intention to meet with a number of key stakeholders from the sector to discuss a range of issues impacting the tourism and hospitality business.

Ms Bunting: The Minister mentioned the very real fears in hospitality that the result of Reval2020 may be that hard-won growth is smothered and, in some cases, some businesses may be forced to close. Will she undertake to make representations to the Minister of Finance on behalf of the sector to see what might be done to avoid and/or minimise such an outcome?

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that I have a meeting with the Minister of Finance later this week, and we will no doubt discuss those issues.

Mr Blair: Like others, I congratulate the Minister on her appointment and wish her very well for the times ahead. Does the Minister, on behalf of the hospitality sector, support reform of licensing legislation in Northern Ireland? In addition, is she likely to report soon on a recent review of that legislation?

Mrs Dodds: My understanding is that that is an issue for the Department for Communities, but I will be happy to give a view. I want the sector to develop and to grow Northern Ireland. The sector is responsible for around 65,000 jobs in Northern Ireland. It is important that we support the sector and allow it to grow in the best way possible. The Department for Communities is the Department in relation to the licensing issue.

Mr Catney: I also welcome you to your post, Minister. I was engaged in the hospitality sector all my working life and I can tell you now that there is real fear out there. I ask you to engage with that sector in order to look at a fair, level playing field. I feel that it has been really hard done by. Taking on board what I have already said, will the Minister engage, as a matter of urgency, with the Minister of Finance and the Executive in the development of a new and innovative business rating system that is fit for purpose in our modern economy?

Mrs Dodds: I will of course engage on this particular issue. I understand the hardship that, sometimes, that can bring, particularly to small businesses that are impacted, from my Department as well as the hospitality sector. I

will engage with the Minister of Finance and I suspect that the Minister of Finance will get a significant number of questions around this particular issue.

4.45 pm

Zero-hour Contracts

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline a time frame to ban zero-hour contracts, as set out in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 45/17-22)

12. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how she will progress the workers' rights commitments in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 53/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I would like to answer AQO 45/17-22 and AQO 53/17-22 together, as they are on a similar issue.

I am committed to protecting vulnerable workers, especially those whose only choice is to accept zero-hour contracts, which do not guarantee any hours and prevent them from working elsewhere. That seems somewhat unfair, particularly to those whose options are limited in relation to the times and hours that they are able to work. My officials are going to develop policy options, taking into account best practice, and we will provide advice in due course. I am also sure that the Committee will take a particular view on the issue in the fullness of time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just for clarity: you are grouping questions 4 and 12, and 5 and 13, Minister. I think that that is the case.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer and wish her well in her new post. Will she ensure that she engages with the key sectors to ensure that the process rolls out smoothly and that there is a better understanding of it?

Mrs Dodds: I assure Members that I will engage with key sectors and will try to understand, in bringing forward options and potentially even legislation, how these things impact on families and lives — on real people in our communities — in the fullness of time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We now move to topical questions.

Post-Brexit Support

T1. **Miss Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will provide financial assistance to firms that find that they need massive adaptations to their business model to continue trading post leaving the EU. (AQT 31/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. In the New Decade, New Approach deal, it was indicated that there should be compensation for firms in relation to the costs associated with the implementation of any new systems. I intend to take that forward with colleagues. The first meeting of the Brexit subcommittee of the Executive will be tomorrow morning and this issue will be part of the considerations in the overall package. It is important that the Government live up to their commitments in the New Decade, New Approach deal and look after businesses in Northern Ireland that might have to change their way of operating.

Miss Sheerin: I welcome the Minister's commitment and thank her for that. I am concerned about some firms that are looking at a potential move to the Twenty-six Counties as opposed to retaining their business in the North. Where a firm finds itself looking at a move south as being its only viable option, will there be financial assistance to try and maintain the jobs that they are providing at their base in the North?

Mrs Dodds: All of the issues will have to be looked at individually. We can direct that to the appropriate Department or to Invest Northern Ireland for them to have a look at it, if the Member would like to contact me directly.

Parental Bereavement Leave

T2. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating her on her appointment, whether parental bereavement leave is to be introduced in Northern Ireland. (AQT 32/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. In April this year, it is anticipated that a new arrangement will be brought in in the rest of the United Kingdom around the issue of parental leave. It will mean that bereaved parents who are employees will be entitled to two weeks' leave following the loss of a child under the age of 18 or a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy. Employees with 26 weeks' continuous service will be entitled to receive

statutory pay while absent from work — I think that that equates to around £151·20 per week in 2021.

At present, there is no corresponding legislation in Northern Ireland. However, it is my intention that parental bereavement leave will be introduced here, and I have asked officials to bring forward proposals for my consideration as a matter of urgency. That is the right and proper thing to do. Currently, the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 gives a day-one right for an employee to have a reasonable time off work to deal with an emergency such as a bereavement involving a dependant. An employer does not have to pay an employee for that time away from work, but many employers already offer paid special or compassionate leave. As Minister, I encourage employers to continue to ensure that their employees are treated with compassion. Statutory parental bereavement leave introduced in Northern Ireland would ensure that all employees are able to avail themselves of parental bereavement leave should they find themselves in the difficult circumstance of the loss of a child.

Mr Robinson: I am sure that the Minister agrees that, at such a traumatic and difficult time for parents and families, parental bereavement leave would provide much-needed time for parents to grieve for their loved one and sort out domestic problems for the bereaved family.

Mrs Dodds: Absolutely. When it was first brought to my attention, I could not believe that, in this day and age, we did not have statutory provision on this issue. It is the right thing to do. I know that I will have support across the House in relation to that. Employment law should be fair to employees and employers, but it also needs to be compassionate. I will bring that forward as soon as I can.

Economic Strategy

T3. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she intends to take to ensure that, as referenced at annexe 4 of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, there will be an economic strategy, and to state how that will relate to all our constituencies and all our communities, particularly our rural communities, which do not get a mention at all in the agreement. (AQT 33/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely am committed to bringing forward a new strategy for Northern Ireland. I want a dynamic economy that brings

benefit and prosperity to all our people in Northern Ireland. That is of the utmost importance. As someone who, in the European Parliament, took a very keen interest in our rural communities, I want to ensure that that dynamic is extended into all rural communities. I reviewed Project Stratum, which aims to deliver broadband to communities where there are slow broadband speeds and poor connectivity, with officials in the Department. Of that delivery, 90% will be in rural areas, which shows the commitment that we have to increasing and growing the economy in rural areas of Northern Ireland as well as increasing productivity, which is absolutely key.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that answer. In addition to the point made, can I be assured that the economic strategy, as it evolves, will link to other strategies in other Departments so that matters like infrastructure, education and other social issues in the Department for Communities are considered as well?

Mrs Dodds: We are in danger of consensus breaking out across the House. Yes, any economic strategy has to relate to all communities in whatever way they are found, and that is very important.

I will mention two key pieces of work that my Department will be bringing forward in the next number of months. One is a strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds in education, skills and training. It is absolutely important that the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy, which has responsibility for further and higher education, work together to deliver valid pathways for all our young people.

I am also currently reviewing work on the training programmes that will be delivered by the Department. I assure the Member of my commitment to all communities in that particular area, because I want to ensure that we have education at community level, whether that be traineeships or general education, that is driven by the community so that everyone can participate in the programmes and thereby find themselves better placed on the ladder of work.

Southern Regional College: Armagh Campus

T4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating her on her new post and her first Question Time, for an update on the progress towards the opening of the new SRC Armagh campus. (AQT 34/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am absolutely delighted that my Department has a capital spend of over £200 million for new facilities for further education in Northern Ireland. Two Fridays ago, I visited the campus at Banbridge in Upper Bann, and it is very exciting to see there a new hub for digital learning that will be taken forward. It will open in September. The Armagh campus is due to open this year as well. Those are hugely exciting prospects to improve education, training and skills for our young people and to match those skills, with the help of employers, to our economy's needs.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree with me that it is important that our young people get the best possible education and training as they face a competitive world in a modern economy.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely do. To add to that, we need to ensure not only that formal education, community education, further education and higher education are linked but that they are driven by the needs of the economy so that we are training young people for real jobs while we seek out better remunerated jobs in the economy. Therefore, it is really important that we lay the foundation blocks. As an old teacher in another life, which seems a very long time ago now, I know that education is absolutely fundamental to progress for our young people.

Skills for Life and Work

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating her on her post and welcoming her to the Dispatch Box, for her view on traineeship and skills for life and work. (AQT 35/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in answer to an earlier question, that is something that I have been reviewing with officials in my Department. There is some concern about the progression levels from level 1 to level 2, about how those skills can be delivered and about whether they can be delivered in community settings. I hope to bring forward proposals that are flexible and that allow people to progress at the pace at which and in the place in which they are best placed to make that progress. The Member and I have visited and been part of community training schemes such as Impact on the Shankill for a very long time. Such schemes do an enormous amount of work with young people in the area, and I congratulate them on that work.

I look forward to working with them and, indeed, visiting some of them in the near future.

5.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time for a quick supplementary question, Mr Humphrey.

Mr Humphrey: It is funny you mention that, Minister. *[Laughter.]* Having met the management of Impact Training recently, along with senior officials from your Department, I take this opportunity to express my concern, as they are concerned, about some proposals that may emanate from your Department. I, therefore, take the opportunity to welcome you to visit Impact Training as my guest in the near distant future.

Mrs Dodds: I would be absolutely delighted to visit Impact Training. I would be going to my political home, and I would be delighted to do that.

I thank all my colleagues across the Chamber for their kind words on this, my very first Question Time.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes topical questions. Members should take their ease while we change the Chair.

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

Private Members' Business

Autism Training in Schools

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the specific needs of pupils with autism in our schools; values and supports the role of all educators in ensuring pupils with autism have the best educational outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Education to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants. — [Mrs Cameron.]

Which amendments were:

Leave out all after "Education" and insert:

"to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers, teachers and classroom assistants." — [Miss Woods.]

At end insert:

", and for teacher training colleges to introduce a compulsory module that includes this training during the postgraduate certificate in education." — [Ms Mullan.]

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): At the outset of this conclusion to the debate, I thank all Members for their valuable contributions. I pay tribute, as others have, to the various groups that have been involved with autism. The contributions that we have had, perhaps, show the merits of all-party groups. Many Members have spoken with the background of having gone through the evidence in the all-party groups. Autism can be an emotive and significant subject, particularly for those families who have children with autism. It is clear we have seen a considerable consensus across the Chamber on the issue.

I will maybe start with the two amendments. They perhaps have nuances of difference, but the general direction of travel is the same for both. To that extent, therefore, at the start of my summing up, I am happy to indicate my support for either or both amendments and, indeed, the motion itself. I will not seek to divide the House on the nuances of difference between the two amendments.

The growth in recognition and diagnosis of autism has, as some Members highlighted, been a welcome development in recent years, but that has then created a need for more awareness and training. Ten years ago, the figure for those diagnosed with autism was around 1.2%. Today, it is 3.3%, and, as a number of Members indicated, that is the equivalent of about one child per class. That is because there has been a growing recognition of autism. I do not believe it is because there has been a particular change, in any form, of the condition. It is actually that, for many pupils who in previous years went undiagnosed, there is a much greater opportunity for that to be picked up.

When we look at the role of educational professionals, we can see that they are not qualified to make, or responsible for, the diagnosis of any child's medical issue, but it is important that they are informed by the child's experience, their views and their strengths and needs. Their role is to identify the impact on the child's learning experience and participation within an inclusive educational system, and then, using that knowledge and those skills, they can adapt their practice to enable every child to fulfil their potential. We should always remember that every child is an individual and that their needs are always slightly different.

Provision of support for special education is based upon those individual needs, and specific support is required to meet the needs of the child. Those with special educational needs quite often have more than one type of need or difficulty, and therefore interventions are tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual child. For autism, special educational needs may include speech, language, communication, social interaction, behaviour and emotional and well-being challenges, and there is a direct responsibility on the Education Authority to ensure that training that it provides is equitable and balanced across a wide range of special educational needs.

I want to highlight three areas where there is pre-existing training. First of all, there is the autism advisory and intervention service that is provided by EA, which provides a wide range of autism spectrum disorder training on request. Through that intervention, last year, the latest figures we have show that 4,023 teachers and school staff accessed training from that. A number of Members have made this clear during the debate, and it has been highlighted by the unions: that is a good service. Is it adequate in and of itself? No, I do not believe that it is, and that has been highlighted particularly by the Ulster Teachers' Union. That

has been identified by the EA itself; it has identified the need for a more strategic development of regional training. Even the EA has accepted that what is there is not sufficient.

The Middletown Centre for Autism has been mentioned, and that is funded jointly by my Department and the Department of Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland. I know that a number of Members have visited the Middletown centre, and I certainly encourage them to do so. It operates as a second-tier service to the EA to augment its autism training programme. It has built a reputation for excellence in the quality of its services, as confirmed by independent joint inspections in 2012 and 2016. Middletown provides a comprehensive range of online training and advisory services for educational professionals, parents, children and other allied health professionals. It is a one-stop shop to support children with autism in their education setting and, as was mentioned by a number of Members, it takes a holistic approach. The support that is available at home is also critical.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McGrath: You mentioned other places. Do you recognise that the informal education sector — in other words, the Youth Service — can also provide an invaluable resource to help with the socialisation of young people with autism, and that there are some excellent examples out there? As part of today's debate, you could maybe bring back to the Department how some work within the Youth Service could be strengthened going forward.

Mr Weir: While we want to provide the best of services, that will quite often involve a cocktail of measures. It is not simply a one-off. The Member is right, and I know that a number of the Youth Service providers have, for instance, received excellent inspection reports, particularly when dealing with the issues around autism. I certainly acknowledge that.

Middletown provides a fully integrated suite of services, including a cohesive transdisciplinary learning support and assessment service combined with research and training, alongside opportunities for family support. The latest figures show that, during the 12 years of its interventions, it has delivered training to over 33,000 professionals. Many educational professionals access the training through this, and they are free to access it. Provision of tailored special educational needs training

specific to need, coupled with school-based support and an incremental approach to service delivery, has been the current model and is to ensure that knowledge and understanding gained from any training is fully integrated. Training programmes are largely focused on upskilling educational professionals, enhancing the capacity of educational institutions to support children with autism in their education setting and in the home, and providing parents with support.

One of the outcomes of the capacity-building project, which was established in response to the 2017 Northern Ireland Audit Office 'Special Educational Needs' report, is that training in special educational needs, including autism, for teachers and those studying is a key focus of the Learning Leaders oversight group, which is chaired by my Department and involves a range of stakeholders. The purpose of this is to provide strategic direction in design and development. That oversight group was established in March 2017, following publication of the report.

There are many special educational needs in our schools. It is important that we get balance but also have a focus on autism. Through identification, we have seen a rising number of children with SEN. There has been mention of the overall costs of around £280 million to the Education budget, which is the latest assessment. Obviously, we need to ensure that we get the best possible delivery for our young people and the best possible value for our money. So, we have to caveat this slightly on the basis of what resources are available.

Mr Durkan raised the issue of the Western Trust. The one thing I can give an assurance on is that my Department will not be handing back any money in terms of spend on children, particularly resource spend. We will often be going to the Finance Minister to look for more, but there will not be any underspend in the Department of Education.

Despite the pressures that are there, we can think imaginatively. We are looking at where we are with this. The capacity-building group perhaps provides a template to look holistically at both CPD and initial teacher education. We need to see a step change in what we provide for special educational needs. I hope to launch a consultation and framework for special educational needs in the spring. That will provide a coordinated approach to autism and other special educational needs. All these things are multi-agency and multi-departmental in their nature, and there has been criticism of some other Departments. The second progress

report on the current autism strategy, which is being done by the Department of Health in conjunction with other Departments, is also due to launch soon.

Ultimately, the big issue is how we move on from here. There has been mention of initial teacher education. The point is well made that, if we are to embed what is there, the starting point is to ensure that teachers coming out in the first place do so with this level of knowledge. I should put a little bit of a caveat in that because, ultimately, initial teacher education is paid for by the Department for the Economy. I cannot make a pledge that actually spends someone else's money. The curriculum is controlled by the higher education institutions themselves. While there has been some autism training available, there is a concern that its depth is not sufficient. We need to move to a situation where it is embedded in initial teacher education and then, in the wider context, ensure a roll-out of mandatory training.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing the intervention. I welcome him to his place at the dispatch box and wish him well as he carries on the work that he started before the institutions were suspended.

Minister, there had been talk of a new ASD behaviour unit to be located in north Belfast. That could not be progressed because of the collapse of the institutions. Having spoken to local principals and teachers, I ask the Minister to look at this as one of his priorities.

Mr Weir: I am happy to give the assurance that we will take a look at that. We need to make sure that we have the right network of facilities.

There is no hidden agenda to look to abolish any form of special schools. It is about getting balance.

All our teachers, in special and mainstream schools, have to be highly skilled in supporting pupils with autism to succeed, and it is important, therefore, that our educational professions are appropriately skilled. It is clear that, while what we have been doing up until now has made a valuable contribution, it is falling short of the mark, and we need to embed that level of knowledge within our professions.

5.15 pm

There are imaginative solutions that the proposer of the motion and others have come up with. We can see, for example, as part of the SEN framework, that there will be an

opportunity, as we move ahead, to embed within the so-called Baker days some provision and a recommendation that they should use those days particularly for SEN training. That could provide a level of focus on autism.

There is a unity of spirit here. The issue, therefore, is a question not of whether but of how we do this. From that point of view, I am not doctrinaire as to precisely how we reach that end point, but it is clear, given the growing needs that we have in the greatly increased level of identification of autism and, therefore, the prevalence in mainstream and specialised schools, that we do need to deliver better.

I will be happy to work with others to ensure that there is access to adequate, appropriate training programmes in initial teacher education and in continuing professional development. That has to borrow heavily from the experience of parents and teachers. Sometimes, there is a tendency for the Assembly or Ministers to almost dictate from above. It is important, if we are to have something that is fit for purpose, that it learns from the experience of families and what works directly for teachers.

That is the commitment I give. We will ensure, then, that we move towards that system, which means, therefore, that the proper provision is made and proper awareness, recognition and training are put in place. I welcome the rest of the debate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, Minister. I call upon Chris Lyttle to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Mr Lyttle: It is amendment No 1, Principal Deputy Speaker. No?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes. I beg your pardon.

Mr Lyttle: No problem. Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. It is a privilege for me to respond to this motion. To begin with, I would like to read into the record a contribution that I have received from a parent of a child with autism in relation to the debate. It reads:

"Dear Chris,

Please keep pushing for mandatory autism training for teachers.

My son was diagnosed with autism in June of P6, and a number of his teachers were unable to recognise indicators earlier. I don't think they believed my concerns because he

is high-functioning. He was constantly punished for behaviour beyond his control. His confidence plummeted; he didn't want to go to school; his learning was affected. It was a dreadful year that could've been easier if people were trained, equipped and supported to respond.

Please keep pushing so that another family doesn't have to suffer the way we did. We had both to adjust to autism at home and fight for our son at school. Because of his autism, and the pattern-based way in which he learns, if he didn't know an answer on his post-primary transfer academic selection papers, he couldn't move on to the next because a pattern had been broken. He had to withdraw from the academic selection process for his mental health, and his choices were instantly reduced.

Our son is bright and been diagnosed as high-functioning but that doesn't matter as academic selection processes appear to make no allowance for a child who thinks differently. Their minds aren't standardised but they are meant to fit into standardised tests. They can't, so they're rejected and they have no choice. It is a disgrace.

I torture myself by wondering would it have been different if staff had autism training, understanding and support."

Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to ensure that that contribution from a parent of a child with autism has been heard today. The motion tabled by Pam Cameron MLA, the chairperson of the all-party group on autism, gives the Assembly the opportunity to recognise the unacceptable challenges and the breach of rights that children and families living with autism in Northern Ireland face; to recognise that many children and families living with autism in Northern Ireland feel unsupported and, indeed, failed by our education, statementing and health systems; to recognise the failure to fully implement the Autism Act and the autism strategy; and to recognise the need to train and resource our valued teaching staff to identify and respond to the additional needs of many pupils in our schools.

That opportunity has been taken by MLAs today. They have identified the centrality of autism teacher training and support to early intervention. They have recognised that the timeline for action has been lengthy and delivery is needed now and that, in the absence of this provision, not only educational attainment but children's mental health and

family finances are affected. They have also recognised that excellent resources exist, in the likes of the Middletown Centre for Autism, but that investment and mandated access is needed.

The motion tabled by Pam Cameron MLA, and the amendment tabled by Rachel Woods MLA and I, gives the Assembly the opportunity to support the widespread campaign calling on the Minister of Education to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers and teaching staff.

I ask Members to support the motion and amendment, and call on all Ministers with responsibility for implementing the Autism Act and strategy commitments to attend and brief the all-party Assembly group on autism as to how they will deliver on those commitments. Importantly, they should start with the training and resources needed by our teachers to deliver early intervention and educational opportunity for children with autism and additional needs in our community.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind the House that, as this is Catherine Kelly's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Ms C Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The number of children diagnosed with autism has risen by 20% in the last 10 years here. Boys are four times more likely than girls to be diagnosed, and, even more alarming, the rate of autism in more deprived communities is 58% higher than the average. Resources should reflect the higher prevalence of need in more deprived communities and among boys, but mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants is a basic first step.

Autism is a developmental issue, and teachers are in the business of developing children's potential. From personal experience, having worked in Naiscoil na gCrann in Omagh, I must say that helping children to fulfil their potential is very rewarding, and I want to take a moment to recognise the amazing work carried out in my constituency of West Tyrone by teachers and others, and organisations such as the National Autistic Society, west branch, in Omagh, who have been working for many years with children with autism and their families. West Tyrone has a high proportion of children and young people, many living in lower income families, but we do very well in education. Barriers can be

overcome, and potential can be developed. Our schools and teachers need proper support. We would not expect a plumber or electrician to do a proper job without the right set of tools. Give our teachers the right set of tools that allow them to understand the specific needs of children and young people with autism.

In addition, let us do something we often fail to do: let us listen to the children and young people themselves. I ask all Members to support amendment No 1 and to recognise the need for compulsory training for those in teacher-training colleges and undertaking a PGCE. We need to ensure a proper foundation of support and education for our children and young people, teachers and classroom assistants.

I thank all those who contributed to the debate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Let me be the first to congratulate the Member on making her maiden speech. It is sometimes intimidating to stand for the first time to do that, so congratulations to the Member. I call Mr William Humphrey to make the winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Humphrey: I congratulate you on your elevation to the position of Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish you well in that new role.

I thank my colleague the Member for South Antrim Pam Brown for securing the debate and, indeed, for the agreement that she has managed to achieve across the House. That does not always happen on this issue, which is, of course, hugely important in Members' constituencies.

There has been a 62% increase in the number of school-age children diagnosed with autism in Northern Ireland in the past five years. Department of Health research reveals the prevalence of autism in the classroom. As other Members said, it affects at least one child in each classroom. Therefore, the Programme for Government needs to deal with the issues. There needs to be real adjustments made to support autistic children and, more importantly, to allow teachers to carry out those adjustments.

If teachers are trained and given the skills, and if strategies are implemented, children will achieve their full potential. No child with autism should miss out on a full and supportive education. That would be hugely impactful on our classrooms, on our society and, most importantly, on each individual child affected.

The fact that one third of our children may be on a reduced timetable is totally unacceptable. Over 78% of those children are placed in mainstream education, and it is my view that all teaching staff in Northern Ireland should, over time, be trained.

Early intervention is more effective, more cost-effective and better for everyone involved. As with mental health, suicide and mental general well-being, a joined-up approach is required across Departments and with local government and government agencies.

I take the opportunity to thank all the principals, teachers and classroom assistants who work on autism in our schools across Northern Ireland day and daily. I have been dealing with a couple of cases recently in my office, where teachers are stressed to the max and principals do not know where to turn. We need to give clarity and certainty. We need to give those teachers the skills to allow them to carry out their roles and functions so that they can provide the education that those young people need and give them the classroom environment to allow not just them, as individuals, but their peers to have an education that will make a positive change to their life. Formalised training is needed, and we also need to provide protection for teachers and classroom assistants. As I said, that will positively enhance young people's education. Equity must be brought to the classroom through training for education professionals. Ulster's schoolchildren must have parity with those across the rest of the United Kingdom.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to some people who have been making a huge contribution, not just in the classroom but in the community. Like Mr Lyttle, I want to read into the record the name of a lady in my constituency. Ashleigh Spence established Snowflakes, a group that is working with young people from across greater Belfast and outside the city boundaries. It is a group of parents that has come together to work with young people on the autistic spectrum. They have done fantastic work. Ashleigh wrote to me, knowing that the debate was happening today, and asked me to make a number of points.

First, she asks how the training be delivered and by whom. She makes the point that it should be no less than the training provided to parents once diagnosis is confirmed. The initial classes are delivered by various specialists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists etc. They cover the reasoning behind understanding and strategies to identify managed behaviours. The classes are

delivered in three or four sessions. A one-day PowerPoint presentation is not going to be of any use to teachers or classroom assistants. She says that they need true understanding. I think that we would all agree with that.

She also asks how success will be measured. What impact will the training of teaching staff have on the allocation of additional classroom assistants and support for children in mainstream schooling? Will there be extra resource for schools to implement strategies learned via the training? If the teacher has the training and learns of a resource to help a child in a class — for example, a visual timetable, scheduling board or wobble cushion — will funds be available for teachers to purchase or obtain such items? All those issues are important. Extra resource is needed, and it is therefore important that we all take those issues on board.

I also pay tribute to that lady because she is also involved in my scout district, and I declare an interest as the president of North West Belfast District Scout Council. We have a scout group in our district that is specifically for young children who have ASD. This young lady works with that group, and she is doing valuable work. We need to support those people in the classroom.

5.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am really sorry —.

Mr Humphrey: We need to support those in the community who are working hard. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is not my afternoon. It is all right.

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, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the specific needs of pupils with autism in our schools; values and supports the role of all educators in ensuring pupils with autism have the best educational outcomes; and calls on the Minister

of Education to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers, teachers and classroom assistants.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while there is a change at the top Table.

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

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I have received notification from Mrs Dolores Kelly, a member of the Business Committee, of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm, in case the next item goes beyond that, under Standing Order 10 (3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 3 February 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00pm. — [Mrs D Kelly.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion was agreed to, so the Assembly may sit until 9.00 pm, if necessary.

Private Members' Business

Climate Emergency

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Dr Caoimhe Archibald to move the motion.

Dr Archibald: I am delighted that we have the —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. The Member will resume her seat. Can you confirm that you are moving the motion?

Dr Archibald: Yes, I can confirm that I am moving the motion. I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that we are facing climate breakdown and a biodiversity crisis, which are impacting here and now, and will affect all aspects of our lives in coming years; declares a climate emergency; and calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Minister for the Economy to implement urgently the commitments as agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement to include reviewing the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100; developing a new energy strategy that will set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero-carbon society; bringing forward a climate change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning; establishing an independent environmental protection agency to oversee this work and ensure targets are met; developing an economic strategy that will support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a green new deal; creating a plan to eliminate plastic pollution; and closing down the renewable heat incentive scheme and replacing it with a scheme that cuts carbon emissions effectively.

Dr Archibald: I am delighted —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Please resume your seat; there is some protocol to go through. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Three amendments were selected, but one has since been withdrawn. In accordance with convention, an extra 15 minutes has been allocated to the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes in which to make a winding-

up speech. The proposers of the amendments will have 10 minutes to move and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

I now call on Dr Archibald to open the debate on the motion.

Dr Archibald: Third time lucky. I am delighted that we have the opportunity to debate this important motion. I move the motion and will support amendment No 1. On that, I acknowledge colleagues Clare and Rachel in the Green Party. I am grateful that we were able to work together on this. It sends a positive message when we can collaborate cross-party on big important issues that will affect us all.

For many years, the science and evidence on the breakdown of our climate have been abundantly clear. The earth's temperature is rising, causing our polar ice sheets to melt and collapse and our sea levels to rise, heat up and acidify. We are all witness to the increasing numbers of extreme weather events that cause greater human and ecological damage around the world. There is, perhaps, no more striking example of that than the bush fires in Australia. They have caused the deaths of hundreds of millions of precious and endangered animals whose species might never recover and devastated the land and plant life. We send our solidarity to those suffering the real and present consequences of climate breakdown in Australia and around the world where extreme weather events will not get the same media attention.

The scientific evidence is also crystal clear on the cause of global warming. Carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases pumped into our atmosphere are rapidly warming our planet. It is also clear that this is a direct result of industrialisation, endless economic expansion and resource consumption and other human behaviours. The rise in global temperatures between 2006 and 2015 was greater than in the 50 years between 1850 and 1900. Since the pre-industrial era, the earth has warmed by at least 1°. If we want to have any chance of a safe and stable climate future, we must halt that warming in its tracks. In 2020, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we have just 10 years to reduce our global carbon emissions by at least 50% to have any chance of limiting warming to 1.5°. That is our target: if we miss it and even succeed in limiting warming to 2°, that difference of 0.5° could change the world irrevocably. It would expose millions more people to heatstroke and desertification; it could displace millions more

climate refugees, as sea levels rise further and food and other essential resources become more scarce. Sea levels will rise, with more flooding in vulnerable areas. That 0.5° will see our air more polluted, while our oceans warm further, destroying marine wildlife and coral reefs.

The essential point is this: we have no margin for error. Any error or lack of application or the slightest failure to recognise the emergency around us has profound human and wider implications. As legislators and those charged with protecting public safety, our natural environment, our biodiversity and our climate for future generations, we must move now with urgency — all of us. To do that, we need rapid and radical action to reduce our emissions. We all have an individual and moral responsibility to confront climate breakdown and the disfigurement of the natural world, but meeting the scale of that challenge will require systemic change and unprecedented government action. By declaring a climate emergency, we are telling the public and the world that we recognise the scale of policy change and cooperation needed to deliver radical and consistent climate action. We are saying, "We are ready to meet the challenge of limiting global warming to 1.5°". The purpose of the motion is to ensure the Assembly and the Ministers responsible in the new Executive urgently implement the commitments on climate action and environment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. However, to be clear, I do not believe that the actions listed should be or can be the sum total of our response to the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis; they are a starting point.

Detractors of the radical policy that we need to deliver across all Departments will deploy tired and exhausted excuses for inaction. They may ask, "Is this not too costly?". To this we must say, "We cannot afford not to act". The current unprecedented bush fires in Australia are likely to result in a cost of tens of billions of pounds. The cost of dealing with extreme weather events and the negative impact on health, infrastructure, food security and our ecosystems is incalculable. Central banks around the world now recognise the systemic and unprecedented risk to the global economy and the financial system. Perhaps the most vocal of those actors is Mark Carney, former Governor of the Bank of England, who starkly warned the global financial industry:

"Those that fail to adapt will cease to exist."

We have the choice of allowing total economic damage, or we can embrace the prospect of a

just transition and roll out climate action in a way that protects vulnerable communities, improves resilience through afforestation, transforms our public services and improves human health. Moving towards a zero-carbon society, we must introduce secure high-skilled employment to harness the world-leading potential of our renewable energy resources. That can create clean energy to power communities, eliminate fuel poverty and save hundreds of millions of pounds on annual fossil fuel imports.

At the core of any economic strategy going forward must be a green new deal and the principles of a just transition. A green new deal will support other key commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', including addressing regional imbalance. We now have the real opportunity to fundamentally change our economy, improve productivity and direct resources on the basis of demonstrable and objective need. That is the vision of a just transition in this part of our island: confronting climate change in a way that improves the quality of our lives and ensures that we live within our planetary boundaries. To that end, Sinn Féin wants to see the establishment of a just transition commission that will detail the economic and legislative changes needed to reach the IPCC 1.5° target, while protecting the lives and livelihoods of communities. We need to end dependence on fossil fuels and move towards renewable energy sources. Sinn Féin has called for a moratorium on the issuing of any new fossil-fuel licences on the island of Ireland, as well as a complete ban on fracking.

Here in the North, we have met and surpassed the 40% target for the production of electricity from renewable sources by 2020. We now need a strategy that will rapidly build on that progress with programmes to replace the renewable schemes that are no longer active. The renewables transition must also be supported by improving energy efficiency through an ambitious retrofitting programme and amending planning regulations to ensure carbon-neutral buildings.

5.45 pm

We want to see climate action legislation that places targets on a statutory footing and obligates Departments, public authorities and public bodies to put in place strategies to meet emission reduction targets. An independent environmental protection agency must ensure that those targets are met, provide support and advice and, where necessary, deliver enforcement. We need policy that will both encourage change by consumers and obligate

corporations and big polluters to reduce their emissions and move towards renewable sources. The same is true in tackling pollution, waste and toxic plastic waste, in particular, through an extended producer responsibility scheme.

All the actions outlined will be the initial steps in our response to the climate emergency. It is necessary that we take those steps immediately and with urgency. We also need to ensure that our actions are joined up and collaborative. We need to act on an all-island basis, as climate and environment recognise no borders. We need to continue to uphold and work to EU environment regulatory frameworks and contribute to wider targets.

In summing up, I thank all those who provided briefings for today's debate, including SONI, NIFDA, NIE, the Royal College of Nursing, RSPB and others. The range of those who provided briefings shows the cross-cutting nature of the impact of the climate emergency. I also thank the Assembly Research and Information Service for its briefing.

Finally, I pay tribute to activists across Ireland and, in particular, our young people who have joined the school strikes over the past year. They stand alongside activists around the world who have ensured that the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis will no longer be ignored. They have placed the emergency facing us at the heart of the political agenda, exactly where it needs to be. In their name, and for future generations, we cannot let them down. I commend the motion and amendment No 1 and hope for all-party support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Miss Rachel Woods to move amendment No 1.

Miss Woods: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "crisis" and insert:

"declares a climate emergency; and calls on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement by commencing, as a matter of urgency, a review of the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100 and to ensure that targets are met; and further calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin immediately work to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of best

practice, that will be appointed within 12 months."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Miss Woods: Members do not need me to tell them that we have very little time to act on the twin crises of climate disruption and biodiversity loss. The UN scientific consensus is that we have 12 years to arrest carbon emissions. Meanwhile, another UN science body tells us that one million species are at risk of annihilation. Members do not need me to tell them that the climate is becoming increasingly chaotic, and Members do not need me to tell them that a collapse in biodiversity will be accompanied by the collapse of humanity.

Leading climate scientists have warned that there are less than a dozen years left for global warming to be kept at a maximum of 1.5 degrees, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people. I do not have time, during this debate today, to go into the double injustice that those who will be the worst and most affected, short and long term, are those in the global south; those who did not cause this but who are having to leave their land because it is uninhabitable; those who literally have to move to another island because their current home will be under water in a few years.

Given the magnitude of this issue and its severity, there is a role to play at every level of society and government, and it should be the top priority of this Government. Accelerating our pace of change is no simple task, and it will be a challenge for everyone at times of supposed austerity and cuts, but it is a challenge that we need to rise to. There is no app for this. There will not be a wholly technological solution to fix this issue. We must fix it at every level, from the home to the farm, to how we grow and consume our food, to how we travel, what we wear and up to our entire economic structure.

A crucial part of responding to the climate emergency is the decarbonisation of our economy; that is, the phased and planned transition beyond fossil fuels. What is needed is a transformational adaptation of our economy and society. We need to take a leadership role in bringing the importance of climate breakdown and energy transition to the forefront.

The motion as amended can give us five steps. First, we can declare a climate emergency, mobilising the resources and attentions that this

deserves. The second recognises that we are actually in a climate and biodiversity crisis, leading to detailed action plans on how that can be managed. This needs to include the voices of and cooperation from everyone at every level. The third calls on the Executive to live up to the promises in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, crucially introducing a climate change Act as Northern Ireland still does not have one. The fourth reviews the Executive's strategies to reduce emissions in line with the Paris Accord and ensures that those targets are met. Finally, it calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin to work immediately to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of best practice. That agency should be appointed within 12 months as we desperately need it if we are to meet any of these commitments. We need legislation with teeth, and we need an agency that has teeth, is properly resourced and is able to respond and lead on matters, which is why we are calling for one to be introduced as a matter of urgency.

We have much to do to get up to speed on plastic pollution, marine waste, illegal dumping, air quality and air pollution, transport and long-term sustainable planning. We need to tackle our biodiversity crisis as part of a climate breakdown as the two are intertwined. Environmental and natural mitigations to climate change are available and should be utilised. Northern Ireland is on target to go beyond the goal of generating 40% of its electricity from renewable energy by 2020, yet levels of greenhouse gas emissions are increasing, and we have the highest levels of car use, air that is literally killing us and the highest levels of fuel poverty in the UK and Europe. As many Members know, 42% of households in Northern Ireland are in fuel poverty, which is a terrible blight on our society where people have to choose between heating and eating. We should all be ashamed of that figure. There is an answer, and that is why we need a just transition beyond fossil fuels as that is the only legitimate way to respond to climate breakdown: a fundamental change to our system.

A just transition means that no one will be left behind. Governments must cooperate with trade unions, industry and local communities to ensure that good quality jobs are available to workers in the new low-carbon green economy. We can retrofit homes, street by street, and ensure that any new houses are of the best quality and are as efficient as they can be. We can train and upskill the labour market, and we have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in coordinating such moves. We have an

opportunity to lead on quality rather than focusing on quantity.

pA just transition strategy not only is recognised in the preamble to the Paris agreement but is growing as an inclusive, realistic and positive approach to tackling climate breakdown. In September last year, for example, a just transition commission was established in Scotland, and the Spanish Government have committed over €250 million to compensate, retrain and offer early retirement to displaced workers and their communities. All those could serve as possible models for Northern Ireland so that we can address climate breakdown and the various transformations in different sectors and areas of our lives connected to creating a low-carbon Northern Irish economy and society.

The just transition approach has been supported and promoted by trade unions, businesses, climate advocates and environmentalists as a way to ensure climate policies include economic and, especially, employment considerations and that any low-carbon transition prioritises jobs that are well paid, decent employment and in the new green economy. It proposes bringing together everyone in a social dialogue to formulate and drive the plans, policies and investments that are needed for a fast and fair transition to a low-carbon economy. The transition to a green economy will be an opportunity for more jobs, warmer homes and new businesses, and will therefore be a positive step as opposed to being something that we begrudgingly have to do.

There are many voices that urge us not to do anything too radical. Why spend money on cutting emissions when we are only a tiny part of a huge global economy? Let the others do the hard work, and we can follow later. Apart from the moral bankruptcy of that argument, if we do not invest in a low-carbon economy now, we will be left behind in pretty short order. With no carbon targets and poor environmental regulation on our businesses, we will all wake up one morning and realise that they can no longer compete in a green economy. That will not be their fault; it will be ours for failing to provide the leadership that is needed now. A very wise man once said that a roof should be fixed when it is sunny, not when it is raining. The time to act is now, not some time down the road when the costs of doing something about it are dire and the negative consequences of inaction are high. This is not a "keep calm and carry on" situation. It is no longer business as usual. We owe it to our citizens and our young people to act now by declaring an emergency

and showing leadership and action. This issue is above party politics. It is far too serious.

I will finish with the words of one young person who has provided more leadership in the past year than all the world's politicians together. In Davos last year, Greta Thunberg said:

"Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Mr William Irwin to move amendment No 2.

Mr Irwin: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "years" and insert:

"notes that the 'New Decade New Approach' paper was tabled by HM Government, in conjunction, where relevant, with the Government of the Republic of Ireland and contained within appendix 2 a possible outline of a Programme for Government that listed a number of potential measures on the subject of climate change but which have not been agreed as a final Programme of Government by the parties within the Executive; and calls on the Executive to use an evidence-based approach to balance the demands of our growing population whilst ensuring the protection of our natural resources for future generations, as they work to construct a final Programme for Government."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Thank you, Mr Irwin. You will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and a further five minutes at the end in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak in the debate will have five minutes. The Assembly should note that amendment No 1 and amendment No 2 are mutually exclusive, so if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

Mr Irwin: I speak as a farmer and as someone who is fully committed, first, by my personal desire and motivation and, secondly, of course, by very strict environmental guidelines to be a custodian of the countryside. That is a role that I take very seriously. I am joined in that role by many thousands of other farmers across Northern Ireland who also farm the land and take great care of the environment. That work is of the utmost importance. It cannot be

overstated from an environmental perspective. The work, which, as I said, is very tightly controlled and monitored, serves the very important purpose of protecting our ecosystems while also providing vital food to sustain our population in Northern Ireland and, through exports, populations across the UK and further afield.

I am not a climate alarmist, and I do not promote alarmism. I say that because I have seen, over many years, all types of different weather patterns, which have given benefit and concern in equal measure. The farmer will agree with me wholeheartedly on that. However, I do not dispute that industrialisation has given cause to an increase in disruptive weather patterns in the global context. In Northern Ireland, as we know, farming the land and relying heavily on weather systems instils in the farmer an acute understanding of the environment. Farmers know a great deal about the capabilities of the environment and, indeed, its resilience.

The motion leads with the statement that we are "facing climate breakdown". Everyone understands that, across the world, there is a growing frequency of climate events that are causing great distress and concern and are upsetting the lives of people in a very serious way. We should all be concerned about that. I want to see the environment be protected in the strongest possible terms. However, I want to see everyone playing a part in that response in a measured and non-alarmist fashion. Consumerism is driving global industrialisation, so it is consumers and their habits that will, to a significant degree, dictate the pace of change.

Recent statistics on global emissions point a finger very firmly towards China and other nations with a high reliance on coal and fossil fuels. The UK, by contrast, currently contributes only 1%, owing to very proactive steps taken to reduce carbon emissions, and that is to be welcomed. However, it is somewhat negatively offset by the UK's high-import carbon footprint for goods that are bought in, for instance, from China.

Farmers have been leading the way on protecting the countryside. Financial margins for farmers are so tight and competitive that their farming operations must be managed on the strictest and most efficient terms. A few decades ago, thousands of farmers, each with their own sowing, fertilising and harvesting operations, used smaller vehicles and equipment and took many trips to complete a task. In 2020, we have a limited number of contracted services that use high-tech

machinery and much more capable equipment that covers greater areas much more efficiently. Food products must meet the most rigid production standards, meaning that farmers cannot cut corners. Farmers are encouraged to make their farm as clean and traceable as possible. That, as I said, is bound by strict protocol. That type of responsibility and custodianship, if anything, needs to be replicated across other production sectors and, indeed, instilled in our general population.

I mentioned wider society needing to care for the environment. Take a look at our roadside verges. They are a disgrace, strewn with litter and Coke bottles. Our hedgerows are the same. Everything looks unsightly. That is certainly damaging our environment. Farmers are sick of litter being blown across their fields and causing risk to grazing animals. Hundreds of thousands of plastic bottles litter our roadsides, along with coffee cups and takeaway packaging.

Why is it acceptable for people to hurl their packaging into the verge and for our councils to spend heavily on removing this unsightly mess, costing ratepayers more and more each year? This is only one area, but it shows that responsibility is key to this debate.

6.00 pm

Impacting global emissions positively will, of course, take more positive action across the globe, but it will also take a very real effort by consumers to use resources much more wisely and make choices much more sustainably. The amendment I speak on takes a more measured, reasoned approach to dealing with what is truly a global problem, and it is important that the Assembly and Executive take actions that are very well assessed and thought out and balanced by protecting both our environment and the livelihoods of people in Northern Ireland.

The motion calls for Departments to simply rush ahead and implement actions "urgently". This is not how it should be done. Actions should be well thought out and need to be sustainable. Proposals and policies need to be tailored to the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland. I do not support knee-jerk reactions, which will do more harm than good to the well-being of the economy of Northern Ireland in the here and now.

I fully support the need for the Executive and the Executive parties to agree a financial Programme for Government that can work

effectively on measures that, as the amendment says, use an evidence-based approach that will continue to see our environment protected not only in the here and now but for future generations. As I said, I speak as someone who has endeavoured to care for the environment for decades, and I want to see —.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member outlined the issues he has with the language in the motion, and I will bring to his attention some issues that some of us might have with the language in the amendment, specifically when we talk about a:

"possible outline of a Programme for Government which listed a number of potential measures"

with regard to climate change. Yes, the deal was tabled by the two Governments, but it was signed up to by the two biggest parties, and, as I recall, the DUP was quick out of the blocks to do so. It was the basis on which five parties, including my own, went into the Executive in good faith. Do we now see the DUP distancing itself from the agreement, even the uncontroversial aspects, such as commitments to tackling climate change, —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Mr Durkan: — or an attempt to water it down?

Mr Irwin: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not believe so. I think these issues need to be thought out properly and looked at in great detail before decisions are rushed in to.

As I said, I speak as someone who has endeavoured to care for the environment for decades, and I want to see people with a new-found respect for the environment around them. One aspect of any climate response must be a renewed sense of understanding of how our daily actions impact on the environment. As a Province, we can control only what is within our gift to control. It is, therefore, clear that we can, in the very near future, make decisions in a balanced and measured way that continue to protect our green and pleasant land and, in fact, create new opportunities.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document, of course, takes a wide and encompassing approach to the running of Northern Ireland. Part 2, paragraph 23 of the deal says:

"By April 2020, informed by a detailed stakeholder engagement process, the Executive will publish a new strategic level outcomes-based Programme for Government aligned to a multi-year budget with a sustained approach to public finances and prioritised investment in infrastructure and public services. The new Programme will be aimed at delivering lasting changes and improvements in key priority areas and will include measures aimed at: removing paramilitarism, ending sectarianism, transforming health and social care, reforming education, ensuring households have access to good quality, affordable and sustainable homes, addressing climate change, creating good jobs and protecting workers' rights."

Further, it states:

"The new Programme for Government will be supported by an Anti-poverty strategy; an Economic/Industrial strategy; and an Investment strategy."

In addressing climate change, as the amendment suggests, actions on this issue must be complementary to our ambitions in the Programme for Government. It cannot be in competition with our objectives as an Assembly. For instance, an economic and industrial strategy must be positive and forward-looking but also respectful and meaningful in protecting our environment. This is where our efforts need to be directed, with full engagement from the industry, to arrive at a sustainable and desirable set of objectives to ensure that our Province does its share to lessen the impacts of climate change.

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

Mr Irwin: That is why, through our amendment, I encourage Executive parties to ensure that every effort is made to construct and agree a Programme for Government that is ambitious, that promotes and encourages economic and social enhancement, and that also contains measured approaches to meet the challenges of climate change and its effects.

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

Mr Irwin: There are challenging times, and it is up to the House to meet these challenges.

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

Mr Irwin: I come up with solutions, so I propose the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This is Pat Catney's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption, provided, of course, that you do provoke an interruption yourself.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I express my gratitude to the Speaker of the House for his role in going back and securing the funding for a little school called St John the Baptist. The school enhancement programme brought the Minister out to west Belfast to visit that school. For me, that was a wonderful example of how and in what way this place is meant to work. As the old advert says, "We're better together".

This is my maiden speech, 1,168 days since the people of Lagan Valley elected me to the Chamber. I come from the world of business. I got my first job in the bar at the age of 15, and I have worked ever since. I was elected to this Chamber to work, and it is disgraceful that we have not been able to work whilst people in our communities are suffering, whether from poverty, mental health or lack of a hospital bed. We can never let such action occur again.

I am, however, very glad that I have the opportunity to use my maiden speech — sounds strange when you say "maiden speech" at the age that I am at, but anyhow *[Laughter]* — to speak on this incredibly important motion. I am particularly glad that the motion brings the issue of the climate emergency to the Assembly Floor so soon after we have been able to reform. This is not only because of the devastation the climate emergency will cause to Northern Ireland but because, in the past, many in the Chamber have expressed some curious views when it comes to climate change. Even former Ministers for the Environment have expressed some foolish views denying the existence of climate change. I hope that, in supporting the motion, the Assembly shows all the people of Northern Ireland that this really is a new decade and a new approach.

The climate emergency impacts on a wide range of areas. That is why our plan for tackling it needs to be broad and far-reaching. These plans will not only see benefits in our environment. A move to a greener energy supply creates a more secure energy supply that is less vulnerable to global tensions that we cannot control. A greener economy not only cuts down waste but cuts down on cost, allowing our businesses to take home more of

their hard-earned profits — probably to pay the rates. A greener public transport system not only reduces our emissions but creates a more connected and accessible society for us all that boosts productivity, innovation and well-being, from our rural towns to our modern cities. On a personal note, I would add that a lot of the infrastructure already exists, including the disused railway line that runs between Lisburn and Antrim, which I believe we should try to open up. All right, Minister, I got that in. *[Laughter.]* A wide-ranging plan of action does not have to be a complicated one. That has been shown by our colleagues in Dublin, who have committed to get one million electric vehicles on the road and 500,000 homes insulated and to move to 70% of power from renewable resources by 2030. I welcome the UK's ambitious goal of net zero emissions by 2050 but, to achieve it, we need to develop our list of simple and real waypoints towards that goal so that the people can keep us in check and moving forward every day. I hope to see Ministers bring forward some such proposals as soon as possible.

I want to highlight just one more policy. I was delighted to see the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency included in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. An independent EPA is vital to our achieving our goals for a cleaner and greener environment. I believe it to be so important that I made an election promise to bring forward a private Member's Bill to establish an independent EPA if it was not included in the Programme for Government. It is also a development that the SDLP has been calling for for a very long time, having first been proposed by my colleague Alex Attwood. I think that I speak for all of us and all our citizens when I say that I am glad that everyone else has caught up with this idea.

Over Christmas, I welcomed my third granddaughter into this world. It has been a time of great joy in our family, and I look at her and all my granddaughters and see the potential of all that is to come after me.

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

Mr Catney: As a Member of this Chamber and as a grandfather, I must do all I can to make sure that the next generation can grow up in a world that allows its potential to flourish, and that is why I beg you all to support the motion and amendment No 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This is also John Stewart's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, and I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption, provided he does not provoke an interruption.

Mr Stewart: I might be happy to take an intervention at some stage.

What a privilege to follow the Member for Lagan Valley, who I had the privilege to be elected with, along with a few others, in 2017. We have waited 1,168 days for this moment, and what a wait it has been. It is a moment that, at some stage in the last three years, I honestly thought would never come, and I am so pleased that we are here today.

It is 20 years since I sat — roughly in this seat — with my Carrickfergus Grammar School politics class. When we were at school, many of us came to visit the "Big House", and I remember saying to my teacher at the time, Miss McKinley, how I would love to do this for real one day and represent the people of East Antrim. It is an immense honour to stand here today and give this maiden speech representing each and every one of them. It is a responsibility that I will never take for granted.

East Antrim, as I am sure you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, is the centre of the universe and the nicest constituency in Northern Ireland. I think that you will give me a bit of leeway to reflect on that for a second. It is full of our tourist gems, the gateway to the Causeway coast and a drive that has been described by many as the nicest anywhere in the world. It is a constituency with a wonderful blend of rural communities and coastal towns and villages, from Carrickfergus to Carnlough, from Greenisland to Glenarm, from the Glynn to Glenoe, and if there was any upside to the hiatus of the last two years, it was the ability to represent the people of East Antrim daily on the constituency matters that matter to them.

I am a proud, progressive, liberal unionist; some would probably say too progressive at times. I have a business background and spent seven years in local government. My grandfather was a B-Special, my dad was an RUC officer, and I am a member of Her Majesty's Reserve army. Many in the Chamber will have fundamental differences with me on our past and how we see it, and probably on the future as well, and we will debate those out in a respectful manner, but there are many issues that we will agree on, whether it is on housing, health, mental health, education, growing the economy or the housing crisis we

face. There are hundreds of issues that each and every one of us in the Chamber can get behind each other on and agree on. Those are bread-and-butter issues and real-life issues, and that is why we are all here. That is what we agree on.

The climate change emergency is also one of those issues. It is not only massive here but across the world and, as the spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party on climate change, I am happy to support amendment No 1 and the specific asks of the original motion, specifically Northern Ireland-specific legislation in the form of an all-encompassing climate change Act, Northern Ireland targets on emissions and the need for an independent environment protection agency, in addition to our party's commitment to see a zero net carbon future by 2035.

None of us in the Chamber is a climate scientist. The only sensible thing for us to do, in understanding the science behind climate change, is to follow the advice of the overwhelming number of scientific experts. The science behind this — the link between CO₂ and rising temperatures, along with the associated risks of burning fossil fuels — have been well established for decades, but the issue has probably only been in the political agenda since the late '80s. It took a politician with a scientific background and, like it or not, a lot of courage to spell out the implications. They said:

"I spoke about the global threat of climate change. I set out the magnitude of the challenge we face. Until recently, we have always thought that whatever progress humanity makes, our planet would stay much the same. That may no longer be true."

An inconvenient truth perhaps, but it was not Al Gore; it was Margaret Thatcher speaking in October 1989. That was over 30 years ago, and, since then, the narrative has evolved greatly, with virtually all developed countries around the world having implemented essential legislation to help combat the causes and effects of climate change.

6.15 pm

There has been a lot of talk in the Assembly about a fresh start and the feeling that we need to not rake over the past and be partisan for the sake of it. However, as a new legislator, I feel I need to ask this question: why are we the only devolved region of the UK that does not have

an independent EPA and climate change-specific targets?

Looking back to the period of devolution post 2007, there seems an obvious conclusion to be made. While officials in various Departments, local government and NGOs did a sterling job on climate change, there has been a severe lack of political leadership. As a result, the last Stormont Executive was the only Administration in the UK and Ireland not to have produced its own laws to cut carbon emissions. I am not saying, Mr Speaker, that legislation is a panacea to all the problems — and there is an awful lot of virtue signalling on this issue — but the impression has been given for too long that Northern Ireland does not take the issue seriously, and that is unfortunate to say the least.

What we need can be summed up in two words: mitigation and adaptation; mitigation meaning addressing the causes of climate change — many of them have been alluded to today, and we will get into the nuts and bolts of that later; and adaptation —

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

Mr Stewart: — meaning the necessary changes to reduce and negate the effects of climate change, such as building sea walls and other things in our coastal communities. Neither of these will be easy, and they are not meant to be easy. They cannot be done in a silo mentality but, rather, with a cross-departmental and collegiate approach. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Now, we will have a third maiden speech in a row. This is Andrew Muir's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will start by welcoming you to the role and thanking everyone throughout the Chamber for the welcome that has been provided to me. In the short period since I became an MLA, one thing that has become acutely apparent to me is that, whilst these institutions are supported by structures, it is relationships that form their foundation. If the last three years have taught us anything, it should be the importance of relationships as the way to strengthen the foundation of these institutions.

Talking of relationships, this brings me to the reason why I am here, namely the elevation of my predecessor to the House of Commons. My relationship with Stephen Farry started nearly 30 years ago in the early 1990s, when we were both young-ish and I delivered leaflets and canvassed for Stephen's election to council. I have deeply admired his dedication, insight, integrity and courtesy shown to all. I was, therefore, absolutely delighted to see Stephen elected as my Member of Parliament, and honoured to have been selected by the Alliance Party as his replacement.

Stephen Farry follows in the footsteps of Lady Sylvia Hermon, who personified North Down in so many ways for the 18 years that she served as MP. She was respectful, principled and passionately committed to representing and reaching out to all communities. Stephen Farry and Lady Sylvia Hermon say everything about why I love north Down. I am so immensely proud to represent the people and the place where I was born, grew up and live.

While some may not think of it as remotely enjoyable, one way that I get to enjoy north Down is by running many miles amongst the wonderful natural environment that we are so lucky to have, but, Members, as we have seen in recent times, we cannot take our environment for granted. The impact of climate change has already taken effect on the most vulnerable across the globe. The risk of climate catastrophe is ever-increasing, especially if we do not take action now. I am, therefore, glad that one of the first motions to be debated in this place during this mandate is about such a topic. At this point, I should declare for the record that I am a former employee of Translink and councillor on Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Whilst I welcome the commitments given in the motion and in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, if we are to genuinely declare a climate emergency, I suggest we must be prepared to respond accordingly. The commitments given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document should be the bare minimum, and, as a result, I cannot support amendment No 2. The independent Environmental Protection Agency must be urgently established to bring us into line with the rest of the British Isles and Europe. It must have real teeth and real freedom to pursue its remit with vigour. The targets in the Climate Change Act must stretch us in ways that we have never envisaged. Petrol and diesel cars need to be phased out. Plans to expand the Sydenham bypass to three lanes need to be

shelved. The way we move around has to change.

A step change in how we produce and use energy is essential. It should not just be about reduce, reuse and recycle but rather reduce, reuse, recycle and rethink — rethinking everything we do about waste. We need a collective effort involving everyone at every level of society and government. It would be great if this were the first issue to be addressed by the citizens' assembly.

I believe that we are up to the challenge. As Alan Turing — a personal hero of mine — once said:

"We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done."

Plenty does need to be done, but I believe that together we can do it.

I am wearing a dicky bow. Hopefully, that is a tradition that has been set for maiden speeches. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Frew: How refreshing it is to hear so many maiden speeches today. We should all be thankful that we are here debating these issues. We have been out of this place for far too long, and it has been a disgrace.

With this seat comes a lot of responsibility. With a five-party Executive now in place, the Assembly becomes much more important and critical, as does the work in our scrutiny Committees. We need an era that we have never had. We need the Executive to step up with courage and bring to us an era of decision like we have never had.

MLAs must hold their nerve not only in scrutiny but in difficult decisions that must be taken for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. That has been lacking for many years in this place. It is not good enough that this place functions; we need decisions to be taken and taken quickly.

For us to be able to make decisions, we have to be informed. We have to ensure that, when we make decisions, they are the right ones for the people of Northern Ireland. I worry and fear for the state of our Civil Service and some Departments in this place.

Do not get me wrong: there is some great expertise around Civil Service-land, and there are some shiny, fine cogs in what I believe is a broken machine. It should be our task to make

sure that that machine is fixed and running smoothly. I cite three examples, because if we are to make tough decisions on these big political issues — one of them being climate change — we need to make sure that we are taking the right steps.

I hark back to the decision that Secretary of State Karen Bradley made, bringing in the Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) (No. 2) Act, whereby the tariffs of the RHI scheme were stripped. That brought great hardship to recipients, the farming community in particular, especially poultry farmers, whereby they are facing a dilemma such as the industry has never faced before.

Are we going to leave them hanging in that position? It might be good, sound political policy for any party to want to scrap the RHI scheme but, before you make that decision, have you read the Cornwall review? Have you read the Buglass review? Have you even read the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee "raw deal" report? Before we make any decisions in this place, and before the Executive make decisions, we need to be informed about what has taken place, and I am not sure that any of us are in that position. None of us has yet shone a light into the energy branch as to what went on in the years before we got to this place.

I also suggest that Members look up the work that the Economy Committee did on the Northern Ireland-only ROC, where I believe that Department officials tried to mislead the Committee on what Whitehall and other Ministers in Westminster were expecting of us at that time.

I go on to my third point. If we want to have a sound energy policy, we need a suitable system operator for Northern Ireland (SONI). I do not believe for one moment that we have one at present. I believe that SONI is a shell of its previous self and is not capable of making sound energy decisions on behalf of the consumers of Northern Ireland. Before we go making energy policy, we need to make sure that the machine below it — the machine that will implement it — is capable of conducting that policy as we see fit. It could be party policy to have one wish or another, but unless we are informed and given the correct reports and the correct information, we are in a very bad place. I fear for the future if we do not get it right this time, because we will get only one more crack at it.

Mr McGuigan: I can confirm that, even though this is not my maiden speech, today is a potentially historic day for the Assembly. If we

support the motion and amendment No. 1, we will join a handful of legislatures across the world that have done what is long overdue.

More importantly, we will have collectively pledged to tackle the climate emergency. We will be resolving to confront it with urgency and focus. We stand today not just recognising that our climate is changing but knowing that it has already changed profoundly. Human activity to date has set in motion emissions that have radically altered the delicate balance that creates and sustains life on this planet.

Today is perhaps not the time to document the staggering loss of biodiversity that has already unfolded or to lament the rapid melting of ice caps, destruction of habitat or the growth of barren deserts around the world. It may not even be the time to bear witness to the extraordinary destructive weather events that we have seen unfold in front of us over the past number of weeks and months in places such as Australia and the United States. Indeed, on this island, increasing numbers of severe storm events continue to reach our shores.

Today is the time to talk about action. Real, meaningful and radical climate action is required to halt the advance of climate breakdown. The steps we must take should not be seen as a threat or something that we must endure as a hardship. In fact, the opposite is true. The motion calls for a "just transition" to a cleaner, more efficient and more cooperative society. It calls for a "green new deal".

Of course, it will involve transformative change, but change for the good. First and foremost, we must change the ways in which we consume energy, including heating and powering our homes and communities and through our travel habits. How much time in our life is spent pent up in cars in endless traffic jams, roads full beyond capacity, when we could be using a modern and efficient public transport system? A society over-reliant on cars is a society embracing the least efficient and most harmful mode of transport. It is a society ignoring the social, health and transport benefits of active travel. I say that not to put the blame or the responsibility for taking action on hard-pressed families living in communities with next to no decent public transport facilities, cycle lanes or greenways in rural communities in constituencies such as mine. We all have a part to play. By passing the motion, we in the Assembly will have a moral obligation to assist people in playing their part.

I welcome the attendance of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I am

disappointed that the Minister for Infrastructure has just left. This debate is about lots of responsibilities for Minister Poots, but it is also about other Ministers on the Executive coming together and making collective decisions that will help move the situation forward.

Infrastructure, for example, will be key in that. I am a cyclist, and I like nothing more than talking about riding my bicycle. I was checking my Strava app — any athletes, runners or cyclists will know what Strava is — just before the debate. In the past seven years, I have cycled over 83,000 kilometres. Unfortunately, most of those 83,000 kilometres is cycling in the pursuit of leisure or sport, not in the pursuit of active transport or commuting because of the infrastructure where I live. That is the kind of thing that we need to change. Whether in this city or others, we need a separate cycle infrastructure that allows people to feel safe travelling to and from their work.

We need an effective transport system, we need safe passing laws, and we need all our new developments to take a keen eye to active travel. We need an innovative and modern public transport authority for the North, and we need strong and effective active travel legislation. We need a strategy and funding to rapidly grow and decarbonise our public transport fleet. T

The action that we need will involve a change in all our public services. Powering our health system with clean energy, retrofitting homes to conserve heat and money and educating young people on the benefits of more sustainable lifestyles will improve the quality of life for everyone while creating a greener and fairer economy. All this must be led by government. People cannot make the changes without being given the alternatives. I welcome all the commitments that people made today on the motion and amendment No 1, and I welcome the commitments and the promises made in 'New Decade, New Approach', including the commitment to an Act and an independent environmental protection agency. After today's debate, hopefully, this will be the task of all of us, and it will be our duty to implement it.

6.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): In the interests of balance, I call Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: So, the Northern Ireland Assembly is going to declare a climate emergency. That is it sorted, then — wow. What is meant by the Northern Ireland Assembly declaring a climate

emergency? Are we going to switch off the lights and bring in the candles? Are we going to send Minister Poots home not in his limo but on a bicycle? What nonsense are we talking here? Phraseology like this: this pitiful Assembly, which cannot even sort itself out, is going to declare a climate emergency. What turbocharged virtue signalling — that is all it is.

It is not that the climate does not change. The debate is this: what causes it to change? Now, I do not know: maybe we have some climate deniers in our midst. Maybe they deny the medieval warm period. Maybe it never happened. If it did, what are we going to blame? Factories? I do not think so. Cows? I do not think so. Electricity? Fossil fuels? I do not think so. It happened, and then, a few centuries later, in the 17th century, for 10 years during that century, the River Thames froze over as the climate cycle switched the other way.

Climate change happens, but the question is this: why are we working ourselves up into a frenzy in the belief that this puny Assembly — the puny man — in some way can stop the forces of nature? Yet, that is what we are doing. We are all getting, it seems, on the bandwagon of Greta this and Greta that. Remember Al Gore? Remember the great hero of climate change? In 2009, he, with great solemnity, told the world that, in five to seven years, there would be no ice at the North Pole.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. Further to his point, he said that single, small entities cannot affect change by standing up and resisting larger things. Why does the Member bother to intervene in a debate like this, if that is the way he feels? *[Laughter.]*

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

Mr Allister: Some small things can be quite effective *[Laughter.]* Let us be serious. Is the Assembly serious, or is it just virtue signalling to say, "We are going to do this, we are going to do that, because it makes us feel good"? We have had more doomsday predictions from climate alarmists than we have ever had from the most extreme and ludicrous religious cult. "The apocalypse is upon us", according to these folk: "We are going to do this, and we are going to do that". Try as you might, you will not change the natural cycle of nature. You are not as big as that. Therefore, reality needs to dawn.

Yes, it is absolutely right that, as the custodians of this beautiful planet, we have a bounden duty to hand it on to the next generations in as

fantastic a shape as we can. Of course, we should not be reckless. We should not be wanton in how we treat it. We should be sensible. We should be controlled. Where we can do things better, we should certainly do them better, but the idea that, suddenly, we are going to stop the world, we are going to kill off all the cows, because they belch and do all sorts of things, and we are going to save the world is such patent nonsense. Yes, focus on the real; forget the fantasy. If we did that, maybe we would get focused on things that we can do something about and get off our high horse that we somehow can declare with effect a climate emergency. Maybe somebody could tell me what it is.

Mr M Bradley: I congratulate the three Members who made their maiden speeches, particularly the Member who struck a blow for ageism and us grandfathers.

Climate change is a global emergency. We are all agreed on that. We in Northern Ireland must play our part to reduce its effects. The evidence is all around us: more violent storms, heavy rains, floods, rising sea levels, shrinking ice sheets and wildlife threatened with extinction. The world is not in a good place. While the main sources of warming lie elsewhere, change is required to reduce what are commonly known as greenhouse gases — carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons — which are known to directly contribute to the greenhouse effect. There are other initiatives: reduce vehicle journeys, more use of public transport, promotion of renewable energy, a new greener agenda, promotion of electric cars etc. Those are all things that we can do. To take a point that one Member made, a large journey begins with a small step. We have to try to take small steps here in Northern Ireland.

The reduction of ammonia in farming practices, including some form of renewable energy away from the use of fossil fuels and gas in farming, particularly poultry production, must be tackled immediately. That includes a long, hard look at what is to replace RHI and what options are available. A reforestation plan for Northern Ireland with a "One person, one tree" planting scheme in 2021 to plant a tree for every person who resides here is a small first step. A single tree has the potential to recycle a ton of carbon in its lifetime. However, there needs to be a concentrated effort to plant and nurture more trees across Northern Ireland. I know that the Minister has a keen interest in that. While reforestation currently sits at around 8%, I believe that, with greater effort, we could achieve a target of 20% or more.

All Departments have a role to play. I think about the vast estate of our schools and colleges. Further extensive planting along our road network is another way of introducing trees and hedgerows. There are open spaces at our hospitals, along our riverbanks and in our town and city centres. That is all open space with the potential of helping reforestation across Northern Ireland and, at the same time, creating quality space. All that will help to reduce the carbon footprint.

We should look at providing greater protection for trees in current planning applications and building works that are being carried out and at building houses and buildings etc in a more environmentally aware way. Trees that have to be removed in the name of progress should be replaced, and we need to revisit the criteria for tree preservation orders. We should look at creating a natural sink to help to reduce our carbon footprint, and that can be achieved only by strategic thinking and planning.

Climate change is the remit of us all, and every Department has an important role to play. An independent environmental protection agency is one of the ways to tackle climate change in Northern Ireland. The time frame in which to have the independent environmental protection agency is immediate. The planet is the one thing that we all have in common. Work has to start now, but in a well-thought-out and well-structured way. Therefore, I support amendment No 2.

Ms C Kelly: There is no question that the dedicated and selfless actions of young people have forced the climate emergency on to the political agenda around the world. Global days of action, school strikes and the fearless, irresistible message of urgency from people such as Greta Thunberg have woken up policymakers and Governments around the world. We have young people to thank for the relative urgency with which we now consider the breakdown of our climate and the staggering loss of biodiversity all around us. Perhaps we should ask why. Why has it taken people whose futures are at risk to get us to wake up to the evidence that has surrounded us for decades?

The evidence has been clear for some time that the destructive activity of humanity and our economic system has broken our planetary boundaries and that we are rapidly changing the climate that we all depend on for survival. For too long, we have been guilty of inaction. That ends now. We have an undeniable and irrefutable moral responsibility to pass on to young people a safe climate future. In their

name we act today. They have demanded that we recognise the scale of the climate emergency facing us, and, by agreeing the motion, hopefully we will. I commend young people across the North and across the island who have taken their future into their own hands and demanded action. Let us not let them down. Let us confront the economic and social systems that have pushed our climate and biodiversity to the point of breakdown. Let us commit today that we will not be found wanting in standing up for those who depend on us to secure their future. Let us act.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Sinead Kelly. Sinead will be our final Member to speak. Sorry, Sinead McLaughlin.

Ms McLaughlin: It is 100 seconds until midnight. For those who are not aware, for over 70 years, the 'Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' has published an annual assessment of the likelihood of a man-made global catastrophe. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Doomsday Clock measured the probability of an extinction-level event as the nations of the world edged closer to nuclear conflict. Last week, at the annual assessment, former Irish president Mary Robinson revealed that the twin threats of increasing geopolitical instability and rapid climate change have brought us closer than ever to the brink of irreversible disaster.

The climate crisis is the most pressing global challenge we face, but it cannot be addressed without action at local, regional and international level. That means that we have a part to play, and it will mean that difficult decisions have to be made. It begins with the Assembly facing up to the scale of the crisis that we face. The suspension of the Assembly cost us precious time, and we cannot afford to be complacent. We must join the legislators of the world who have made an unambiguous declaration of climate emergency, and, having declared an emergency, we need an action plan that focuses on prevention and mitigation. I fully support the proposals in the motion and amendment No 1, all of which are closely interrelated.

I will focus now on the viability of the green new deal from an economic perspective. A green new deal offers exciting economic opportunities that will benefit people, communities and businesses. For instance, carbon savings would be made by expanding public transport infrastructure to reduce journeys made by cars. Other benefits include job creation, increased mobility and a reduction in air pollution. Transitioning to a zero-carbon society also requires an increase in the production of

renewable energy. That would strengthen our energy security and reduce our dependence on other countries for fossil fuel imports, thus creating a more sustainable society.

We have already laid solid foundations. Recent statistics from the Department for the Economy show that 44.9% of total electricity consumption in Northern Ireland is generated from local renewable sources.

However, the number of new renewable installations is declining, so further investment is needed to sustain growth. One approach would be to implement the proposal that seeks to replace the failed RHI scheme with a new scheme that effectively cuts carbon emissions.

6.45 pm

Clean energy can be affordable and could help to alleviate the high rate of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, which currently stands at 42%. Work to improve energy efficiency will further reduce the energy bill for consumers, as well as minimising carbon emissions. Also, analysis from the European Commission shows that employment created from investing in energy efficiency has the potential to be 2.5 to 4 times larger than that from investing in oil and natural gas.

The SDLP supports the calls for binding emissions reduction targets that are underpinned by legislation. On that note, I welcome the Minister for Infrastructure's announcement about next-generation public transport and the unveiling of hydrogen fuel cell busses, which was made just last week. We need a similar programme to improve efficiency in our housing stock, which not only helps the environment but helps to reduce fuel costs for the most hard-pressed families in our society.

The new energy strategy being produced by the Department for the Economy must break our reliance on destructive legacy fuels and plot a new course for a clean and green sustainable future. We have an immense opportunity to become global leaders in renewable technology, with our on and offshore wind, the high quality —

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

Ms McLaughlin: — geothermal points along the north coast and investing in tidal energy: that is our future. We must prepare to exploit those opportunities and prepare our economy for industry transition. Mr Speaker, the clock is

ticking. The climate crisis is real and is escalating.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The clock is ticking; your time is up. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McLaughlin: It is time we escalated our response.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Too often, in the last Assembly, the voices of the smaller parties were not heard. Today, it is a shame that the voice of my party, and those who vote for us, has not been heard. My party provides the only eco-socialist voice in the Chamber. I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and your office to look at how every voice and all parties can be included in future debates.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We will reflect on what you have said, but I hope that you will reflect on the fact that diverse opinion was brought into the debate. That is one of the issues that the Speaker or a Deputy Speaker has to determine when deciding who is called to speak. I hope you appreciate the thinking behind that.

I now call the Minister. You have a maximum of 15 minutes.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Dr Archibald, Miss Woods and Mr Irwin for moving the motion and the amendments to the motion. The Department for the Economy has a number of issues, and I will speak on its behalf as well.

I welcome the widespread interest from colleagues throughout the Chamber today, and, if Mr Carroll wants to make an intervention, I will happily give way, providing that he does not speak for too long.

I note that we had no fewer than three maiden speeches, which all had something going for them. In Mr Muir's instance, he spoke about having the greatest Alliance Minister representing his area as an MP, and, of course, Mr Catney and Mr Stewart also have great MPs. *[Laughter.]* I have warned Mr Catney, because we get on quite well and come from a similar family background, that the Chamber is like a boxing ring: we cut the tripe out of each other inside, but we can be pleasant to each other outside. Today, Mr Catney, it is good news: I am not going to have a go at you in here, as you made a great speech. It was wonderful. Well done to you and to Mr Stewart and Mr Muir.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will the Minister support the calls for no further extraction of fossil fuels in our country? It would be very significant for people who are campaigning to save the environment if he said, today, that he would refuse to support further extraction, and would call for no more exploration of fossil fuels. Will he support that call?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. I would like to have heard more of the argumentation behind it, and maybe we will at a future time. I know that we have very limited extraction of fossil fuels in Northern Ireland and I hope to move to a circumstance where we use considerably less fossil fuel, where we require less gas from Russia, less oil from the Middle East and all of that. Those are all things that we wish to do.

In my previous role in the DOE, we did a lot of work on renewable energy, and, as a consequence of that, today 45% of our electricity comes from renewable energy. We have the opportunity to drive that up further, and we will do that in meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

Climate change is a global challenge that needs to be addressed through comprehensive and effective global actions. It requires actions across all society to help to reduce carbon emissions. I am pleased to see that the UK's leadership in taking action to combat climate change was recognised this year in its presidency of the United Nations Conference of Parties on climate change. The UK will be hosting the annual conference, known as COP 26, later this year in Glasgow, and I intend that Northern Ireland will play its full part in that event.

I appreciate what an emotive subject climate change is and how some people want to see immediate action to make a difference. They want to use the language of crisis to generate support for change. We can see that wording in the motion, and I do not doubt the sincerity of many of those who take that view. My party also wants to see action to tackle climate change, but we want to see practical measures that make a real, tangible difference, and we want to be sure that we do not rush into schemes that could end up making matters worse. Ultimately, we will all need to work together if we are to confront the issue effectively. We need to be wary that the language we use does not make it harder to work together. Action to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to our changing climate should not be viewed as a burden but

as an opportunity, and we need to create a stronger, prosperous and more sustainable green low-carbon economy and enhanced natural environment for everyone.

I am sceptical that there are quick fixes on the issue, albeit they are desirable, but I suspect that someone would have found them by now if that were the case. Addressing climate change will take a sustained effort over many years, requiring input from academics, regulators, business and industry, local and central government and society in general if we are to reduce our emissions. Any actions that we take must be adequately resourced, with support for the most vulnerable in our society.

Our approach to climate change also needs to be realistic and sustainable. We cannot just close down business and industry, stop people travelling and hike up energy costs. Never mind the impact on the way we live, it would not work to reduce global CO₂ emissions in any event. We would simply export our emissions overseas to those who were less committed to addressing the issue, but that does not mean that we can sit back and do nothing.

Following the report from the Committee on Climate Change on the UK's contribution to stopping global warming, the UK Government have set a UK net zero greenhouse gas emission target by 2050. That is to ensure that the UK contributes to the worldwide challenge of keeping global temperatures well below 2°C and pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C.

Northern Ireland needs to play its part in minimising greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to the UK net zero targets. However, we need to recognise that every region has distinct characteristics and will be able to contribute at different levels. The Government's independent expert advisers recognise that, and Scotland has greater scope for carbon storage and hopes to achieve net zero by 2045. Wales, where reductions would be harder to achieve, is hoping to achieve 95% reduction by 2050.

A greater percentage of our emissions are attributed to agriculture. It is 27%, as opposed to an average of 10% elsewhere in the UK. That, however, reflects the fact that we produce 10% of the UK's food, so our agri-food footprint is bound to be higher, and it is recognised that it is more challenging to cut emissions in that area. We need to be clear that carbon capture in agriculture is properly recorded so we can move forward on an evidential science-based analysis as opposed to wrapping up with what everybody else is doing elsewhere, given that

we have a different food production system from many parts of Europe.

Accordingly, I am writing to the Committee on Climate Change, asking it to provide advice and assistance on what we need to do in Northern Ireland to reduce our emissions so that we can contribute equitably to the net zero target. On receipt of its recommendations, I will bring the Committee's advice on what we do on climate change to the Executive to agree a way forward. Decisions on any new cross-cutting approaches will naturally require Executive support.

My Department commissioned the Committee on Climate Change to produce a report on how Northern Ireland can reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the 2020s. 'Reducing emissions in Northern Ireland' was published in February 2019 and provides us with advice on how we can deliver reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The report has been circulated internally and externally, and its recommendations are being considered by all Northern Ireland Departments. Our response to climate change action is coordinated through a cross-departmental future generations and climate change group. I intend to personally oversee the group's work personally to ensure that we build on our response to the impacts of climate change.

Turning to what we have achieved so far, the latest Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory estimates emissions to be 20 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, which is an 18% reduction on the 24 million tons that were emitted in 1990. Our reductions are of a lesser amount than elsewhere in the UK, but, nonetheless, they are still welcome. Statistical research released by my Department last week estimates that, by 2030, greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland will have reduced by 37% on their 1990 levels to 15 million tons. The level of confidence that we can place on some of those projections is naturally subject to wide variation. Much of the reduction has been achieved as a result of our efforts in the energy sector, particularly the increase in renewable energy to 45%. In other areas, it has proved more challenging to reduce emissions, and work remains for us on a number of those areas. Our emissions from transport have gone up, and our land use, which elsewhere is a carbon sink, is an emitter. There have been significant reductions in other sectors, such as waste, but those sectors are responsible for relatively small percentages of emissions. All of that emphasises the need to take action across the board.

I have set out initial actions that I intend to take to tackle climate change, and I will consider plans to bring forward climate change legislation and other approaches on climate change outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach'. However, these are significant and complex issues that have long-term consequences, and I do not want to be bounced into rushing through measures that we later regret. I appreciate the need for swift action, but there are matters that need thorough analysis. It will take collaborative action across all parts of government, local government, business, industry and households to ensure that we leave the environment in better shape than that in which we found it.

I will say a quick word about climate change adaptation. Much of the climate change debate is about mitigating the impact of our emissions, but we also need to adapt to the changes that are already happening, whether those are due to rising sea levels, a wetter climate or more extreme weather. As required by the UK Climate Change Act 2008, a second five-year Northern Ireland climate change adaptation programme was recently published by my Department. It contains government and outside government responses to the latest climate change risks identified for Northern Ireland. Again, we need to work together on building a resilient Northern Ireland.

The biodiversity information compiled by the NIEA and various other stakeholders has indicated that there is a variety of pressures in Northern Ireland. My Department is refreshing the Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy to align our targets with post-2020 global diversity targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity. Once again, we need to act collectively, as improvements in biodiversity can be achieved only when we work together.

On the matter of establishing an independent environmental protection agency to oversee the work, I say that environmental governance is much wider than the degree of independence of one particular agency. It is about making appropriate decisions on the environmental outcomes that we are seeking to achieve and about the effective and efficient deployment of limited resources to achieve those outcomes. In November 2017, a report on a review of environmental governance, jointly commissioned by a number of environmental NGOs, stated that forming an independent environmental agency without pinpointing all the problems would probably mean that any reforms would not operationally have much impact. Any decision on a fundamental structural change to the NIEA is, of course, a

matter for the Executive, but a robust economic appraisal of the costs and benefits of having an independent agency will be necessary to inform that decision properly. I remain open to the idea of an independent environmental protection agency, and that is something that we will look at.

7.00 pm

We also have the opportunity of looking at the office of environmental protection, which is being developed in Westminster to take the place of what would previously have been carried out by the European Commission.

We are planning to eliminate plastic pollution. That is an absolute must. We need to do more to reduce our dependence on single-use plastic bags. It is estimated that we have brought in some £19 million since the introduction of the plastic bag levy and that we have used 300 million fewer single-use bags as a consequence. I pay tribute to Mr Durkan for his work in bringing that in. It has been a significant success story. My Department also introduced a ban on the manufacture and sale of rinse-off personal care products, including microbeads, in March 2019. That will have a significant benefit, as it is estimated that products used in a single shower could result in 100,000 plastic particles entering the sewerage system.

Where an energy strategy is concerned, Sinn Féin brought forward a notion about closing down RHI. Let me say this: the ambitions of RHI were good. The introduction of the renewable heat incentive — there are renewable heat initiatives in the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales — has reduced ammonia, carbon and methane in our environment. A crude closure would mean a return to fossil fuels, which would be environmentally damaging. It is an entirely contradictory position for Sinn Féin to suggest that we should close RHI and reduce carbon because, if you close the RHI, you will increase carbon. The scheme is already less effective as a consequence of Karen Bradley rushing legislation through Westminster. The same Karen Bradley could not bring forward legislation on historical institutional abuse victims, but, nonetheless, she brought legislation through Westminster that made entirely unjustifiable cuts, which made the running of the boilers a huge burden for those who invested heavily in the capital cost of installation. Members may think it is popular because one particular newspaper happens to run a story about it very regularly — it has somewhat of an obsession with it — and it is bad news, given the way it is put out there. It is,

but the reality is that a lot of good has come from the renewable heat initiative. From 2012 to 2030, the renewable heat initiative will account for 6% to 7% of the greenhouse gas reductions in Northern Ireland that we are seeking.

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

Mr Poots: That goes across all sectors.

There is a significant opportunity. We are currently sending £22 million a year back to Westminster. We need to get this issue right, not rushed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Mr Gary Middleton to wind on amendment No 2.

Mr Middleton: I thank all the Members who contributed, and I congratulate the new Members on their maiden speeches. I am glad my maiden speech was made long before the suggested tradition of wearing a bow tie for it. *[Laughter.]* I support, obviously, amendment No 2, which is tabled in the name of me and my party colleague William Irwin. I think it is fair to say, from all the contributions today, that people are concerned about climate change. Some of us are more energised than others, but I think people are genuinely concerned and know that action needs to be taken. The Executive and Assembly must use an evidence-based approach to ensure that there are measures and targets in the Programme for Government to tackle the climate crisis. In the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there are a number of potential measures that would go some way to ensuring that there is a coordinated and strategic approach to the challenge of climate change. I must say at the outset that I welcome that the Minister is here. As Mr McGuigan touched on, we know this is something that goes across all Departments. I appreciate that the Infrastructure Minister is here as well. All our Departments have a role to play, and we very much need a coordinated approach to tackling climate change.

It is recognised that there will need to be actions and interventions across a wide range of areas to address the immediate and longer-term effects of climate change in a fair and just way. We will need all the Departments to work collaboratively and to lead by example in their relevant areas of responsibility. It is also noted, of course, that the Executive should bring forward a climate change Act. We know that, since the introduction of the UK Climate Change Act 2008, greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 9% in Northern Ireland compared

with a 27% fall for the whole of the UK. A Northern Ireland climate change Act will need to take into account the unique characteristics and challenges that we have here in Northern Ireland. In the February 2019 report by the Committee on Climate Change, analysis showed that nearly 30% of all greenhouse gas emissions here in Northern Ireland are from agriculture, compared with 10% in the rest of the UK. The farming sector here in Northern Ireland is also much more heavily livestock-based.

The Minister has said that legislation should not be rushed, and I agree with that. I think that any proposals, including those within the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, should be well thought out, should be tested and should be debated here in the Assembly Chamber. Unlike other devolved Administrations, energy policy is an area of devolved responsibility. We need to see a new energy strategy that has ambitious targets and actions as we transition towards a zero-carbon society. There is also a need for investment in our infrastructure. We need to encourage a greater uptake in public transport across all of Northern Ireland, not just here in Belfast. For example, charging points for electric vehicles need to be reviewed to ensure that they are sufficient to meet the current and future demands.

I also recognise and pay tribute to many of our local councils, which are already taking action on a range of issues affecting their environment. In the absence, of course, of the Assembly for the past three years, many local councils have taken the lead and have put forward similar motions, followed up, of course, with action in the areas of their responsibility. It has also been mentioned that the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency will be an important step to oversee and ensure that targets are met. It is indeed the case that Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland that does not have an EPA.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I will pick up on his comments regarding an independent environmental protection agency. In no way is this an attack or an insinuation around the ability or dedication of the existing Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which often goes above and beyond to ensure the protection of our environment, but will the Member agree with me that, if we are looking at a new independent environment agency, there is logic in doing so on an all-island basis?

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

Mr Middleton: As you will see, I mentioned that it was mentioned that the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency is something that could be looked at. I think that we need to look at all options. Again, it is something that cannot be rushed into. I think we need to look at examples of best practice elsewhere and at what is unique and what works here in Northern Ireland.

There are a number of urgent actions needed to tackle climate change, and we need to ensure that these are implemented as soon as possible. I thank all the organisations and charities that have contacted each and every one of us with very useful briefing papers and information. We know that not all of that can be discussed here today, but I think, from listening to all the Members around the Chamber, it is very evident that this is an issue that we will not be leaving behind. It is an issue that will be in the forefront of all our minds as we go forward. I urge Members to support our amendment No 2, which we believe will send a clear signal that we are united in our commitments to deliver a new approach to climate change.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call on Clare Bailey to wind up on amendment No 1.

Ms Bailey: First, I thank the honourable Member Caoimhe Archibald and her party, Sinn Féin, for their willingness to engage in this debate and to work collaboratively and in a cross-party way on the amendment and throughout the debate. On a personal note, it is a bit bittersweet to watch the growing understanding across our public decision-making bodies and also within our political leadership, knowing and understanding that continuing as we are is just not an option. If we had understood that earlier, we could have had interventions earlier. I do not feel that we are being bounced into anything. These debates and this evidence base have been building for 50 years. I know that change comes slowly but just consider that. I have been watching the growing understanding that our environment is not a stand-alone thing that can be dealt with separately or by just recycling cardboard boxes. It is much more urgent and intrinsic. It goes to the very heart of who we are, what we are and how we do business. It goes to the heart of our education system, our health systems, our communities and to the very heart of our economic systems.

Jeremy Grantham from the London School of Economics states:

"Capitalism, by ignoring the finite nature of resources and by neglecting the long-term well-being of the planet and its potentially crucial biodiversity, threatens our existence"

Our very systems are our greatest threats. Our planet will, can and has sustained itself over billions of years, as the honourable Member Mr Allister has pointed out, and through many environments. It is us who are at risk.

The changes that we need to bring in cross every Department. While it is great to have our Minister for the environment here and speaking on the motion and our Minister for Infrastructure joining the debate and being here, it is to be regretted that their Executive colleagues are not here. They will carry as much responsibility in carrying out the changes that are needed. It is not just one Department; it is across Departments. The Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions need to be reviewed in light of the Paris Accord. Our energy strategy, which is out for consultation, needs to set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree with me that it is disappointing that the AERA Minister did not rule out opposing any further extraction of fossil fuels in the future? Does she agree that the only way we have a chance of saving our environment is by stopping the drilling for and extraction of fossil fuels?

Ms Bailey: It is a very valid point. I do not think that it is the only thing that we need to do, but it is very urgent. I think that the moratorium on fracking in Northern Ireland still stands, but I am willing to be corrected if I need to be.

We want to see the Executive bring forward a climate Act, environmental targets with strong legal underpinnings and an independent environmental protection agency to oversee that work and hold us all accountable. We need our communities to be protected and made resilient in the face of the changes that are to come. We can make sure that they can thrive.

The honourable Member from East Antrim tried to take the title of the centre of the universe earlier, but Belfast is the centre of the universe. It is the city that I am from, and it makes me so proud to see a Commissioner for Resilience in Belfast City Council doing fantastic work and the recently established Belfast Climate Commission linking up many networks across these islands to set new frameworks and share best practice.

There is real potential in what we would understand as a post-growth economy. There is a spirit level. There is greater health and well-being. The Minister is right: there is no quick fix. The economic and human cost, the environmental and biodiversity cost of not acting now will be greater if we delay. We have the evidence, but we are fast running out of the time. Fifty years of this evidence base is not being bounced, but we do delay very well here. Let us take a moment to decide whether we will have a new approach for a new decade and begin to deliver. I urge the House to support the motion and amendment No 1. Thank you for your time.

Mr McAleer: A LeasCheann Comhairle, thank you for the debate. I commend the proposers of the motion — I was one of them, I suppose. I want to draw on some of the points that were raised. I also want to make a couple of points.

From my perspective, as the agriculture and rural lead in the party, I want to make the point that farmers are at the very coalface of the climate. They face climate change all the time, are aware of the challenges and can play a big part in the solution; indeed, if you were in a constituency such as mine and many others during 2013, you will have seen the big snow on the Sperrins. Again, in 2017, we saw the huge floods. That makes you realise how farmers are impacted on by climate change. They are part of the solution, and I think that they are willing to play their part in it. They provide grasslands, habitats and hedgerows for the purpose of carbon sequestration.

7.15 pm

I want to move on and try to summarise the debate. Fourteen Members spoke, so I will try to get through some of the key points. The debate was opened by Caoimhe Archibald, who made the point that we face into an ecological and environmental disaster because of climate breakdown. She referred to the international examples in, for example, Australia and outlined the economic and human impact of that and, indeed, the impact on wildlife and habitat as well. She also drew attention to the 1.5° target that is contained in the Paris Accord. She said that we must put climate action on a statutory footing and called for the implementation of the independent environmental protection agency to ensure that targets are met. She also underlined the point that that must be done on a joined-up and an all-island basis.

The next Member to speak was Rachel Woods of the Green Party, who, again, picked up on the 1.5° target. She referred to the biodiversity loss and the climate destruction that would lead to the collapse of humanity. She also called for a big role for the Executive and the Assembly in this and again underlined the calls for an independent environmental protection agency with teeth to be implemented in the next 12 months. She made the point that we needed a just transition from fossil fuels for the low-carbon economy and that we needed joined-up social dialogue. She also called for leadership and said that the time for it was now.

William Irwin was the third Member to speak. He spoke on amendment No 2 and made the point that farmers were the custodians of the landscape. He said that they have been protecting our landscape and our wonderful ecology. He said that he did not want to be alarmist but thinks that everybody has their part to play. He also drew attention to the environmental impact of litter on the verges and hedgerows and how it can blow into fields, become very unsightly and cause risk to livestock. He believes that a more balanced approach is needed to climate change and that it should be based on a very firm evidence-based approach.

Pat Catney was the fourth Member to speak, and he made the point that we needed to move swiftly towards a greener economy and a greener energy supply. He referred to greener public transport and gave some examples of the greenways, for example, that we have down in the South of Ireland. He also referred to the progress that the Government in the South have made towards reducing emissions and said that we needed proposals as soon as possible. He also welcomed the plans for the independent EPA and for a clean and green environment and said that it is important that we ensure that the next generation grows up in a world that allows its potential to flourish.

John Stewart of the Alliance — of the UUP? Is that right? *[Laughter.]* He supports amendment No 1. He said that we needed to follow the experts, and he questioned why we were the only devolved region that had not got an independent EPA and climate targets. Again, he called for greater political leadership on this. He said that we need to take the issue more seriously, and he referred to the objectives of mitigation and adaptation and reiterated the need for a cross-departmental approach.

Andrew Muir of the Alliance Party spoke next and made the point that the New Decade, New Approach agreement is the bare minimum. He

said that he cannot support amendment No 2. He said that the targets in a new climate change Act must stretch us and that the way we move around must change. I am guessing that he was drawing on his experience of working in Translink when he picked up on that point. He said that a rethink is required. However, he said that we are all up for the challenge and that together we can do it.

Paul Frew came in next and made the point that we need a new era of informed decision-making. He referred to Karen Bradley's decision to strip the RHI tariffs and made the point that no light has yet been shone on the energy branch. He said that we need a suitable system for sound energy policymaking and decisions.

My colleague Philip McGuigan spoke in favour of amendment No 1. He referred to the impacts of climate change and said that it was time to focus on the actions and steps that we must take for a green new deal. He said that there must be a change in the way that we consume energy and in our travel choices. He called for active travel legislation and made the point that we must engage in a modal shift to different types of infrastructure for how we travel and move ourselves around. He gave the examples of cycling infrastructure and safe passing laws. He also talked about retrofitting homes to save energy but said that this must be led by government.

Jim Allister came in with a different perspective. He rubbished the climate emergency as nonsense and accused most of us in the Chamber of being climate deniers. He made the points that climate change has been happening for centuries; that we as an Assembly cannot stop the forces of nature; and that the people who tabled the motion are being alarmist. He said that the reality needs to dawn.

Maurice Bradley of the DUP made reference to the global emergency and said that we must play our part. He referred to the impacts of global warming. He mentioned the need for reforestation, pointing out that we have only 8% tree cover in the North and should move towards a target of around 20%. He made the point that one tree has the potential to recycle a ton of carbon.

The eleventh Member to speak was Catherine Kelly. She commended the young people who have forced the issue of climate change onto the agenda and the world stage. She said that we have a moral responsibility to young people to pass on a safe climate future. She commended the young people who are

demanding action and said that we must support them.

Sinead McLaughlin of the SDLP said that there are two issues — geopolitical instability and climate change — and said that this could lead to irreversible disaster. She said that we need to face up to the scale of the crisis. She said that we need an action plan to back this up. She said that the green new deal can usher in exciting opportunities, and she gave examples. She also talked about more renewable energy. She said that we are sitting at over 40% but further investment will be needed. She welcomed the next generation of public transport and said that a new strategy must plot a course for the new green future. She also talked about tidal energy and preparing the economy for energy transition.

Minister Poots talked about the global challenge and how cross-society actions are needed. He reminded us that the COP 26 conference will take place in Glasgow later this year. He wants practical measures and no rushing into schemes that we may regret further down the line. He wants a low-carbon economy but no quick-fix solutions. He wants it to be more sustainable and lasting but said that we must be realistic. He made reference to the CCC aim of a net zero carbon by 2050 and made the point that the North can play its part in achieving that net target. He also made the point that agriculture produces 10% of food and that, as a result, we have higher emissions. The Minister said that any decision must be based on scientific evidence-based analysis and that a cross-departmental approach must be taken. He also made the point that there has been an 18% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions here since 1990 and that that is largely due to the efforts of the energy sector, but he said that there are other areas that are more challenging. In terms of actions, he said that he would consider legislating but does not want to be bounced and wants to take a collaborative approach. He made reference to a climate change adaptation programme.

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

Mr McAleer: Thank you. Minister Poots remains open to the idea of an independent EPA. He also made reference to the reduction in the number of single-use plastic bags and other areas of progress.

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 48; Noes 27.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, 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, Ms McLaughlin, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Sheehan, Miss Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Miss Woods

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, 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 Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr M Bradley and Mr Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that we are facing climate breakdown and a biodiversity crisis, declares a climate emergency; and calls on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement by commencing, as a matter of urgency, a review of the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100 and to ensure that targets are met; and further calls

upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin immediately work to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of best practice, that will be appointed within 12 months.

Adjourned at 7.40 pm.

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