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Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
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Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 4 March 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: At the outset, I put on record my concern that, during Question Time at both plenary sittings last week, a total of five Members were not in their place when they were called for items of business listed against their name. I appreciate that the Assembly has not been sitting for a number of years, that there was an influx of new Members, and that there may therefore be a lessening in awareness of the standards of parliamentary courtesy that are required in certain circumstances, but I remind all Members that there is an expectation that if you are not available to be present in the Chamber to address an item of business that is listed in your name, it is courteous to the House that notification of your absence be made, as a matter of urgency, to either the Speaker's Office or the Business Office. If you were not in your place and did not give notice, it is expected that you come to the House to apologise. Should I have to return to this matter, consideration will be given to sanctions that may need to be put in place. If Ministers are expected to show courtesy to the House, the same applies to Members.

Members' Statements

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

Down GAA: Dan McCartan

Mr O'Toole: I pay tribute to a giant of Down GAA, Dan McCartan, who passed away over the weekend. He and his brother were part of the heroic generation of Down footballers who won the All-Ireland in 1960 and brought the Sam Maguire Cup north of the border for the first time in history. Many members of those teams from the 1960s are still very much with us, but, over the past number of years, several of them, including Dan's brother, James, have passed. It is important to reflect not just on the enormous sporting legacy but cultural and community legacy that they leave behind.

Before 1960, a team from north of the border had never won the Sam Maguire; indeed, very few Ulster teams had come close to winning it. It is often talked about by people who remember it as being a moment of profound joy and relief. There was a sense almost of liberation and self-esteem for people who, for a variety of reasons, did not feel that either jurisdiction on the island of Ireland necessarily treasured their contribution at that time. It was a hugely significant moment that, in the 1960s, brought together the whole community in County Down. People not from traditionally GAA-supporting backgrounds still recall vividly the emotion and sense of pride that they felt.

Dan McCartan was not just a Down GAA legend: he was closely involved with, I think, three GAA clubs, including, most recently, Carryduff GAC, which celebrated its half-centenary in the past couple of years. He and his family, including his son Mark, were a

critical part of establishing and building that club into what it is today, one of the most successful and thriving clubs in County Down. It is also on the edge of south Belfast, and it is a source of immense pride that Gaelic games in that part of the city and the county are growing. Dan McCartan was a huge part of building that legacy. He was a dentist in Belfast, who combined his contribution to Gaelic games and community life with performing that role and public service.

It is important to pay tribute to the immense contribution of Dan McCartan — part of the heroic generation of footballers who brought pride, joy and self-esteem to the county that I grew up in, County Down — to mark his passing and to pass on our condolences to his wider family circle, everyone involved in Carryduff GAC, his friends and all those who treasure the contribution that he and the rest of that heroic generation made to our community.

Seachtain na Gaeilge

Miss Reilly: Idir 1ú – 17ú de mhí Mhárta bímid ag ceiliúradh Sheachtain na Gaeilge 2024 fud fad na tíre. Is ócáid iontach tábhachtach í Seachtain na Gaeilge i saol lucht labhartha na Gaeilge. Is deis í chun ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar ár gcultúr, ar ár teanga dhúchais agus ar ár bhféiniúlacht. Tugann sí deis do gach duine páirt a bheith acu sa teanga agus leis an chultúr, teanga agus féiniúlacht sin a fheiceáil i gcoiflár an phobail. Le linn an cheiliúrtha seo, bíonn imeachtaí agus gníomhaíochtaí éagsúla ar siúl ar fud na tíre, ag spreagadh daoine chun an Ghaeilge a úsáid agus a chur chun cinn.

Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a gabháil le cúpla grúpa amuigh ansin, go háirithe le Conradh na Gaeilge, Foras na Gaeilge, Féile an Earraigh agus le neart grúpaí eile a imríonn ról mór sa phleanáil le linn an ama seo go háirithe. Tá an t-adh orainn go bhfuil Seachtain na Gaeilge againn, ní hamháin don cheiliúradh — agus tá seo ríthábhachtach — go bhfuil sí ann don chéad ghlúin eile a bheas ag ceiliúradh na teanga go ceann blianta fada amach romhainn. Mar fhocal scoir, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le pobal na Gaeilge a sheasann an fód lá i ndiaidh lae agus a bhíonn mar ghuth láidir amuigh ansin. Beidh mise, mar bhall den phobal seo, i mo ghuth láidir istigh sa Teach seo.

Mar sin, coinnígí bhur súile ar oscailt do na himeachtaí a bheidh ag tarlú sa cheantar thart ort sna laethanta atá romhainn. Bígí páirteach iontu agus bainigí sult astu.

From 1-17 March, we will celebrate Irish Language Week 2024 throughout the country. Seachtain na Gaeilge is a very important occasion in the life of Irish speakers. It is an opportunity to celebrate our culture, our native language and our identity. It gives everyone a chance to be part of the language and to see that culture, language and identity celebrated in the heart of the community. During the celebration, there are events and activities throughout the country, encouraging people to use and promote the Irish language.

Thanks are due to Conradh na Gaeilge, Foras na Gaeilge, Féile an Earraigh and the many other groups that play such an important role in planning these events at this time. We are lucky to have Irish Language Week, not only for the celebrations but — this is so important — for the rising generation that will celebrate the language in years to come.

Finally, I thank the Irish language community for standing their ground day after day and for providing a strong voice. As a member of that community, I will be a strong voice in this House. So keep your eyes open for the events that are happening in your district in the coming days. Take part and enjoy.

RNLI: 200th Anniversary

Ms Forsythe: Today, I mark the 200th anniversary of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), which is dedicated to saving lives at sea. As we sit, a service of thanksgiving is taking place in Westminster Abbey, with local representatives in attendance, including the president of Kilkeel RNLI, Merwyn Hanna MBE. I thank all involved in the organisation for their commitment and dedicated service. Representing South Down and with family connections to the sea for generations, I truly value the brave work of the RNLI.

There are two RNLI stations in my constituency: Kilkeel and Newcastle. Kilkeel RNLI, the closest to me, was set up in the 1980s. Kilkeel's busy and vibrant fishing industry drove the need for a local station and lifeboats. Teams of committed volunteers and staff have worked for all these years and have saved many lives through the Kilkeel station. Another important role that they play is in the recovery, for their families, of those who are, sadly, lost at sea.

On 14 February 2002, the Tullaghmurray Lass left Kilkeel harbour to fish and did not return. Three generations of the Greene family were lost that day. With an extensive search over the following weeks, the Kilkeel RNLI team played

a key part in the recovery. That devastation tore the heart from the local community. Just two years later, another tragedy struck, with the loss of Colin Donnelly. Again, Kilkeel RNLI played a critical role in the recovery. We will remember those families always. A seafarers memorial is in place at Kilkeel harbour to remember all those who were lost.

Newcastle RNLI also played a critical role over the years. In 1843, when 16 fishing boats left Newcastle and Annalong in calm waters, a sudden change in the weather resulted in 73 people dying and 14 boats being sunk. The RNLI played a key role, and a silver medal was awarded to member George Thompson for the lives that he saved that day.

Both stations in my constituency are committed. They are cross-community and have male and female crew members. There is no discrimination in lives lost at sea. The RNLI should be commended for that. For seafarers from South Down, their last hope is often the RNLI volunteers, who risk their lives for others. The lifeboat crews, the onshore support, the volunteers, fundraisers and all who are involved should stand proudly today as the entire community salutes their work to save lives. After 200 years, I thank them all and send best wishes for the future of the RNLI as it continues to be dedicated to saving lives at sea.

RNLI: 200th Anniversary

Ms Armstrong: In making my Member's statement, I follow on from what Ms Forsythe said by congratulating the RNLI. Today, we stand on the cusp of history, celebrating a monumental milestone in maritime safety and rescue. Today is the 200th anniversary of the RNLI. It has provided two centuries of unwavering commitment to saving lives at sea.

Founded in 1824 by William Hillary, the RNLI has been a beacon of hope for countless souls in distress, embodying the spirit of courage, selflessness and resilience. For two centuries, its volunteers have braved the tempests, risking their lives to rescue those who are in peril on the sea. In Northern Ireland, particularly in my constituency of Strangford, which has the longest coastline, the RNLI's presence is deeply felt, with stations dotting the coastline, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. They are all volunteers. From Kilkeel to Donaghadee, from Newcastle to Portaferry, the stations stand as pillars of safety, guarding our shores with vigilance and dedication.

The RNLI's legacy is measured not just in years or numbers but in the countless lives saved, the families reunited and the communities strengthened. Its commitment to training, innovation and collaboration has made our waters safer for all who venture out to sea.

As we celebrate this historic occasion, let us not forget the sacrifices made by the brave men and women of the RNLI nor the support of the communities that stand with them. Only yesterday, Portaferry RNLI was called out to a casualty, a boat that had broken free and was drifting inland from Kearney, at the edge of the Ards peninsula. The volunteers give up their time, often walking away from family events, dinners and their sleep in order to help others. Together with the coastguard, they form an unbreakable chain of solidarity, ensuring that no call for help goes unanswered. Amidst the celebrations, however, let us recognise the challenges that lie ahead. Climate change, technological advancements and evolving patterns of maritime activity demand that we remain vigilant and adaptable.

The RNLI's 200th anniversary is not just a celebration of the past but a call to action for the future. Let us in the House reaffirm our commitment to supporting the RNLI, whether that is through donations, volunteering or simply spreading awareness of its invaluable work. Together, we can ensure that the next 200 years are marked by even greater achievements in maritime safety and rescue. Let us salute the Royal National Lifeboat Institution on this momentous occasion and honour its legacy of courage, compassion and service humanity. May it continue to be the guardian of the sea for generations to come.

Irish Grass-fed Beef: Protected Geographical Indication

Mr McAleer: I take this opportunity to welcome the registration of Irish grass-fed beef as an all-island protected geographical indication (PGI). That designation will deliver significant benefits for our local beef farmers and the high-quality beef that they produce. I pay tribute to the Department here; the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; the Livestock and Meat Commission; Bord Bia; and, indeed, you, Mr Speaker, as a previous AERA Minister who did a lot of work to progress the designation. I was delighted to see our local Minister Muir join his counterpart, Minister McConalogue, at a joint event in County Donegal on Friday to mark the very special occasion.

12.15 pm

It is a fantastic example of North/South working in partnership to make the most of our unique access to the European Union for the benefit of everyone. Our beef farmers, who have created and sustained worldwide recognition of such high-quality produce thoroughly deserve the acknowledgement.

The grass-based system of farming across Ireland makes our local beef unique. The PGI status recognises that high-quality standard for customers here and abroad. The granting of the all-island PGI status for Irish grass-fed beef through the EU Commission will help to deliver unique economic benefits for our food industry by increasing the North's share of beef exports to the European Union, which, in turn, will generate more money back into the local economy.

Securing all-island protective status will strengthen the hand of our farmers to showcase our local, distinctive, high-quality beef on the world stage. I and my party will continue to work with the Agriculture Ministers, North and South, to deliver for our farmers and to ensure that they can maximise every available opportunity to promote our world-class local farming industry.

MOT Lifts

Mrs Erskine: I rise with surprise and concern as I have become aware that 14 MOT lifts have cracks appearing on them again. That is concerning for employees' safety in our test centres and, indeed, could add to delays in MOT testing. Many people are already frustrated with the current backlog: I declare an interest as somebody who is waiting for an MOT test, and I know people who work in the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). Given the concerns around the MOT testing system, I was surprised that my question for urgent oral answer for today was not accepted, as a series of questions need to be answered on the matter urgently.

The cracks were found on MAHA lifts, which were at the centre of MOT testing delays in 2019. My understanding is that the DVA has known about the issue for a number of weeks, yet nothing has come from the Department. That raises serious questions for the Infrastructure Minister, his Department and the DVA; officials from which will be coming to the Infrastructure Committee on Wednesday. The Department spent £1.8 million to replace 52 of the 55 lifts when cracks appeared in 2019.

Overall, it cost the Department nearly £4 million in backlogs in the MOT testing system.

How have we managed to reach the situation again? The number of lifts affected is thought to be 14 in total. The condition of one lift is very severe, and it has been sent to Germany for further testing, but why is the manufacturer checking its own homework? Should there not be an independent investigation of it? Undoubtedly, it will cause further delays in the MOT testing system. Therefore, whilst we await the outcome of the further testing in Germany, it is important that the Minister clearly outlines what he and his Department are doing to curb the looming crisis. Lessons should have been learnt from 2019, and it is important that we are honest with the public in relation to that.

Although I make my comments today as a DUP MLA, as Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, I will be asking the DVA to provide the most up-to-date information to the Committee to ensure that everything is being done to assure the public and employees on the issue.

Cricket Ireland

Mr Stewart: I am sure that everyone in the Chamber will join me in sending our best wishes to Ireland's male cricketers, who had their first-ever test match victory against Afghanistan on Friday, which they won by six wickets. That was no mean feat at all, as Ireland is the smallest of the 12 nations that have test match status. It was their first-ever test match win in eight attempts over 20-odd years. They sit alongside countries that have prioritised cricket, such as India, New Zealand and Australia, and it really is a remarkable event.

Cricket is a sport that is growing here, but it is still remarkably small. Hopefully, the maiden victory for the male test-match team will encourage not only participation across the sport but much-needed investment.

I will finish by congratulating the skipper, Andrew Balbirnie, and his team, all the staff and those cricketers from Northern Ireland, including man of the match, Mark Adair, and Andy McBrine and Paul Stirling from my constituency. The team is remarkable, and I am sure that we all wish the players well.

Nexus NI: Funding

Miss McAllister: I rise this afternoon to highlight the situation around funding for specialist counselling services for survivors of

sexual violence. Nexus has been providing a specialist service for five years, fully aware that it would come to an end on 31 March — this month. However, Nexus and, indeed, members of the Health Committee did not expect that there was to be no replacement service, despite the tender process initially beginning last year. Nexus has been supporting over 7,000 individuals, with 400 people in ongoing therapy and almost 800 on waiting lists, but we were told that, as of last Thursday at 5.00 pm, the service could not take on any more new referrals. That means 175 new referrals per month. At a time when we are supposed to be tackling violence against women and girls across all Departments here, what kind of message does that send?

The prevalence of sexual violence in our community stands at one in four women, one in eight men and one in six children having experienced it. Those referrals now have nowhere to go except to the GP general mental health service. That is not to say that there will not be specialist training and counselling there, but it is not simply about saving money, it is about offsetting the burden. It will be displaced from one service and simply placed on to another. We need to ensure that, if we are serious about tackling violence against women and girls, we work as one. It is not just about a financial question of saving pennies but, in the long term, spending pounds. It is an ethical and moral question, and we have an obligation to the public to ensure that we end violence against women and girls in all forms and say that, where women and children are still at risk, we will stand by them and have the necessary support for them.

Faughan Valley High School: Arson Attack

Mr Middleton: I rise to speak about an issue that, unfortunately, arose once again in my constituency last night when arsonists attacked the former Faughan Valley High School site. Unfortunately, 50 fire crew, several water-pumping appliances and a command unit were required to deal with the situation.

The issue is serious because somebody could have lost their life, but there is a wider issue regarding dealing with derelict properties, particularly those such as the old Faughan Valley site. Last night, residents close to that site were, unfortunately, told to keep their windows shut and stay in their property whilst fire crews dealt with the situation. Had there been an incident anywhere else in the city, the

fire crews, which are already stretched, would have struggled to deal with it. Derelict properties blight all our communities. There is serious frustration, particularly among residents who live near to those properties, with the speed at which these issues can be dealt with. The Faughan Valley site has been sitting vacant for well over a decade, yet we are seeing no progress. Over the next number of weeks, I will encourage not only all those public bodies to show leadership in dealing with derelict properties but investors, including private investors, to come forward with ideas to improve our communities.

Sean Brown

Ms Sheerin: I rise this afternoon as the Sinn Féin Member elected in south Derry to stand in solidarity with and in full support of the family of Sean Brown. Sean Brown was a proud Gael who was murdered outside the gate of his club, Bellaghy Wolfe Tones Gaelic Athletic Club (GAC), in May 1997. Since then, his family have shown absolutely incredible strength and dignity in their fight to get truth and justice following his cruel murder. Indeed, the people of south Derry, those across Ireland and particularly the GAA fraternity across Ireland stand with them.

The family was dealt another cruel blow this morning when the inquest into Sean's murder had to be stopped, given the amount of redaction that is in the files.

That is another example of the efforts of state agencies to obstruct the process. My party deplores that. We join the family in their call for a public inquiry. We stand in full solidarity with them, as, I am sure, will all the people of Ireland.

Northern Ireland Policing Board: Medical Assessments

Mr Nesbitt: I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Every month, the resources committee is given a list of medical assessments for those officers who are seeking either retirement due to ill health or an injury on duty award. Every month, I respond that I do not have the medical qualifications, expertise or experience to make judgements. I know that I am not the only board member who takes that view; nor, indeed, is it just members of the board. In a relatively recent determination or judgement, Justice Scoffield made clear that the board was not in a position to counteract or countermand decisions of medical experts, yet

he also made clear that the board is the final decision maker. Given the tension between those two facts — that the board is the final decision maker but cannot overturn a recommendation that has been brought to it — that position is untenable.

It also seems to me perverse that the board is involved in those processes in the first place, because its *raison d'être* is to hold the Police Service of Northern Ireland to account — in other words, to be a service scrutiniser — yet, with regard to ill-health retirement and injury on duty, it is a service-delivery board.

I understand that, recently, a group of retired officers have decided to launch a legal case against the board. I will not go into detail for obvious reasons, but they contend that the board is in breach of a statutory duty on the issue. I believe that it rests on whether payments should begin at the date of the medical assessment or the date of retirement.

I have asked for an independent review of the workings of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I understand that that rests with the Department of Justice. Should it bring on an independent review, I simply request that it looks at whether the assessments of ill-health retirement and injury on duty should not be reverted to the Chief Constable, as is the case, as I understand it, in the rest of the United Kingdom.

COVID-19: Day of Reflection

Ms Bradshaw: I would like to say a few words on yesterday's day of reflection, organised by Marie Curie, which will now occur on the first Sunday in March in line with the first recommendation of the UK Commission on Covid Commemoration report. I thank Marie Curie for promoting the day, and other local charities like Aware NI for their associated ongoing events. This is our opportunity to remember those who died from whatever cause during the pandemic, and to consider what further steps we need to take on behalf of the 175,000 people who were bereaved during that period. We also need to reflect on the overall sense of loss that we all experienced: the loss of loved ones, rituals and routine. As we do that, we need to remember the time of extreme disruption for us all. We want to show support for those who were bereaved and people who experienced loss in whatever form, and support each other collectively as we continue to reckon with the consequences of that period. I am pleased that Belfast City Council intends to create a COVID memorial wall for those who were bereaved, for those who still suffering

from long COVID, and, indeed, as a place where everyone who was affected can reflect. I would like to mention Brenda Doherty who spoke for the thousands of bereaved families at the minute's silence event in the Great Hall last week. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for facilitating that. She called for a permanent memorial here in Parliament Buildings that would serve as a reminder and tribute to her late mother Ruth Burke and so many others. The Alliance Party very much supports that call. Fundamentally, it would be an opportunity to provide a lasting tribute to those who lost their lives and a lasting reflection on the trauma that we all widely experienced.

Integrated Services for Children and Young People

Mr Brett: I rise to put on the record my concerns about yet another funding cut by the Department of Health. The cut is to core grant funding that is provided to vital community organisations across Northern Ireland but particularly to those in my constituency. Integrated services for children and young people, which is provided by the Greater Shankill Partnership, gives support to families most in need across north and west Belfast. The programme ensures that children receive the support that they need and that families are given extra resources to help them meet their health inequality needs.

12.30 pm

The Department of Health has indicated that the £185,000 that was awarded last year to integrated services has been removed and that the Minister currently cannot confirm that the funding will continue. That is a matter of major concern, not just for the employees of integrated services who are based on the Shankill Road but for the hundreds of families who currently use its services or who are currently on the waiting list to get the support that they need.

The job of the House and of each elected Member is to serve the interests of the most vulnerable in our society. The communities of west Belfast, on both sides of the Shankill Road, need that vital service. I therefore call on the Minister of Health to reinstate the £185,000 funding without delay and to provide the service to my constituents and those across Belfast.

Strule Shared Education Campus: Progress

Mr McCrossan: I raise important issues facing a number of schools in Omagh. The ongoing delays to the Strule education campus have had an impact on a huge number of children and young people whom I represent in West Tyrone. On Thursday night, I had the privilege of attending an event at which the six schools gathered and the voices of those young people were heard collectively. They made their plea to see the Strule campus delivered. It was originally announced in 2010, with an estimated completion date of 2020. We are now in 2024, and one out of the six schools has been built, and that is Arvalee School. It is a fantastic facility and does great things to support our young people in Omagh, but it is missing the five other schools that should have been surrounding it: Christian Brothers Grammar School; Loreto Grammar School; Omagh Academy Grammar School; Omagh High School; and Sacred Heart College. Those schools have been left in limbo for well over a decade. A proper maintenance programme has not been undertaken for them, and they have not received the same investment as other schools across the North. As a consequence of the delays, generations of young people in my constituency have missed out on opportunities that they were promised and should have been afforded.

I do not want to see any further delays to the Strule education campus. The people of Omagh, its young and its educators deserve to see what they were promised realised and delivered. It is incumbent on the House to ensure that that happens. Omagh has suffered incredibly over the past 25 years, and this was to be a project that would truly bring our young people together on one site that is entirely inclusive and shared. They were to be learning from one another and moving forward together. That was the promise of Strule. I was asked by educators on Thursday night to reinforce their plea to the House to ensure that the Minister of Education will deliver it, that the Minister of Finance will find the money to ensure that it is delivered and that the people of Omagh will not see any further delays to this important project. It is vital for my constituency, but it is long overdue. The costs have gone up, but it is vital and in everyone's interests that it be delivered.

Mr Speaker: That brings to a close the time available for Members' statements. We will be taking Members' statements again tomorrow morning, so Members who have missed out on the opportunity to speak today will have the opportunity then.

Assembly Business

During Members' statements, a Member challenged a decision not to accept a question for urgent oral answer. To do that is entirely out of order, and it should not have happened. I remind Members that it is for the Speaker's Office to make such decisions, which are made after rigorous perusal of whether a question meets the standard. In that instance, the question did not. The Member indicated that, on Wednesday, there will be the opportunity to address the matter directly with the Minister for Infrastructure, and it therefore did not qualify under the procedure used to accept questions for urgent oral answer. A number of Members previously raised questions about the acceptance of amendments. That, too, is not acceptable under Standing Orders. I remind Members, at the outset of this sitting, that they have had a soft hand up until this point, but it will become stiffer as things go on.

Another Member raised an issue that is in the Order Paper, and Members' Statements are not for that purpose. If something is in the Order Paper to be raised — a question for urgent oral answer has been accepted on the issue of Nexus funding — that matter should not be raised during Members' Statements. I understand that, for a lot of people, we are in a learning curve and that the past weeks have just been the start of the Assembly term. I am reminding people of their errors, as opposed to inflicting any punishment on them, at this stage. Thank you for that.

Mr McGrath: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Business Committee members received an email on Friday afternoon at 3.00 pm, indicating that there will be no ministerial response to the Opposition motion on Executive reform, which we are about to debate. Given that the motion clearly asks the Executive Office to take action, I ask for your ruling on whether the avoidance of the debate by the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers, all of whom are present in the Building, is in order.

Mr Speaker: Where the subject matter of a debate falls within the remit of a Department, there is an expectation that there will be a ministerial response. Ministers are accountable to the Assembly for the activities of their Departments, and I, as Speaker, expect them to regularly attend our proceedings. I am advised, however, that there will be no ministerial response to the debate. The Business Committee was not advised in advance that any Ministers would be unavailable today.

Opposition Business

Executive Reform

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move

That this Assembly is ashamed of the long suspensions of devolution over the past 10 years; accepts responsibility for the decline in public services that has taken place over that time; apologises to public-sector workers who have experienced pay injustice over the past 10 years; resolves that the functioning of the Assembly and the Executive should never again be subject to the veto of a single party; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to include a specific commitment to reform of the institutions in the Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I am pleased to open the debate on the first Opposition day of the new mandate. Opposition is a natural and healthy part of democratic politics, and we intend to perform that role constructively, as we have thus far.

During the negotiations that led to the creation of the institutions, Senator George Mitchell famously pledged to bring his then newly born son back to Belfast one day to listen to and watch a sitting of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Senator Mitchell said that he hoped:

"we would watch and listen as the members debated the ordinary issues of life in a democratic society: education, healthcare, agriculture, tourism."

Senator Mitchell was able to fulfil his wish in 2012 with his then teenage son, but, when he returned last year for the 25th anniversary of the agreement that he helped to broker and that created the Assembly, there was no Northern Ireland Assembly to observe. For five of the past seven years, there has been no devolved Government in Northern Ireland at all. Today's motions from the SDLP on Opposition day are about preventing that from ever happening again, because, if it does and the institutions collapse again, I am not alone in believing that they will simply never re-emerge.

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ní Chuilín] in the Chair)

Those of us in politics and the media often focus a lot on the party political impact of one decision or another, asking, "What does that mean for the DUP?", "How might Sinn Féin react to what the DUP does?" and "How will the rest of the parties behave?". Those are legitimate and necessary questions in a democracy, but, when taken to an extreme, a fixation on political stand-offs leads us to the situation where public services and, indeed, the public themselves are of secondary importance. For nearly a decade, party political stand-offs and vetoes have allowed our public services and our public realm to decay and, in some cases, collapse.

I scarcely need list the litany of problems that beset our public services, from the worst healthcare waiting lists in western Europe to chronically underfunded childcare to special educational needs at breaking point or beyond. None of these problems were created by Stormont collapse, and none of them will be solved merely by the return of devolved government. However, all of these problems — all of them, along with virtually every other public policy challenge that we face — have been undeniably made worse by the absence of devolved government: the absence of ministerial decisions to decide priorities and allocate budgets accordingly, the absence of a multi-year spending programme to allow health service leaders to recruit doctors and nurses on a long-term basis; and the absence of any funding guarantees until the last minute for large parts of the community and voluntary sector.

Although we are all — at least, the vast majority of us — pleased to see devolved government return, we cannot pretend that public trust in the very idea of this Assembly and Executive has not been profoundly damaged. It has. In a recent survey conducted by Queen's University, only a third of voters thought that the Executive would survive until the end of this mandate. That is an extraordinary statistic. Despite the positivity around the restoration of Stormont, only one in three people think that it will last three years. That statistic should shame all of us in this Chamber. That level of cynicism and distrust is exactly why I asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to pledge to not resign their office before the end of this mandate. That was not a stunt. I was asking a question that most of our citizens want to know the answer to.

Our first motion today begins by expressing shame on behalf of this entire institution for its repeated collapses and the profoundly negative consequences that those have had for ordinary citizens, workers and public services. To be clear, that is not about assigning blame, but it is about acknowledging a collective failure of the political class to deliver stable and sustainable government here. To anybody who thinks that we should simply leave the rules unreformed after nearly a decade of chaos and devolution only functioning for a few years out of that time, I simply ask this: are you serious? Can anyone argue with a straight face that we are fine as we are and should just plough on regardless? As the saying goes, the first step to recovery is admitting that you have a problem.

It is worth unpacking some of that problem. We all know that there are divergent narratives of Irish history, but most of us should be able to agree that, tragically, Northern Ireland has been marked by division between people throughout its existence. There was, of course, division before partition. These institutions were created after nearly 30 years of violent conflict, and that conflict itself came after half a century of one-party rule that excluded one community from virtually all political power. Indeed, at times, that exclusion seemed to be the motivating purpose of the state. That hugely difficult inheritance is why we negotiated a system of power-sharing, of government based on inclusion rather than exclusion. As the party that did so much to shape the Good Friday Agreement, we do not agree with those who think that power-sharing — consociationalism, as it is known among academics — is in itself the root of our problems and our dysfunction. To take such a view is to wilfully ignore history, including the manner in which this jurisdiction was created, as well as ignoring the reality of a post-conflict society.

However, it is possible to reform and change the way that power-sharing works in order to provide a basic guarantee that there will be a government in the first place. Our reform motions today are designed to complement and implement one another. The first motion that I am moving acknowledges the harm done by repeated collapses and then pledges two things. Number one, the principle that no single party should ever again be able to collapse the institutions at will. I do not think that that is unreasonable. Secondly, the Programme for Government should contain a specific commitment to reform. Our second motion, which I will address in more detail when I move it later on today, creates a specific vehicle for producing legislative proposals on reform, namely an Ad Hoc Committee required to

produce a report on options for removing the single-party veto by September this year. I am sure that there will be opportunities for us to debate that and for me to answer some of the questions around those proposals during the course of the debate.

Our motions do not prescribe an exact model of reform of the veto, but a number of options have already been publicly advanced. Here, I acknowledge the work of the Alliance Party on this agenda. It has proposed an opt-out model for parties that qualify for one of the top two roles but do not want to take one. The NI Affairs Committee at Westminster proposed a series of related changes, some of which would undercut, although not completely remove, the current veto.

Many of those ideas, such as a move to super-majority voting as opposed to cross-community voting, were based on SDLP proposals.

12.45 pm

No one party can or should own reform. By definition, we need to achieve some degree of consensus in order to make it happen. There are multiple routes to reform, but we need to agree today that the first and most urgent change is the removal of the power to collapse the Government, and not make it conditional on other concessions. The protections in the Good Friday Agreement are supposed to build confidence not reinforce mistrust. The purpose of power-sharing is supposed to be positive partnership not negative veto. It has been said in recent days that the heavy lifting on this work needs to be done by Chris Heaton-Harris, the Secretary of State. We strongly disagree. A Tory Secretary of State who is working out his notice will not do this work for us. We need to do it ourselves.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am not going to give way at the minute, but I will give way later on in my winding-up speech. I will answer any questions then, but I am not going to give way at this stage.

A Tory Secretary of State who is working out his notice will not do the work for us. We need to do it ourselves, starting with these Opposition day motions. Let us remember that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister are now engaged in a process of negotiation with the Treasury over the financial settlement. As a constructive Opposition, we have said, "We support the asks

you are making". However, let us be real: one of the reasons why the Treasury and the Tory Government have been able to be so cynical in their treatment of these institutions and politicians here has been the repeated cycle of collapse. In order to build credibility, not just with the public but with the UK Government and others to reinforce our ability to negotiate, we need sustainable political institutions not ones that collapse so routinely.

As I said, a Tory Secretary of State who is working out his notice will not do this work for us: we need to do it ourselves, starting with these Opposition day motions. Let us protect —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way in my winding-up speech. I am happy to give way then to anyone who does not get in at this stage.

Let us protect the best of the Agreement and reform the veto that is undermining trust in the rest of it. The photo ops and positive vibes of the past month have been welcome, but we have seen this movie before, and rather than wait for the nasty plot turn and not-so-shock ending, let us change the script. Let us never again plunge our public services and our people into the vortex of no Government and no hope.

I commend the Opposition motion to the Assembly.

Miss Hargey: Today's motion refers to "the past 10 years" and

"the decline in public services that have taken place over that time".

Indeed, our public services and the workers who sustain them are part of the bedrock of our society, along with our people, communities and local economies. Ensuring that they can operate on a sustainable footing to address need and, importantly, drive aspiration is essential. Therefore, in doing so, addressing the underlying root causes that impact our public services is critical, particularly when you look at the events of the past decade.

What I find bizarre in the motion is that, while it mentions the impact on our public services and the cause and effects of that, there is no mention of the British Tory Government and their regressive policies. When we look back over the past 10-plus years, we have witnessed a number of societal shocks: the impact of the financial crash, Cameron and Osborne's Tory

austerity policies, Brexit, COVID, global events and the cost-of-profit crisis. When you look at all those shocks, some of which were deliberate policy and political choices, you see the impact that they have on driving poverty and inequality and how their effects disproportionately impact on certain sections of our population: our women and children, those with disabilities, our working class, our minority ethnic communities and, indeed, our older people.

The Tory's chosen policy of austerity has had, and is having, a devastating impact on public services. Countless pieces of research have shown the impact of savage Tory cuts on public services and their ability to respond, not just here but all across England, Scotland and Wales. Billions of pounds have been stripped from public services since 2010, which has had deadly impacts and consequences. Research has shown that Tory austerity policies since 2010 were the main cause of the decline in the rate at which life expectancy has increased. A further review showed the impact of Tory austerity on our health system: it is causing increased poverty, unemployment and homelessness and, as a result, putting considerable strain on our health service and its ability to respond. That has been exacerbated by Brexit and the loss of essential European funding, which targeted those most in need. Today, in this Building, the Equality Coalition is showcasing the need for an anti-poverty strategy, due to the impacts that are being felt here. That is backed by the women's movement and the wider community and voluntary sector, which see the impacts of Tory cuts.

The Executive have protected people by mitigating the worst excesses of Tory cuts. Challenging those cuts must remain our priority. We need appropriate funds to address that need, particularly as we are, as was stated, in a post-conflict society. That commitment was given by all Executive parties and the Opposition on 4 February in a joint letter to the British Treasury, which was signed by Sinn Féin, the DUP, Alliance, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. It called on the need to make immediate and durable changes to our funding arrangements; to deliver on public-sector pay; to deliver a fiscal framework; and, importantly, to plan for fiscal sustainability. If we are seriously to address the underlying root causes of inequality and develop world-class sustainable public services, we all must work collectively to address the funding shortfall, challenge austerity and transform our public services to meet the needs of our workers, families and communities. That is what the public really want us to be doing here today and

in the days ahead, and that is where our focus is and will remain.

Mr Buckley: Happy Opposition day to all Members across the House. Given the immediate media attention that there has been on the topic, we should define what the Opposition is: it is the party that lost the election. The SDLP has a significant record in that regard: it has gone from being the largest nationalist party in this place to the second largest. Given recent polling regarding the Alliance Party, perhaps the SDLP is now the third largest nationalist party in the Chamber.

For weeks and months, Mr O'Toole was clinging to the title of leader of the official Opposition, at the whim of whether the Ulster Unionists or Alliance would take it. They chose not to, so that duty and responsibility lie with Mr O'Toole. I thought that we were told that we were to have a constructive Opposition: one that relished the opportunity to hold the Government to account on the bread-and-butter issues. Do we now see the real political priorities of the SDLP? There is no motion from the SDLP health spokesperson, Mr McGrath, on waiting lists and constructive suggestions for how to bring them down. There is no motion from the SDLP education spokesperson, Ms Hunter, on much-needed capital investment for new schools or on special educational needs funding challenges. There is no motion from the Public Accounts Committee Chairman, Mr McCrossan, on the huge concerns in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I think that we will hear plenty from the official Opposition shortly.

Finally, there is no motion from Mr O'Toole, the Chair of the Finance Committee, on the Budget. Given that a UK Budget will be set out later this week, surely a motion outlining those concerns would be the people's priority, rather than petty point-scoring from the official Opposition. Instead, we have a motion on proposed changes to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement from the party of super-majorities, rather than of accommodation. Is that the real party of John Hume? That question needs to be asked.

Turning to the issue of reform, we do not deny that the challenges to the stability of the institutions and the length of time that the Executive and Assembly have not fully functioned over the past 25 years are regrettable. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we live in a contested space,

emerging from decades of terrorism. Success is not always guaranteed in that regard. This is a reminder of the need to preserve rather than destroy the delicate balance of community relations that is interwoven into strand one of the agreement.

Issues of instability, regardless of from which political party or community they may come, can often be complex, as has been seen in recent times. Let us look at the most recent issue of instability. We had arrangements foisted upon the people of Northern Ireland that not one democratically elected unionist could support — not one. If we had a similar situation arise whereby, for example, nationalism had an issue, would that likely lead to a similar outcome? The SDLP MP Claire Hanna was on record as saying that, in such circumstances —

Mr O'Toole: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Buckley: No, it is true. I will speak to the record, actually, to the leader of the Opposition:

"You cannot imagine that people would take that without civil disobedience at a very minimum."

The inescapable truth is that we live in a contested society.

Mr Middleton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Absolutely.

Mr Middleton: Does the Member accept that although the mandatory coalition that we have to deal with in Northern Ireland is an imperfect system, it is the one that we have to work with? It means compromise and working together on issues.

A Member: *[Interruption.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Will Members stop shouting from a sedentary position, please?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. That leads me to my next point, which is that the inescapable truth is that we live —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I will have to continue to get through.

We live in a contested place. The best way to defend the institutions from collapse is ultimately to ensure that we talk about issues that affect everyday working families, our front-line workers and our schoolchildren, as well as how to protect the most vulnerable in society. That is where the Programme for Government priorities should be. It is not by coincidence but by design that the mechanisms for review are not only built into strand one but rest outside the Executive. That reflects the real need to ensure that all Members and parties have a stake in and the space to give attention to them.

Consensus politics is the only way in which we can stave off instability. The political arrangements in Northern Ireland must be capable of commanding the broad support of all traditions across our Province. The motion before the House simply implies that devolution could still operate and succeed outside those parameters. That is fanciful to say the least. Cross-community consent has been essential to achieving progress in the Province, and it should be viewed as the solution not the problem.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bradshaw: Unlike the previous Member to speak, we, in the Alliance Party, are delighted that this is the first topic chosen for debate on Opposition day, as it reflects an Alliance Party policy and priority of long-standing. We will, of course, support the motion. I welcome the Opposition to this discussion. To emphasise just how long-standing our party's position on meaningful reform is, I have here a document called 'Agenda for Democracy' that we, in the Alliance Party, published 20 years ago today. It is remarkable how prophetic that was, given that it was published even before the St Andrews Agreement. It sought fundamental revisions, not quick fixes. The quick fixes since, as the proposer will agree, have only made things worse.

Mr Brett: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Go ahead.

Mr Brett: Thank you to the Member for helpfully outlining her party's commitment to ensuring the reform of these institutions. Can the Member remind the House, during the collapse from 2017-2020, how many times her party recalled the Assembly to try to move it on and get it back up and running when one party was blocking its return?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker.

You obviously were not a Member then. The issue at that time was that we were renegotiating to get us back. We called for a recall many times. We took things forward. However, the argument that you had with the UK Government over those two years could not be solved in this Chamber. Shame on you and shame on your party for the impact that that had on our public sector, which has seen a decline. For you to hold the whole country to ransom over your party issue is absolutely shameful. We will feel the effects of that for generations.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

1.00 pm

Mr Brett: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Member to address her comments directly to me? I know that she was a member of the Tory party, unlike me, but will you correct the Member on whether she should address me directly with her comments?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am going to respond to that point of order. All remarks should be made through the Chair, but we need to accept that this is just the cut and thrust of debate. If you have an issue regarding what I just said, go and see the Speaker, but I encourage Members just to look as if they are talking through the Chair. *[Laughter.]* Go ahead.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I was responding directly to the comments.

Some parts of our 'Agenda for Democracy' document have actually been implemented, including those parts on the reduction in the number of Departments and the devolution of justice. The document is still relevant as it sought an Executive to be founded, like almost any other Government in the democratic world, through negotiation and compromise. Taking into account our particular circumstances, the idea was that any coalition should be able to take office provided that it had the support of a weighted majority in the Assembly, which would ensure that it was inclusive. Twenty years on, that idea's time has come. It would remove a single party's ability to wield an all-destructive veto, which we saw over the past two years,

and parties would be entitled to opt out of the Government but not entitled to force others to opt out too.

Weighted majority voting, ensuring not only an inclusive Government but a genuine choice for the electorate, would also enable the abolition of communal designation. Even back in 2004, that was seen as a crude form of institutionalised sectarianism. In 2024, it is entirely inappropriate for the modern, post-agreement Northern Ireland in which we live and in which people are choosing even more often to step beyond the old dividing lines when making choices in schooling, leisure activities and, indeed, the polling booth.

The point is that designations do not just mean that cross-community votes, whether arising from the application of a petition of concern or otherwise, take a crudely sectarian form where other votes are deemed to count for less, with the result that people opting to vote neither unionist nor nationalist are blatantly discriminated against. It is not right that the electorate who vote for the Alliance Party are, effectively, disenfranchised on important votes. Those votes also mean that the institutions do not function in a manner befitting the post-agreement electorate.

My party colleagues will come back to much of this, but I want to turn to another issue that we raised in our 2022 manifesto. As in many other policy documents, that has a fundamental recognition that our system of government relies, perhaps too much, on allocating every policy area to a particular Department and too little on a genuine sense of collective interest and collective responsibility. It is on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Executive Office, to look at that because we see far too much silo working in the Assembly and in Departments. What is required, therefore, is recognition from all of us, including those who tabled the motion, that there were flaws in the original agreement and that a review mechanism was built into it that was meant to iron those issues out but rarely did. We need to remove crude sectarian vetoes. That is objectively undeniable, but we also need to ensure that the institutions operate in a way that is befitting of the entire society that they are supposed to represent, and we need to move beyond those silos.

Mr Beattie: I support the motion. I fully understand that it is worded as it is because Members are trying to get the maximum support possible. However, I cannot stand here and give cover to those who caused suspension over five of the past 10 years.

It is important that we say it as it is. We had three years of a boycott by Sinn Féin over a financial issue. Are we better off after that boycott? Are we likely to have another renewable heat incentive (RHI) situation? The reality is that it could be just around the corner. In fact, the rot in our public services set in during those three years. There were then two years of boycott by the DUP over the Northern Ireland protocol. That boycott achieved nothing whatsoever of substance. The Irish Sea border is still there, the European Union still has input into what happens in Northern Ireland, checks of goods arriving into Northern Ireland still take place, and the custom posts are still there. During those two years, our public services crumbled to the extent that some of them cannot be fixed in the short to medium term. We have to be mindful of that. So, no, I will not give cover to those who collapsed these institutions and maintained boycotts, but I promise to work with them, as well as with the Opposition, the Alliance Party, independent Members, the TUV and People Before Profit.

It is the thrust of having a conversation about reform that I support in the motion. Should one party have a veto over devolved government, 25 years after Good Friday Agreement? Absolutely not. The system allowed it, but you have to ask why the system allowed it. The system allowed it because, in 1998, we were trying to stop ourselves from killing each other. That was the focus. We focused on peace and we got peace, but the politics did not fit into place. After the Belfast Agreement, there should have been amendment into the future through collaboration and negotiation. We did not get that, apart from a few scrappy changes that did little to stabilise the Government and keep it from being collapsed at the whim of just one party.

What does reform look like in my mind? Everybody will have a particular view of what reform is, and we could debate every single one of those all day long, but that is not what we are here to do today. I think reform is about negotiation and agreement of an agreed position that takes into account all the political players, including independents, the TUV and People Before Profit, and civic society. All of them have to feed into this, because, remember, it was the people who voted for the 1998 Agreement, and it is the people who need to have a say in what direction we go next. Just because we do not like somebody's point of view does not mean we should exclude them. I will not support exclusion in any shape or form, but it does not look like —

Miss McAllister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Yes.

Miss McAllister: Does the Member agree that it is not about exclusion, but it is more that those who do not want and are not willing to participate choose to exclude themselves and to opt out? Rather than using the word "exclusion", we might use "self-exclusion", or say that they are opting out of sitting in an Executive.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beattie: I am quite comfortable with the word "exclusion". The reason that I say "exclusion" is that there are people in the Chamber who absolutely do not support the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as it stands. It is important to say that, if we do not listen to those voices — if we try to push them away — we will not get to a full understanding of our society. I am quite happy to stick with the word "exclusion".

What I do not want is another St Andrews Agreement. The St Andrews Agreement was a carve-up between two of the large parties, behind closed doors. It was a quick fix, and it did not work. It has left us in a worse position. The UK and Irish Governments were complicit in that; they just wanted to get this place up and running and nothing more. Quick fixes will not work: pull the thread, and the whole thing could unravel. This is about sitting down, thinking it through for the long term and capturing all the voices that need to be added to the discussion.

We know that the Belfast Agreement had its flaws. It was balancing the unbalanceable, after so much conflict. However, we do not want to fall into the trap of just screaming, "Reform, reform, reform!", without stopping to really think through what reform will mean in the short, medium and long term. I am up for having that discussion and do not think that we should be afraid of it, but that does not mean that I am open to changing every single aspect of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement; it is still the bedrock of government in Northern Ireland. However, I am certainly up for having that discussion. I am willing to talk to anybody inside or outside the Chamber and to those who are in favour and those who are against. Until we get all the views, we will not know the position.

Mr Harvey: I have listened intently to the points made thus far, particularly by the Opposition, on future reform. It has struck me how little interest

or focus seems to have been placed on the principle of consent and how much it would feature in reform as envisaged by the SDLP. I find that concerning, given the importance that the principle of consent has had to politics here for the past 20 years or more. It is no exaggeration to say that politics in Northern Ireland could not function without it.

Cross-community consent has got us to where we are. We should not forget that. It has been essential to political and social progress and should be viewed as a positive influence. Cross-community consent, and what flows from it, is not the problem, but it seems somewhat that the SDLP, in its recent road to Damascus-style conversion into opposition, believes that it is. It appears that the SDLP feels the need to fix something to which John Hume and others from its ranks were so wedded. The reality remains that 80% of us in the Chamber still designate as either nationalist or unionist. My party and Sinn Féin represent the bulk of Members. As such, wider support for both traditions in Northern Ireland remains the dominant force in politics and must be borne in mind if we are to sustain fully functioning institutions representing and delivering for the people who elected us.

The motion raises a valid point about the long-term stability of devolved government. No one can deny that stability was an issue in the past and poses a risk to the House in the future. We must be honest, however, about the root causes of instability. Stability was challenged when the institutions were not functioning for the good of everyone and were not deemed to be representative of all communities. As a party, we have evidenced that we are not afraid of reform of the institutions, where such reform is necessary. Indeed, changes have been made to the petition of concern, for instance, to take into account its impact on Assembly business.

It is incumbent on us all to ensure that government works and is seen to work for everyone in Northern Ireland. We are the guardians of that delicate balance and of the need to ensure that, in a divided society such as ours, everyone is at the table. As has often been said, government works only when it works for all. That theme must therefore be central to our focus on any discussion of future reform. If the plan is simply to diminish the voice or representation of one tradition in order to facilitate or bolster the rise of another, such changes are doomed to fail.

It is good to see the Assembly functioning once again and commanding the ongoing support of unionists and nationalists. It is for us all to put our shoulder to the wheel and make it work for

Northern Ireland. That will be achieved through delivery on bread-and-butter issues that matter to the public. Delivery is where our focus should be. Delivery will cement stability and progress. Only then should we advance proposals for reform.

Ms Armstrong: On 19 October 2021, I stood in this place to lead a debate on a motion on reform. Everyone in the House voted for it. There was no Division, as the House agreed the motion. I stood then, after a period of collapse brought about by Sinn Féin, and I stand here now, talking about reform, after a period of collapse brought about by the DUP. Last time, I talked about a demoralised workforce, about the harm being caused to our services in Northern Ireland, about the harm being caused to carers — an issue that is very close to my heart — and about poverty. The same things are present today. Nothing has changed in the past number of years. We continue to fail the people of Northern Ireland because of the Assembly's persistent collapse.

How can we change that? We can do so by having sustainable government that cannot be collapsed by any party.

1.15 pm

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) in the previous mandate prioritised reforming designations and the appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Sadly, there was no real appetite among other parties to take action to remove the power to use their veto. Even after the Alliance motion was passed by the House, with no party voting against the motion, nothing was done to take forward the change needed to create sustainable government. The AERC collected all the information, but nothing was actioned because kicking the can down the road meant that the veto could remain.

We could have mitigated the risk of a single party pulling down the Assembly. We could have delivered change that would have protected the democratic institutions. In fact, I brought it up again at the first Committee for Procedures meeting, and it was confirmed that the legal changes that will be needed to make the reforms will have to be made by the co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement: the UK Government and the Irish Government. If we are serious about these institutions, we need to act now to ensure that this does not happen again. We need to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland and step up for future generations to ensure that our hard-

fought-for political peace process continues to enable Northern Ireland to reach its full potential. The Good Friday Agreement is a foundation of peace and progress. Our political structures should and will also be involved in that.

Alliance wants to see the removal of designations and to change cross-community voting, because the current system embeds division and creates instability. Why should my vote count differently from that of the rest of you in this Building? Why is my vote not the same as a nationalist or a unionist's vote? Why, in 2024, is my vote still different? Replacing parallel consent with weighted majority voting is an important change to reduce the significance and role of designations. It is in the Good Friday Agreement. Society has changed — it is more diverse and inclusive — but that is not reflected or respected in this House. You are only equal if you are nationalist or unionist. That is unfair, and the time to change is now.

In the 2021 census, we can see that the population is more diverse. Minority ethnic groups have increased in size, and the number of people living here who were born outside the UK and Ireland is up to around one in 15, which is the highest ever recorded. The number of those who are forced to identify as other — there are those of us who prefer to be called United Community — has increased between the 2011 census and the 2021 census. There is no justification for the continuation of the designations system.

Alliance also wants to see change in how the First Minister and deputy First Minister are nominated. We want to update how we nominate the First Minister and deputy First Minister in order to ensure the stability and sustainability of our institutions. We want to update, not wipe out, the 1998 Act, so that, if a party that is eligible to nominate a First Minister does not want to do so, the entitlement can be passed to the next-largest party. A party would be able to refuse the nomination without triggering a veto on Executive formation. That is consistent with the current position on the allocation of the other Executive Ministers under d'Hondt.

We in the Alliance Party are committed to stable and sustainable power-sharing that respects liberal, democratic principles and enables the development of a shared future, but, as stated by Professor Paul Dixon in his written submission to the AERC:

"this process will require 'political skills' and pragmatism in order to achieve a

compromise that is deliverable and sustainable across the political parties."

I would love it if the motion had built into it that, if it passed, the Speaker could write to the co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement — the UK and Irish Governments — confirming that it is the will of the House that the designations system and the definition of cross-community voting be updated so that I am not left out of it again.

We must move forward to ensure an inclusive, fair and sustainable government —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Armstrong: — for Northern Ireland.

Mr Brett: I congratulate the leader of the Opposition on his appointment, and I welcome him to his place here today.

We will not be party to a stunt that uses and abuses people's emotions about a sensitive issue.

"There has to be power-sharing ... they are the fundamentals to which we hold dear".

Those are not my words but those of the leader of the SDLP, Colum Eastwood. In the words of the leader of the SDLP, we must have a power-sharing Executive. Those comments stand in stark contrast to the motion. What has changed? Is this a U-turn policy from the SDLP? Is this the leader of the Opposition auditioning for a higher role in his party? Or is it a fact that the SDLP have been placed in opposition by the people of Northern Ireland?

Of course, there is no mention in the motion, or in the contributions made by SDLP Members so far, of the collapse of the institutions that his party presided over following the Belfast Agreement. There have been no comments whatsoever, but simply criticism of the Executive — an Executive that, for the past number of years, the SDLP —

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brett: Of course.

Ms Bradshaw: Do you agree with me that stop-start politics has been very damaging to public service delivery in Northern Ireland over the past 25 years and that we have to do something to change that?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Brett: I agree with the Member that the politics of domination have been very damaging for relations in Northern Ireland. I agree with her that Northern Ireland only moves forward when all communities move forward together. The lesson of the past three years should be that the concerns of a major section of our society cannot be simply ignored and papered over. The only way in which we all move forward —

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brett: I will happily give way.

Ms Armstrong: Does the Member accept that the feelings of the people who elected me — I was the first person to be elected to this House at the last election — have been papered over by the DUP? You stayed out of government and you do not accept my votes in this House. How can you marry up what you are saying to the actual facts?

Mr Brett: The point that I was making to the Member is that the mandate that we were given was not simply just transferred to the DUP; we did not make up our mandate. We were given a mandate by the people of Northern Ireland to take the action that we took. I must remind the Member that it was not my party that brought about the settings and rules by which we operate currently. Her party and others in the Chamber campaigned for the Belfast Agreement, and these are its outworkings. We have managed to improve that through the St Andrews Agreement and other agreements. However, the way in which we operate is a result of the conditions set out before us.

I want to make some progress before I give way to anyone else. We have had two years with the leader of the Opposition in post and not a single policy settlement has been put forward here. He proposes to create a new Committee, to which he will, selflessly, appoint the Chairman. He has been so ready for Opposition in the past two years that his contribution has been to congratulate the Alliance Party's policy. When the provision for Opposition was introduced in the House, we were told that it was a new age for democracy. We were told that people would be held to account. Instead, we have an attempt to use the motion to create another office that they will fill. No meaningful proposals have been put forward here.

The lesson of the past three years must be that Northern Ireland will move forward when all

communities move forward together. I encourage the leader of the Opposition, when he next brings a motion, to perhaps make it relevant to the people of Northern Ireland. Then, perhaps, at the next election, he will no longer be in the Opposition.

Miss McAllister: I support the motion. I am glad that it has been tabled and that the SDLP is joining the Alliance Party in our calls for reform of the institutions. I say that in all honesty and without sarcasm, because it is important that all parties get on board and not just have discussions and conversations about reform, but actually help to make it happen.

There is an elephant in the room, however, that has not been highlighted today. These institutions are as stable today as they were the day before the last collapse. The reason not just why Sinn Féin and the DUP are lacking in support for reform of the institutions but why others are not fully on board — I appreciate that UUP Members have said that they support the motion but are unsure about the entirety of the conversation — is the issue of power. The reason why people are so reluctant to give up the power of veto is control. If you are refusing to give up that power and to reform the veto over the establishment of these institutions, it is for one reason only: you want to use the threat of bringing down these institutions again.

We need to go beyond that type of politics in this day and age. We need to ensure that we have good governance and a respectful way of debating the issues that we do not all agree on. There is no one in the Chamber who believes that they can get everything that they want at all times. In bringing down the institutions, we see people acting like they should get everything that they want. However, they know that, in any negotiation, the outcome will never be totally on your side. Alliance respects that, and we have been calling for reform since 2004. In June 2022, we published our proposals and put them forward to the UK and Irish Governments, stating that we are willing to have these conversations and to talk about cross-community voting and designations, because, as my colleague has just outlined, the votes of the people who voted for the Alliance Party are not counted in any cross-community vote. We need to ensure that we can move past that, but it is not just about words; it is about action.

The Member who spoke before me — I speak through you, Principal Deputy Speaker — highlighted the Belfast Agreement, which many Members in the Chamber support. I am proud to say that we still support the Belfast Agreement, but, at the time it was published, it

contained safeguards so that it could be changed and updated, because time moves on. We all have our political priorities, but we cannot push forward our political priorities without the threat and the shadow in the background of bringing down these institutions.

We wanted the motion to be a bit more specific, and we did attempt to table an amendment. However, perhaps we understand why the SDLP has not been specific, and I understand that the leader of the Opposition will address some more issues in his winding-up speech. I would like to hear from the SDLP if it will also get on board with the Alliance proposals to remove the system of designations, because that is particularly important.

We have already discussed that issue in public. Each and every one of us, when canvassing doors right across Northern Ireland, will have been met with the conversation about reform. We know that people support it and that people can get on board, so I say to the DUP and Sinn Féin: do not be afraid of what reform could mean. I know that you may be afraid of losing your power and control, but it is more important to move this place forward and have an Assembly and Executive that can actually deliver for everyone.

Ms McLaughlin: Since this place has returned, we have discussed and debated several issues that are central to people's lives in every part of Northern Ireland. We have promised to work together on childcare, we have pledged to end violence against women and girls and we have called for action on the environmental catastrophe, yet, while debating each of those issues — I agree with the Member for North Belfast — there has been a huge elephant in the room, which is that, at any moment, one of the biggest parties in the Assembly could, once again, exercise a veto on the progress that they claim to support. That nuclear veto, which we are discussing today, and its repeated deployment in the past 10 years has eroded public confidence in our politics, left public services in crisis and forced workers out into the cold to demand fair pay. That is a veto that we should all resolve to remove from our politics for good. After a decade of dysfunction, it is time to change.

As we debate that veto today, those of us in favour of reform should be comforted by the support for the idea of reform. A huge majority of the public get that the veto just has to go. In polling, a majority in every age group gets that it has to go, and that is no surprise. Those people can see all around them the consequences of that and the dysfunction that the veto has

incentivised. They see it in the health service collapsing in front of their eyes, in the generation of young people leaving our shores, in their pay packets that have reduced further and further in real terms and in their childcare costs that are just skyrocketing.

1.30 pm

While the Government have sat back — or, too often, not sat at all — people have seen how their lives have, in many ways, been collateral damage of the deadlock. They have seen at first hand in their communities how a constant cycle of ransom politics just does not work. They see the same people lose trust and confidence in politics, and it is little wonder. They hear us talking about multi-year budgets, but they know that we are rarely here for multi years. They hear us talk about the Programme for Government, but they know that one has not been agreed since 2011. Their trust in politics has been pushed beyond breaking point on too many occasions to count. Indeed, a member of the public could be forgiven for thinking that such dysfunction actually suits parties that would rather say no than say yes and that are content to feed off tribalism and factionalism instead of standing over a record of government in delivery. The truth is that good government is not built by historic events, and trust is not won through symbolic handshakes. Good government is a process that demands us all to commit to consensus and compromise over years of crafting peace, the same years that simply have not —.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, of course.

Mr Durkan: Does the Minister agree that it is both telling and disappointing that —.

A Member: Has she had a promotion?

Mr Durkan: Does the Member agree that it is both telling and disappointing that not only would neither the First Minister nor deputy First Minister promise not to collapse the institutions again but neither would come here to respond to the debate?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Member for his intervention. I suppose that, really, that says it all.

I understand that a veto is a really hard thing to give up, but the two biggest parties have told us that they are about delivery. The single biggest message that the First Minister and deputy First Minister could send, if they are really committed to delivering for people here, is to put down that veto and accept that no one should be able to exercise it again. That would be to act in the spirit of the agreement and our peace process. Without that, how can people believe them this time, when this place has collapsed so easily before? If they do not have that commitment to write it down in the Programme for Government, people will know what conclusion to draw.

Finally, I have heard people say that entering into any process of reform runs contrary to the Good Friday Agreement. I fundamentally disagree with that. I am profoundly grateful for the success of the Good Friday Agreement. I will never take for granted that agreement or the men and women who made it happen. They are the builders and the giants whom we all follow, but the truth is that to review the agreement's outworkings is to fulfil the very spirit of that agreement and stay true to the original intention of those builders. Change was always expected and, indeed, intended. To reform and review is to believe no less strongly in the agreement and peace process. In fact, it is the same agreement as that which provides for reform and expects and demands those who carry out the responsibility of preserving it to ensure that it works for the next generation. That generation deserves stability in its Government and hope for the future. The only way in which to guarantee that hope is to recommit to that agreement and reform the institution so that no one can ever pull it down again.

Ms Nicholl: When I was elected as an MLA, my first act in the Chamber was to sign the register and designate as United Community. It has always been strange to me that we were lumped into the Other group: we are not other; we are so much more than that. Then, I took my seat, and we tried to elect a Speaker. We could not. The cross-community votes of my cross-community party did not count in that. I spent the next two years being an MLA but being unable to legislate because one party has the power to bring everything down. My experience as an MLA has been severely hindered by flaws in the system. We need to change that.

I welcome the motion. It is important that we have this discussion today. I will focus my comments specifically on designation, which I would have liked to see referenced in the motion. The urgent need to change it is a case

that Alliance has been making for many years. The Good Friday Agreement is precious, but it was designed to be a living document; to be the beginning rather than the end of a process. Not to move forward and not to change is dangerous and damaging to the vision of the Good Friday Agreement. Society has changed dramatically since 1998. The number of Alliance MLAs on these Benches is testament to that. We are all given the label of "Other", but we are many things. I am Zimbabwean, my mother is South African, my father is Irish, and my children have Irish and British passports; I have them. Our identities are complex, and they should not be barriers to be overcome. They are the stuff of pluralism and vibrancy, and they are something to celebrate and respect. The process of designation, when MLAs sign into the Assembly, is unnecessary. It embeds division and is part of what makes our institutions so unstable.

When we are asked in the Chamber to vote on a cross-community basis, our votes, on these Benches, are treated differently. My colleague Kellie Armstrong is particularly passionate about that and far more articulate on the subject than I am. Not to have the same weight on a range of votes — including on the election of a Speaker, changes to Standing Orders, and approvals to the Budget — is quite frankly untenable and demeaning to me and my colleagues. As Kellie pointed out, if that was the case in any other area or aspect of someone's identity, it would be discrimination. Our society has changed, and our institutions must reflect that.

The values of mutual respect, equality and partnership are infused in the Good Friday Agreement, and they should remain the driving forces of our politics. To fulfil those values, however, we cannot stand still. We must modify and update the functions of these institutions. Cross-community voting continues to treat cross-community parties as less than those who are nationalist or unionist. The continued use of designation is no longer tenable, and it has been untenable for some time.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with her, and I will talk in my winding-up speech about designation being something that we need to have a conversation about. Does she agree, though, that in the short term, given that there are things as well as designation, such as how North/South and east-west works, we should give urgent priority to removing the veto? It would be very good to get rid of that quickly. Some of those other things will take a little bit longer.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Nicholl: I thank the leader of the Opposition. On the Alliance Party website, there is a document with proposals for reform, which we published in June 2022. It details our short- and medium-term changes in the line of reform. It is something that we feel very passionate about, and it should not be something that we just talk about. We have laid out how we would achieve it. Yes, I absolutely agree that there are different areas to focus on, and we should discuss how those should progress.

The final point that I want to make is that Members from the DUP said that we should be discussing things that are relevant to Northern Ireland. I think that this is so relevant: the fact that we have had no Assembly; that we can just collapse it and have no Ministers in place to make local decisions for local people or to look at budgets or have no Committees scrutinising and able to ask questions. The impact that it has is huge, and that is not just on delivery. It has a psychological impact as well. People see a failed Assembly, and they feel like this place has failed, but it has not. This is a brilliant place to live. Our people are brilliant, and there are wonderful opportunities. We are talented and creative, and we should be celebrating everything that is good. The ability to collapse everything — the failure within the structure — needs to be addressed and is very relevant to the House. We will support the motion and will continue, as the Alliance Party, to do everything that we can to progress reform.

Mr Allister: Since I first came to the House, I have repeatedly pointed out the unworkability of mandatory coalition. Every time I did, the most ardent defenders of Belfast Agreement devolution were from the SDLP. It was the holy grail; it could not be touched; it was perfect; it was the ideal for us all. Those who dared to question it were some sort of outcast from the past. Yet here we are today and, lo and behold, the SDLP calls for change. Mind you, the motivation is very suspect, because, so long as the mechanisms of mandatory coalition were about protecting the interests of nationalism as the minority, those mechanisms were, indeed, the holy grail. However, the moment that nationalism is in the ascendancy in the House and it might be unionists who need whatever protection there is, forget about it. The call has been, "Let's have reform. Let's have change". The motivation is very suspect indeed.

We heard from Mr O'Toole about his worry that the institutions might collapse again. Mr O'Toole, do not worry about those in the DUP leadership. They have been captured. They are

now protocol implementers and acceptors of the Irish Sea border and of the fact that we are governed by foreign laws that we do not make and cannot change. Do not get too concerned about whether the DUP will ever rediscover its principles. Under the current leadership, you can rest assured that there is no chance of that.

You might, if it bothered you, be more worried about Sinn Féin because, for its leadership, it is not about making Northern Ireland work. It is about having a stepping stone and getting within touching distance of its goal. It is quite clear from some recent Sinn Féin declarations that, as soon as it arrives there, Stormont is over — it is gone.

I reassure you, Mr O'Toole, that, from my knowledge of what I observe from these Benches, in the main, the happy band of the DUP will not rediscover its principles or pull down the protocol-implementing institutions. My goodness, you have only to look at the glee and delight of the deputy First Minister as she troops around the publicity stunts with the First Minister as her unelected lady-in-waiting. Be assured that the DUP, having enthroned Sinn Féin, is very unlikely to return to the principles that, rightly, took it out of the House two years ago and the dispensing of which, shamefully, brought it back in a month ago.

I fear that your concerns in that regard are misplaced, Mr O'Toole, but if you have any concerns about when Sinn Féin reach the point of saying, "Mission accomplished" and therefore the end of any role for this institution — you probably do not have such concerns and nor does your sister nationalist party, Alliance — you probably have reason for them. You probably do not, however, because you are all, of course, on the same trajectory with the protocol and its implementers.

Mr Carroll: It is fitting that the Executive parties and the former Executive parties start by offering public-sector workers an apology for cutting their pay for over two decades. All those who have been in government at some point — that is, Sinn Féin, the DUP, Alliance, the UUP and the SDLP — should be sorry for the destruction of our public services, which have been underfunded, understaffed and under-resourced by successive Administrations.

When I was younger, my ma told me that if you are sorry for something, you do not do it again. It means that you have learned a lesson from the past and are ready to do better in the future. Four weeks into the new Assembly, the Administration are set to do the same disastrous deeds all over again and again.

If parties were truly sorry for cutting public-sector pay, the first thing that they would do would be to give public-sector workers a real pay rise. Instead, the Assembly ran through a Budget Bill that guarantees those workers only a 5% rise, which is a cut in real terms, considering the rate of inflation. That is not to mention the spate of budget cuts and attacks on public services that will come down the line. Whatever today's outcome, we need to be clear that, if Executive parties do not begin to address those issues, they are not sorry at all for the harm that is being done to our communities and services. Like many previous motions in the Assembly, this one will simply be for the optics. They are ruling by fooling once more.

1.45 pm

People Before Profit was one of the strongest and most vocal critics of the DUP's boycott of the Assembly, which was self-serving and wrought untold misery on people across the North. However, today's motion about reform of the Assembly fails to address the real elephant in the room: that these institutions, built and run on the basis of communal designation and division, will always be prone to instability. When the Good Friday Agreement was signed, a critical minority warned that it would effectively institutionalise sectarianism, and that is exactly what has happened. The DUP, when it collapsed the Assembly, was simply exercising its veto on power-sharing as enshrined in Stormont's sectarian institutions.

People Before Profit attempted to amend today's motion by calling for the doing away with of communal designations and the removal of the sectarian mechanisms that allow for day-to-day vetoes of Stormont's business. As we see it, the communal veto is not just about collapsing the Assembly but is a sectarian mechanism that has been used to deny democratic rights time and time again. We have seen it used under the guise of the petition of concern to thwart things like same-sex marriage, reproductive rights and Irish-language legislation. It is to the eternal shame of the Assembly that the Tories, under pressure from popular mass movements, were forced to legislate for those demands where Stormont had failed.

A system that mandates parties to designate as unionist, nationalist or other assumes that there are and always will be separate communities here and that those communities should elect the leaders to represent their supposedly separate interests. I am not an other. I am a

socialist, and I was elected on that ticket. It is a disgrace to the House that me and others are designated offensively as "other". Not only does that approach copper-fasten sectarianism outside these institutions but it is based on an illusion. While the unionist and nationalist establishment parties here seem opposed in principle, they are always united when it comes to cutting workers' pay, impoverishing our communities and stoking communal segregation.

Even if the motion passes, it will not begin to cure the sectarian rot at the heart of the Northern state. The cure lies in working-class unity. It is that unity, seen amongst striking public-sector workers, that forced the Assembly back to business. It is that unity that will uplift our communities. It is that unity that will overcome communal division as people — Catholic, Protestant, none, migrant — finally stand up to Stormont together. The contrived unity on offer in the motion will not cut it, because it is an attempt at unity imposed from above. Real unity and real change will either come from outside these institutions or not at all. Working-class communities must start by opposing the pay cut offered to public-sector workers and the punishing revenue-raising measures that the Executive want to impose.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Matthew O'Toole to wind on the motion. Matthew, you have 10 minutes. If you take an intervention, you will not be given any extra time.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you very much for that warning, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.

First, I thank all the Members who have participated in the debate. It was a wide-ranging debate, and I will touch on as many key points as I can. People will not be surprised by anything they heard from any side of the Chamber. I welcome the fact that at least two parties support what we are trying to do. I am not entirely clear where Sinn Féin is on it, and I am clear where the DUP is. I will attempt to address some of the points that were raised. I am genuinely disappointed that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are not here to respond. Indeed, there is no Minister here to respond to the debate. I think that that is an insult to the Chamber, bluntly. It is suboptimal at best, and I do not think that it reflects the seriousness of the issue or the gravity with which the people of Northern Ireland view it.

We are clear that the purpose of today's motion is not about assigning blame or having a fight over what happened in the past, but, since

Members raised issues that happened in the past, I will touch on a couple of those, purely to draw reflections on them. Our motions today are about positive, constructive momentum behind reforming the institutions, not to remove the pluralist or power-sharing principles behind them but to allow us to simply have a Government. What is so unacceptable about that? Why is veto necessary? Why is it necessary for people to have their identity protected to abolish — to be able to take away — not just the principle of government but the operation of government?

I will go through a few of the comments that were made in the debate. Deirdre Hargey seemed to be in sympathy with some of the motion but focused on the regressive austerity imposed by the Tory Government. That is exactly right, and Deirdre would know, because she was Communities Minister and had to deal with a lot of that when she was in office, but what about the three years before that when there was no Communities Minister to deal with the aggressive austerity being foisted on the people of the North by a Tory Government and an austerity-obsessed Westminster? One cannot, on the one hand, argue that aggressive austerity from Tory Ministers has left our communities in a terrible place and then, on the other hand, say that we need to retain the right to collapse government and give them the power to do what they like. The power that we have at a devolved level is limited, both because of the mandatory coalition system and because Westminster holds all the power. Deirdre, her party and I agree that we need to change that in the long term and that we need a new constitutional set-up, but, while we have the one that we have at the minute, it is not defensible for us simply to say, "Well, we should be able to collapse the institutions".

Jonathan Buckley's former party leader — I do not know whether he was involved in the defenestration of that particular former party leader — famously said:

"It is good to have a bit of fun in the Assembly." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 130, p148, col 1].

That is what Jonny was doing when he made a series of bizarre claims that John Hume and Seamus Mallon would not be in sympathy with reform of the institutions. John Hume and Seamus Mallon helped create the institutions, along with David Trimble, John Alderdice, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. Yes, the SDLP was intimately and proudly involved in the creation of the institutions. It wanted the institutions to function. It wanted us to be here,

to work and to spill our sweat and not our blood. I will therefore take no lessons or preposterous, pathetic slurs from DUP MLAs about what John Hume and Seamus Mallon might have thought about our changing the rules, to be quite honest with you.

Jonny also said that the SDLP was forced into this position by the electorate. I have had to clarify a few times that I am not denying the outcome of the 2022 election. We did not get enough seats to qualify under d'Hondt for a Ministry. Unlike others, and this includes the Member's party, we accept the outcome of elections. We are here in opposition because that is the role that we have after the election. There is no denying that, and there is no cavilling about that from me, and we intend to do it robustly and constructively, no matter what slurs come from different sides of the Chamber.

Paula Bradshaw gave a thoughtful assessment. I am a bit of a geek, although I am not quite geeky enough to have read a 20-year old document. I may pinch a copy of it afterwards, however. I will come on to touching on a couple of other comments made by other Alliance MLAs in order to give some balance.

Doug Beattie is right when he talks about the fact that things were different in 1998. A lot of the institutional issues that we have were created in the context of a society that was emerging from a violent conflict. Before that violent conflict, we had a system of government that was genuinely based on excluding one entire community.

Harry Harvey mentioned the principle of consent. With respect to Mr Harvey, the absurd conflation of consent with perfect consensus has been a hallmark of DUP arguments for the past lock of years, as people say in the countryside. I do not consent permanently to Northern Ireland's being in the UK, nor will you — through the Chair — if there is ever a referendum on a new Ireland, and I hope that there will be consent for its happening. That does not mean that you do not give consent to the institutions that exist to work through democracy. Nor does it mean that everything in the Chamber has to have perfect cross-community consent. It was not designed in that way, and it was never supposed to work in that way. With respect, again, there was a slightly preposterous reference to John Hume, with which I have already dealt.

Kellie Armstrong talked about reform and said that the AERC is kicking the can down the road. That is one reason that we do not accept the idea that the Assembly and Executive Review

Committee is the best place in which for the discussion to happen, because it has a record of being — for fans of Charles Dickens — like the famous Court of Chancery case of *Jarndyce v Jarndyce*, where the court sat for years and never reached a resolution. We need to have a resolution, and we need to have momentum. There are a couple of common threads through the Alliance contributions, and I will address the designation point a little bit later.

The Member for North Belfast Mr Brett called the motion a "stunt". Mr Brett, as always, for a rather new MLA, is a very persuasive and passionate speaker, and, indeed, one who is able to pull off quite remarkably brazen lines like that, given some of what the DUP has pulled over the past number of years. He said that there have been electoral issues for the SDLP. I am tempted to say this: no blank, Sherlock, we know. We are doing our job in opposition, we are proud to be doing it and we are going to keep doing it no matter what slurs come from different parts of the Chamber.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree with me that every single DUP Member who participated in the debate has contradicted the manifesto on which they stood for election to the House? On page 41, it states:

"We remain convinced that a voluntary coalition represents the best long-term option for Government in Northern Ireland. We believe this should be on the basis of a concise agreed coalition plan that can subsequently be augmented by a more comprehensive Programme for Government and supported by a weighted majority in the Assembly."

Mr Buckley: Speech.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Excuse me.

Mr Tennyson: The DUP has advocated reform.

Mr O'Toole: The Member has been generous —

Mr Buckley: *[Interruption.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Shh!

Mr O'Toole: — and I think that his point has been made.

Nuala McAllister and Kate Nicholl both touched on the question of designation. The motion does not mention designation because we should prioritise up front. That is why the third motion that we will debate today is focused on the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee to get consensus and agreement on the question of the removal of the veto. It is really important that we try to keep up the momentum to take that one toxic ingredient out of the mix here. Once we do that, we can do a lot afterwards. That is why this first motion talks about the broader reform of the Programme for Government, which could certainly include designation.

I understand, particularly now that there is increased Alliance representation in the Chamber, some of the frustration around voting. We are up for that debate. It is important to say that I do not agree that designation in 1998 was the root of all evil. We need to be honest about where we were in 1998, but that is not to say that we cannot look at it now. We all have rich identities. For what it is worth, I designate as a nationalist and a social democrat. My party is a proud member of the Party of European Socialists. There is a lot more to me than simply my constitutional view — proud and passionate though I am about it. Our identities are all complex, and we need to recognise that. The binary definition does not apply simply to those who designate as other, although I respect the argument that was made.

I come back to the point that was made again and again, including by Mr Allister, about the SDLP talking about changing the Good Friday Agreement. From the very beginning, we have talked about improving and changing, where necessary, the Good Friday Agreement. What we have been opposed to has been the hacking at the principles of power-sharing, including the St Andrews Agreement —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am afraid that I do not have time to give way. I would normally, but I will not get an extra minute, so I will not give way. You will, hopefully, have time to speak in the second debate on reform.

We have been opposed to hacking away at the principles of power-sharing, pluralism and partnership. Of course, Mr Allister has been delighted to hack away at that and object to it. That is fine; that is his outlook, as they say. Although he is a talented polemicist, I do not go along with the somewhat vulgar and faintly misogynistic depictions of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is not appropriate.

We have an opportunity today to do something very important, which is to build a consensus around partnership and working together. It is ironic that the constructive Opposition have to encourage the Government to stay together and do a job for the people, but that is where we find ourselves. I very much thank everyone who participated. Let us make this place work. I commend the motion once again to the Assembly.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for bringing his remarks to a close.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: OK, so —

Mr O'Toole: Aye.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. I heard you, Matthew. Question Time begins at 2:00 pm. Rather than doing the Division now — it is clear that we need one — we are going to do it directly after the question for urgent oral answer, when the Speaker will do it. Members should take their ease until Question Time at 2:00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Programme for Government: Timeline

1. **Mr Allen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline when they expect a Programme for Government to be finalised. (AQO 91/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): We all want to see a truly transformative Programme for Government (PFG) that sets a clear strategic direction for the Executive and enables the type of cross-departmental collaboration and working needed to improve public services and tackle long-standing social, economic and environmental concerns. To achieve that, we are committed to working in partnership across the Executive to deliver an ambitious programme that responds to the challenges we collectively face. We have started to address those challenges already by moving quickly to tackle public-sector pay, starting the work needed to make childcare affordable and seeking to work urgently with the Treasury to put in place a more sustainable financial settlement. While we have not put a specific timetable around that yet, we know that the Assembly would like to see progress quickly. That is shared by the Executive. It is, however, important that the Executive develop a Programme for Government at a sensible pace, take into account all the relevant issues and ensure that our collective priorities are considered alongside an incredibly challenging financial and operational backdrop.

Mr Allen: Deputy First Minister, there is no doubt that the over 46,000 people on social housing waiting lists will want to see a transformative and ambitious Programme for Government. To that end, will you commit to pressing for a stand-alone housing outcome in the PFG?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The process is ongoing. The First Minister and I expect proposals to be brought to us shortly. There is, of course, an in-built consultation process, and not just with the Assembly, which is a legislative requirement. However, we also want to get out there and listen to various groups about the issues on the

ground. You are absolutely right. We only have to look to our closest neighbours to see the housing crisis there in terms of not just homelessness and social housing but access to affordable housing for families right throughout those places. We are very conscious of that. In order to prevent that from happening here, work needs to commence now. We have already discussed that, and it will be fully taken into account in the PFG process.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with Andy Allen on the need for a stand-alone housing outcome. We all look forward to seeing the Programme for Government. Perhaps the deputy First Minister can give us more details on how the PFG outcomes will be measured.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware that a significant amount of work and consultation went into the previous draft Programme for Government. That included a consultation on a well-being framework and an outcomes-based framework. That is very much the direction that public policy is moving towards. It is about encouraging people to look at cross-departmental collaborative actions that should be focused on the outcomes. What is it that we are trying to achieve? Of course, key to that is the measurement of progress against those outcomes. We have a well-being framework that is live across all section 75 groups and is being monitored. Of course, we will be focused on ensuring the right matrix for an outcomes-based approach to the Programme for Government.

Mrs Erskine: The deputy First Minister will be acutely aware that I am keen to see the economy in the west boosted. Can the Minister confirm whether the Programme for Government will contain any specific economic targets on which sectors are key to Northern Ireland's growth?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Yes, absolutely. As indicated in a number of the public remarks that both the First Minister and I have made, we are keen that we have a strong prosperity agenda for Northern Ireland. That must mean all of Northern Ireland — every part of it. We are very conscious of that. That will be fully integrated in our economic approach, which will be a key mission within the Programme for Government. You are absolutely right: that must be backed up by the right indicators. Of course, we encourage investment in Northern Ireland no matter where it is coming from, and we will listen to the companies that are willing to invest here on where they want to go. However, we have this incredible story to tell about so many

of our places throughout Northern Ireland, and we will ensure that, in speaking to businesses, we make clear the huge benefits of many places throughout Northern Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw: I will pick up on the previous debate on the deterioration of our public services over the last number of years in terms of stop-start politics. With regard to your leadership role and that of the First Minister, how are you going to work through areas of Government where we need to stabilise and where we need to transform in the Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There have been huge challenges in relation to that. It is notable that for quite a number of years — really, since 2015-16 — we have been operating on a single-year Budget instead of a multi-year Budget. That is a product not necessarily of our system but of the spending review process in London. We are dependent on what is happening with the spending review, and we will find ourselves with a single-year Budget again this year because this is the final year of the spending review period.

We absolutely want to move onto a multi-year Budget. That should be aligned with an ambitious Programme for Government, as I have set out. Of course, what we also need is the ability to make that investment in public-service transformation while we continue to provide public services. That has always been a huge challenge because if the choice is to take away from front-line public-service delivery right now in order to do that medium to long-term planning, that is, understandably, a very difficult decision and choice for Ministers.

So, we have made clear to the UK Government that we want to put our finances on a sustainable basis that facilitates both of those key themes of work: delivering good public services right now to the people who need them and being able to absolutely invest in the transformation work that we need to make our public services fit for purpose.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Northern Ireland Bureau: Update

3. **Mr Stewart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Northern Ireland Bureau. (AQO 93/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The role of our offices in Washington DC, Brussels and Beijing is to represent and promote the Executive's interests

and priorities overseas. As a small, outward-looking economy, that is key to our ambition to building a more prosperous region where our businesses and our citizens can realise their potential.

The bureau works closely with key partners, including Invest NI, Tourism Ireland, local government and the business community in promoting Northern Ireland as a great place to work, live, invest and visit. We have come to enjoy unprecedented access to the key decision makers at the most senior levels at the heart of the world's largest economies. That is welcome. We need to build on that if we are to realise our ambitions. As we look forward, we need to have a clear focus on our priorities for overseas offices and on new opportunities and regions.

Mr Stewart: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Also, I congratulate her and wish her all the best.

As she said, there is a great deal of goodwill towards Northern Ireland right now, particularly around the world, in light of the Executive coming back. We have a very skilled and highly able workforce. Is there any more that we can do to promote Northern Ireland on the world stage given our economy ability and unique circumstances? What plans does she have to extend the offering of the Northern Ireland bureau around the world?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. We have always been very conscious, in terms of our offices overseas, that we do not work in isolation. We do not work in a silo in terms of just the Executive Office. We work very closely with, for example, Invest NI to identify opportunities and priorities.

Northern Ireland's economy will only grow through that foreign direct investment, support and collaboration, and we are very conscious of that. Very often, our size can be a challenge in terms of economies of scale and cost, but it is also an incredible opportunity because we should be able to get ourselves into a position of being very agile in identifying new and merging opportunities. We have made significant progress with that on, for example, fintech, regtech and our creative industries. That is the type of thing that we need to build on to promote ourselves as a key region that is connected, between Government, business and our universities, and really sell the opportunities of Northern Ireland as a great place for international investment and growth.

Miss Brogan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Buíochas leis an Aire fosta. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister also.]* As the deputy First Minister has outlined, the work of the bureau is extremely important to increasing trade, investment, tourist opportunities and employment. Will the deputy First Minister provide an assessment of the bureau's delivery over the past 12 months, le do thoil? *[Translation: please?]*

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The work of the bureau has continued over the last 12 months, but we are conscious that a strategy was put in place in 2014. There were some attempts to revise that strategy over subsequent years, but a decision was made to look at a longer-term strategic framework for not just the Executive Office but the Executive and all of the key interests. The First Minister and I are expecting proposals from officials around how to approach that new strategic framework, but we want to work collectively with everyone across the House to make sure that our strategy for international engagement is fit for purpose. That will include an assessment of the work of all three overseas offices over the past 12 months, to identify what has been effective and what we need to build on.

Ms Forsythe: The First Minister and deputy First Minister will be in Washington DC next week for St Patrick's Day. What benefits do they aim to bring forward and deliver for Northern Ireland during that trip?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Our annual visit to DC around St Patrick's Day offers unprecedented access to key decision makers at a very senior level. Looking across the globe at the opportunities that equivalent countries or regions the size of Northern Ireland get, we see that we have incredible access. We want to maximise that opportunity. We will go to DC with a very positive message — the positive message that we have sought to establish over the first four weeks of our joint leadership of the Executive — that Northern Ireland is up for investment and growth and that we want Northern Ireland to thrive for all our young people and for all places within it.

We are going to DC, and the Member is right that there is a huge amount of goodwill out there. It is our responsibility to make sure that we maximise the opportunity presented by that goodwill in order to bring maximum benefit to everyone in Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin: Does the deputy First Minister agree that stop-start Government damages our international reputation and negates our ability to positively sell Northern Ireland? Remember, it is only 12 months since we did not go to Washington, because we had no Government.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As I very clearly set out, moving forward, the key thing is to try to build robust, confident, strong and constructive working relationships. I look forward to working with the Member and her party, as the official Opposition, and, indeed, with parties throughout the Assembly to sell a very positive vision. The key thing is to ensure that we avoid instability by working well together. I am confident that we have the ambition to do that across all the parties of the Executive, and I look forward to working constructively with the official Opposition.

Diplomatic Links

4. **Mr Irwin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline how they plan to continue developing diplomatic links with key international regions. (AQO 94/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Global challenges impact on us locally. Engagement with international partners is vital to deliver for all people here. We have seen significant changes over the 10 years since the first 'Executive's International Relations Strategy' was published and are considering how a future strategy will deliver the Executive's priorities. Part of that will be about building deeper relationships with the key international regions that can help us, whether we build trade and investment links or learn from others and share our experiences. In the past year, we have seen a considerable increase in delegations coming here, and we will build on those links to develop new relationships. Improving our relationship with the EU, its institutions and its member states is an important focus. We will also work closely with the UK and Irish Governments, in their representations overseas, to boost opportunities.

Mr Irwin: I thank the deputy First Minister for her response and wish her well in her new post, given that she was born and bred in my constituency and has close ties with the family that remains in Newry and Armagh.

Does the deputy First Minister believe that the bureau offices are best located? Is a review of their roles needed?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Going forward, an evaluation of the successes of the strategy over the past number of years will be invaluable. That evaluation will have to be fed into what we build on. We are conscious that, in the US, our office is in DC and that we have an office in Brussels. Those are the key centres of power. We will, of course, continue to assess strategic advantages. That was part and parcel of the 2017 review of the international relations strategy that sought to identify in which regions there is potential for growth and with which regions there is potential for forging closer relationships that will be to the benefit of our businesses and to Northern Ireland. We keep that under active review, and it will very much be a part of the new international relations strategy.

2.15 pm

Ms Armstrong: Given that the deputy First Minister is thinking about changes in the possible locations of the international offices, how will human rights be promoted in those areas? As a liberal democracy, we need to promote that issue too.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: All engagement is done clearly in the context of our strong position on human rights, including internationally.

Mr Kearney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Chéad Aire as ucht a freagraí. [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers.*] The deputy First Minister referenced the review of the international relations strategy. There is still considerable scope to develop and build on the strategy. Will she identify the new global challenges on which the Executive's international strategy must focus? Will she also advise what innovations she will bring to ensure that our international relations strategy is capable of meeting those challenges and opportunities?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We are aware of the ever-changing global situation, particularly in geopolitics. There is the war between Ukraine and Russia, and there are areas of instability, including in key trade routes. There are also opportunities, however, such as the growth of the tech industries, including cyber security and regtech, in which we have done very well thus far. There is huge potential for that, along with AI and other technologies and industries in which we have a proven track record. The key will be to work closely with the Department for the Economy and Invest NI to identify which

partners offer the best opportunities for investment. We are relatively small, so, of course, we cannot cover everywhere. That is why targeting in line with the Department for the Economy's 10X strategy will be absolutely key. Focusing on a small number of strategic objectives will give us the best opportunity of achieving them to the benefit of Northern Ireland.

Programme for Government: Multi-year Budget

5. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether a Programme for Government will be aligned to a multi-year Budget. (AQO 95/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The number of years covered by the Executive's Budget depends on the period covered by the Treasury's spending review. As 2024-25 is the last year of the current spending review, and the Executive's funding beyond that has not yet been confirmed, a multi-year Budget is not possible at this point. The Executive have been clear that public finances here need to be put on a more sustainable basis. To that end, we are committed to working with the UK Government to make sure that we are given the tools that we need. That does not prevent the Executive from planning for the long term. We have already got to work on childcare and public-sector pay, and we will continue to plan for the future while we work to create the stable financial baseline that we know we need.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, deputy First Minister. Acknowledging that a multi-year Budget will not come from the UK Government yet, is it the Executive's position that there will not be a multi-year Budget allied to a Programme for Government when it is published?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As the Member is aware, under section 20 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the commitment and requirement of the Executive is for a one-year costed programme. However, we want to place that in the context of a multi-year Programme for Government and a multi-year Budget. That will require some projection forward in the hope of achieving a certain level of spend. To that end, budgetary discussions with the UK Government secured, for example, the so-called fiscal floor of 124%. There is much more to be done on that, but it gives a degree of certainty. As the Member is also aware, some of that additional funding was secured as part of the £3.3 billion package. It is not without its issues, some of which are being worked through by the Finance Minister for

clarity about what is or is not contractually committed. We therefore have some certainty that will allow us to plan on a multi-year Budget. Of course, it is fiscally incredibly tight. We need flexibility. We want the ability to invest in transformation. Ideally, we want to weave the initial one-year Budget plan into a multi-year Budget to align fully with a multi-year Programme for Government.

Mr Allister: Given that Casement Park costs are now out of control, at £308 million with a derisory 5% GAA contribution, is it fiscally responsible to include it any longer in a Programme for Government, particularly given the high level of need in health and education?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware that there is a commitment to the Casement project as part of the multisport programme. There has been no change to that fiscal commitment, and it remains, but we are aware of a huge amount of speculation, which has yet to be confirmed, that costs have increased. There will be an inflationary increase, but it appears that costs have significantly increased. We have not had confirmation of the totality of that cost. When we have that, the Minister for Communities will bring forward advice on the issue, but, at the moment, the commitment in the Programme for Government is to the allocation as set out in the multisport package, which, at that time, included rugby and football.

Ms Sheerin: Will the deputy First Minister outline the measures that will be put in place to prioritise effective delivery of the Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We are conscious of the fact that many things were achieved in previous Programmes for Government but that there were commitments that were not. In the last number of weeks, the report on the investment strategy for Northern Ireland and capital programmes has come out. That has some very good examples of what has been achieved, not least the Glider and the Titanic centre, which are really good examples of key capital investment in strategic interests. We are also conscious of the fact that other big capital projects were not advanced. That is why the First Minister and I have tasked the head of the Civil Service with bringing forward proposals for an effective delivery-style unit that will sit at the centre of but work across the Executive. That unit would not simply be owned by the First Minister and me in that we would ask for and demand that delivery; it would very much be there to work with all the Ministers in order to

make sure that we deliver the strategic priorities of the Programme for Government.

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

6. **Ms Brownlee** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what steps they intend to take to improve the application process for the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 96/22-27)

10. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of processing applications to the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 100/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 10 together. More than £36 million has been paid to victims since the victims' payments scheme opened for applications on 31 August 2021. We are aware of concerns about the length of time that it is taking applications to reach determination stage. It is important to acknowledge that each application to the scheme is unique, with its own complexities, and that many applications include multiple relevant incidents.

Our Department has provided £5 million of funding to support victims' and survivors' representative groups to facilitate the recruitment of welfare and support officers and of admin support staff who can assist applicants with the application process. Additional funding has also been made available to provide health and well-being support. We are also supporting the retrieval of evidence on behalf of applicants and the Victims' Payments Board. Our officials continue to engage regularly with the Department of Justice and the Victims' Payment Board to consider ways of helping to enhance the delivery of the scheme.

Ms Brownlee: I thank the deputy First Minister and welcome her to her role. Will she provide a timeline for the appointment of the new Victims' Commissioner?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As the Member is aware, the previous Victims' Commissioner resigned. We are waiting for a submission, which, we understand, should be with us in the next number of weeks, to commence that process. We are very keen for a commissioner to be put in place as quickly as possible. The appointment is regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for

Northern Ireland (OCPANI), and there are therefore a number of requirements that mean that we estimate that the process will probably take about six months. We encourage anybody who may be listening and who feels that they could do the role and do it well to please put their name forward for it. The process will commence, hopefully, very shortly, with the aim of putting a commissioner in place as quickly as possible.

Mr Dunne: Unfortunately, more than 40 people have died while waiting on a decision on their application. What more can the deputy First Minister do to streamline the process and, ultimately, to get more payments out to those who are eligible?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Victims' Payments Board has so far made determinations on 1,024 applications, 733 of which have been successful and 391 of which have been unsuccessful, so things are moving. As I indicated, £36 million has been distributed. I am sure that many Members are in a similar position in that they have constituents who are now part of the process. Their application is in, and it has been a very difficult and challenging process for them because the application form inevitably requires them to go through an awful lot of their experiences and the impacts that those experiences have had on them. We are conscious of that. We have asked the Department of Finance's business consultancy service to come in and do a review. We have also been working with the Department of Justice, which appointed Capita, to look at the processes to see what we can do to improve them.

We have to remember that, in this process, we are not requiring people to get information and evidence to support their application prior to making the application. We are encouraging people to put their application in, and that is when the process commences. That, inevitably, means that the application process is considerably slower than it would be were we asking for fully supported applications. We have encouraged people to do that for a number of reasons, but we are looking at how we can speed up the application process, knowing that so many victims and survivors are very concerned, are waiting and need that support as quickly as possible.

Ms Nicholl: Congratulations, deputy First Minister, on your appointment. It was lovely to see you and the First Minister at a childcare setting for your first engagement. How will

awareness of the scheme and any changes to the application process be raised?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There has already been a review of the application process. Those changes and the changes to the guidance have been rolled out to support people with their application. I have spoken to victims and survivors who have found it retraumatising to fill out the form and relive all the experiences that they have gone through. The £5 million was spent on organisations, welfare officers and support officers for them to work with people not only on putting the application in but, after that, on the implications for those people of having gone through the process. We know that, for many people, certainty is an important aspect. The nature and complexity of many of the applications means that it is not simple to say that they will take six or 12 weeks. A lot of them take a lot longer because they are historical or, perhaps, some of the records are difficult to obtain.

We have been working with the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) to try to secure a better way of getting access to records. We have been supporting the Department of Health with additional resources to help get medical records and whatnot. There is a whole series of actions. We need to improve communication and speed for families, but it is a very complex and novel scheme.

Mr Beattie: I welcome the information leaflet on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme, which has gone to every household in Northern Ireland. However, it is a UK-wide scheme: what are we doing to reach people in Guildford, Hyde Park, Deal and Birmingham?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his very important question. It was raised in the House of Commons at the time that the scheme had the potential to go wider. However, we made the case that there was no point in the UK Government replicating the scheme. The scheme could be fit for purpose for people no matter where they currently reside. Many soldiers who served in Northern Ireland reside in parts of England, Wales and Scotland and may well be able to apply to the scheme.

Discussions had commenced with the UK Government, asking them for a financial contribution towards the overall cost. At the moment, the cost of the scheme comes from our block grant. To do something like a leaflet drop for the entire UK would have a significant cost associated with it, which would come out of our allocation. We do not think that it is

unreasonable that the UK Government should support that drive by making a financial contribution, not only to the scheme but towards the support and welfare of their applicants. Those discussions will continue, and, hopefully, we will have a more collaborative approach moving forward.

Maze/Long Kesh: Development

8. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what discussions have taken place regarding the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQO 98/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We recognise the immense economic, historic and reconciliation potential of the site and look forward to working with the recently appointed board to maximise that potential. We hope to meet the board over the coming weeks. The new board will continue to consider possible approaches to the regeneration of the site and provide us with advice and options for the future.

The Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) continues to develop its area of the site, with three further tranches of land transferred under the development agreement. The addition of Logan Hall, the Fold and the Annex have further enhanced the success of Balmoral show. The development corporation has carried out significant repairs and restoration of the World War II-era hangars, which host the wonderful Ulster Aviation Society collection. It continues to prove popular and attracted some 3,000 visitors over the European Heritage Open Day weekend in September 2023. Air Ambulance also operates from the site, taking the very best pre-hospital critical care to the scenes of medical emergencies.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: A very quick question from Mr Butler.

Mr Butler: This is a question that I first asked in 2016 to then First Minister Foster: how long is the Executive Office prepared to land-bank that valuable asset and stall efforts to reap its full potential benefits for Lagan Valley in particular?

Mr Speaker: Quickly, please, deputy First Minister.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We will have discussions about that issue and how we will potentially unlock the site. It is a key strategic site in Lagan Valley, and of course I want to see its potential

unlocked. It can be an economic driver not just for Lagan Valley but for the whole of Northern Ireland. We will therefore work to seek a way through the issues on the site in order to unlock the potential for Lagan Valley and Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: We move on to topical questions.

Assembly Conventions

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why, on the first Opposition day of the mandate, they failed to respond to the Executive reform motion, given that long-established convention in the Assembly holds that when a motion specifically calls on a Minister or Ministers, that Minister or those Ministers will respond to the debate. (AQT 61/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member should be aware that his motion pertained to the work of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) rather than to that of the Executive Office.

Mr O'Toole: I am afraid that I do think that that is a particularly acceptable answer. I will write once again to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister about that.

You have been talking about vital issues such as international relations, victims' payments and economic opportunities. Why, deputy First Minister, will you not commit to staying in your job for the rest of the mandate, given the seriousness of all the issues that you have been discussing for the past half hour?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The best way in which to secure and stabilise the future of our Government here in Northern Ireland is to build constructive working relationships. We work within the framework set down by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, as amended by the St Andrews Agreement. The work on reform, and on the consideration of reform, is, appropriately, being taken forward by the AERC, and we look forward to reading the Committee's recommendations in detail.

Mother-and-baby Homes in NI: Unmarked Graves

T2. **Mr Donnelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after congratulating the deputy First Minister on her new role, for an update on whether the inquiry into mother-and-baby homes in Northern Ireland will include the

burial of babies in unmarked graves. (AQT 62/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: That work has been moving forward at pace against the report on the five key recommendations. Work on the key policy decisions to be made in legislation is still at a relatively early stage. I know that many of the people most impacted on by the issue have not yet seen the draft legislation, but that is because it has not yet come up to Ministers. Once it does, we will consider some of the policy questions in the consultation. There are still a number of issues to be resolved, including on what we will go out to consultation, but we want to be able to look at them as comprehensively as possible. Mother-and-baby homes were not part of the Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) inquiry. If we can, we therefore want to deal comprehensively with that issue through this inquiry and its redress scheme so as to prevent any unnecessary further inquiry into dealing with some of the elements. We will be very conscious of that issue and try to take it into account as fully as we possibly can.

Mr Donnelly: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Will she agree with me that moves to resell plots of land throughout cemeteries in Northern Ireland where the babies are buried should not happen? Will she commit to working with residents who are opposed to that?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. I am not aware of the detail of what you have said about the potential sale of such land, but there is no doubt that people throughout Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland have been absolutely appalled at some of the revelations about the treatment of those babies and children. It is an incredibly emotive issue for very many people, so it is absolutely right that we address it in every way that we can. Although I do not know the detail of the specific plots of land that the Member talks about, land absolutely should not be sold if there is a question mark over those sites. We will certainly take that issue away, consider it fully and perhaps write to the Member with more details.

Gaza: Israeli State Actions

T3. **Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their office will commit to not meeting and engaging with Israeli state representatives on account of Israel's actions in Gaza, where some 30,000 people have been slaughtered, with children killed and maimed on a mass scale and people forced to

eat animal feed under the hail of American-sent weaponry. (AQT 63/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware that I am answering questions from a departmental perspective for the office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Executive Office. There will, of course, be party political views on that matter.

Mr Carroll: That is a disappointing answer, Minister. Your previous international relations strategy was supposedly committed to peace-building. You cannot be committed to peace-building if you are engaging with a nuclear-armed state that is slaughtering people in Gaza on a mass scale. You have missed an opportunity to say that the House will not endorse the actions of the Israeli state. I call upon you and the First Minister to refuse to engage with that apartheid state.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I know that many people throughout Northern Ireland will want to see a resolution to the current situation in the Middle East, the hostages released and movements towards peace in that region.

Historical Institutional Abuse: Executive Apology

T4. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will associate themselves with the apology that was issued by the Executive to the victims of historical institutional abuse, at a time when the Executive were without a First Minister and deputy First Minister. (AQT 64/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The First Minister and I would like to associate ourselves with the apology that was offered to victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse on 11 March 2022. In our role as leaders of the Executive and Ministers in charge of the Executive Office, we said that we are sorry. To the victims and survivors, we say this: we acknowledge the wrong that was done to you, accept responsibility and offer our deepest regrets. We pledge to ensure that systemic abuse never happens again, and we commit to continue supporting you in any way that you deserve.

Mr McAleer: I thank the deputy First Minister for her response. Does she acknowledge the importance that associating herself with that apology has for the victims?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. I want to pay tribute to the incredible work that has been done by the victims and survivors. The Executive Office deals with many people who have been fighting for so long to get recognition, acknowledgement and redress, not just for historical institutional abuse but in respect of mother-and-baby homes and for the victims and survivors of the Troubles. We recognise, absolutely, the incredible journey that they have been on and the fight that they have had to try to get acknowledgement, justice and redress. Our message today, absolutely, is that we are here to support all those victims and survivors. We recognise the hard work that they have put in, and we now want to do everything that we can to support and help them.

Childcare Expansion

T5. **Mrs Dodds** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that she knows that the deputy First Minister is deeply committed to expanding childcare in Northern Ireland and to delivering a strategy, for her commentary on the fact that, on 23 February, in a response from Dr Caoimhe Archibald, the Minister of Finance, she indicated that the Executive have received £57.2 million of Barnett consequential for 2024-25, additional to the Northern Ireland Budget, in response to the expansion of childcare in the rest of the United Kingdom, and to state whether she agrees that it would be good to ring-fence that money for the first steps in delivering childcare, standardising preschool and nursery and perhaps extending Sure Start. (AQT 65/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for Upper Bann for her question. It will come as no surprise that I absolutely agree with her. There are consequential that come from those policy decisions in Westminster. I absolutely believe that, although we are not obliged to ring-fence that money for those particular purposes, we should ring-fence it and spend it. The Member, rightly, pointed out that there are immediate actions that could be taken. We are all conscious that, getting a really good, workable, effective childcare strategy, will require working with stakeholders, really thinking it through and getting the right intervention at the right time to support settings and families. Of course, families are under immense pressure right now. That should mean supporting families and settings with immediate actions while that work continues.

The Member is right to highlight the rationalisation around the 22 hours. I think that the approximate cost of that is £35 million. The

First Minister and I have asked for urgent, costed actions to be brought forward on what we can do immediately while that work on substantive strategy is put in place.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is very positive that we have additional funding from the UK Treasury in order to take the first steps in relation to this. Does she also recognise that it is important to support childcare providers in the extension of the childcare strategy?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. In my constituency, Lagan Valley, we have already seen the impact of that pressure on settings. No matter what the type of setting — public, private or social enterprise — they are under huge pressure, not least because electricity and heating costs have significantly increased. Of course, childcare workers deserve to have fair remuneration — a fair wage. To that end, it is welcome that there is a pay increase that will shortly come in for those workers. They are some of the lowest paid, despite the importance of the work they do. We also know that that puts additional financial pressure on the settings. We want to meet both objectives. We want childcare workers to be paid well, but we want childcare settings to be sustainable. The Education Minister is urgently looking at this issue and will bring forward some proposals. However, we need to stabilise current provision while we continue to roll out development of the substantive childcare strategy.

Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly

T6. **Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the discussions that have taken place about Shackleton barracks in Ballykelly. (AQT 66/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The development of these sites has been a part of the Executive Office and OFMDFM for some time, and it will play into a discussion around the strategic approach for the sites. We want to maximise the potential, as mentioned, around the Maze/Long Kesh site and other strategic sites. We know that they can be very important in the local area, and we want to work with the local community towards what can be achieved. I was reading about the development of Ebrington and the significant benefit that it has brought to the local area and the local economy. It sets a very good example of what we can achieve if we work with the local council and local stakeholders to maximise the potential of these sites.

Mr Robinson: I thank the deputy First Minister for her response. Does she agree with me that, given that this site was once described as one of the most exciting sites in the north-west, every effort must be made to ensure that it becomes an economic driver for the north-west?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. It would be good to meet with him and perhaps some local stakeholders. As we said to the Committee just last week, we are keen to get out of Belfast and get out and about. I am a Markethill girl, and there is a Tyrone woman, so we are keen to get out. Investment in the Belfast area is vitally important, and we support it, but of course we need to bring prosperity to all parts of Northern Ireland. We are keen to get up and speak to the local stakeholders about what we can do to support them in realising and maximising the potential of that site for the area.

Mr Speaker: Questions 7 and 8 have been withdrawn.

Ebrington: Future Plans

T9. **Mr Delargy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to state what the Executive plan to do at Ebrington, given that Ebrington has been mentioned, which delighted him, to meet the demand of the people of Derry for more events there and to maximise the potential of that site. (AQT 69/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We have worked very closely with the site and have made a significant multi-million-pound investment in it. There is lots of exciting opportunity and some exciting events have already taken place. The Member is absolutely right. The overall strategic direction for Ebrington was to transfer that to the local council and for the council to bring forward the events and entertainment scheduled for the site. There have been some difficulties in the last number of years with this, but we want the site to be an economic driver, albeit working with those who have invested and are on the site. We want the site to maximise its potential. Ultimately, the aim is to transfer that site to the local council, but we are happy to work with local stakeholders and the council to see what we can do in the meantime to maximise its potential.

Mr Delargy: I thank the Minister for her answer. What will she do to help review the number of events that are in Ebrington and maximise that to drive tourism and the economy in the north-west?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware that this is subject to contractual arrangements with those who are now currently resident on the site and have businesses on it. Officials have been working constructively. I understand that there is now going to be an entertainments programme over the course of the summer and the next financial year, and I welcome that.

I understand, however, that it is a restricted programme, due to those discussions. I understand that the relationships are working well and that constructive conversations are happening. Getting the local council, as the body that will eventually take ownership of it, involved in that may well help to develop that local culture and music programme for the entire community.

2.45 pm

East-west Council: Establishment

T10. **Mr Brooks** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm a date for the establishment of the east-west council that is outlined in the safeguarding the Union Command Paper and to state the positive benefits that it will bring to Northern Ireland. (AQT 70/22-27)

Mr Speaker: You have a few seconds, DFM.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: A date was confirmed for the east-west council. I believe that it is 26 March. That will take place in Belfast, but the details will be released very shortly. We are working closely with the UK Government on the new infrastructure, which provides really exciting opportunities for greater collaboration across and throughout the United Kingdom.

Health

Insulin Pumps

1. **Ms Brownlee** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the NHS provision of insulin pumps for people with type 1 diabetes. (AQO 105/22-27)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In January 2022, I formally announced the setting up of the regional insulin pump service to mark the 100th anniversary of the use of insulin to treat diabetes. That announcement was supported by £200 million of funding by my Department to enable that life-changing service to be established. The investment makes

provision for pump devices and the specialist workforce required to support people living with type 1 diabetes to receive insulin pump therapy.

The aim of the regional insulin pump service is to improve the lives of people living with type 1 diabetes, and it was co-produced with people living with diabetes, clinicians and healthcare professionals across all health and social care trusts, alongside Diabetes UK. Our service goal is to provide equity, reduce variability and enhance outcomes for people living with diabetes across Northern Ireland. Centrally, quality of life is a key consideration in pump decision-making. I am proud to report that Northern Ireland is the first of the regions across these islands to have made quality of life a key criterion.

Following a formal commissioning process, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust was selected to deliver the service. A regional multidisciplinary team delivers the insulin pump pathway, connecting with local health and social care trusts to provide a high-quality service. In year 1, the service has begun a rebalancing exercise across the region. That directly supports the ambition to have equity as our chief priority.

I am pleased to report that, following successful steps to support those experiencing the longest waits, in the context of having an available workforce, the regional insulin pump service will be fully operational from today, Monday 4 March 2024. Without doubt, there is still much work to do, but we have built firm foundations, and, most importantly, work has begun.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you, Minister, for your response, which I welcome. I understand that the Department of Health recently endorsed the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommendations regarding the hybrid closed-loop system for those with type 1 diabetes. Will you provide an update on the implementation of those recommendations?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her query about the closed-loop service. In December 2023, as the Member stated, NICE updated its guidance with recommendations on the use of a hybrid closed-loop system. The guidance provides evidence-based recommendations on hybrid closed-loop systems for managing blood-glucose levels in type 1 diabetes. Subsequently, Department of Health medicines policy branch, which sits within my Chief Medical Officer's group, reviewed that guidance and formally endorsed it as being applicable in Northern Ireland.

In line with NICE guidance and the recommendation, work has been undertaken by my officials to develop an options appraisal. That will allow me to understand the implications of that decision for overall provision, consideration of priority groups, system costs and workforce and communication requirements to enable and support that. The information will inform commissioning arrangements for Northern Ireland and final decision-making on the implementation by my Department. It is worth noting, however, that NHS England developed a five-year phased implementation strategy in response to the guidance. That decision was taken in response to the scale and scope of the recommendation.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, you will recall that, during the previous mandate, I wrote to you and, subsequently, the permanent secretary about the commissioning of Dexcom continuous blood-monitoring devices that have been described to me as revolutionary for people with type 1 diabetes. They work in conjunction with a pump. I have constituents who are entitled to a new pump —

Mr Speaker: Question, please. You have had your preamble.

Ms Sheerin: — but cannot avail themselves of it because they do not have the Dexcom device. Can you advise whether the decision to commission these devices in the North will be reconsidered?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point, which is in connection with the previous supplementary. Those continuous glucose-monitoring (CGM) devices are steadily becoming a more in-demand way of monitoring diabetes control for people on intensive insulin therapy. There are many such devices available to support people living with diabetes. The NICE resource impact report on continuous glucose monitoring devices, published in March 2022, states:

"there is no advantage to recommending a specific device over another".

Therefore, the most appropriate system for each individual is the responsibility of the health and social care trusts and their clinicians to determine, in consultation with the person living with diabetes and their carer.

The strategic planning group in my Department commissioned stand-alone CGM devices, and this is in line with identified commissioning

needs within limited resources and as recommended in the NICE clinical guidelines for people living with diabetes. There are CGM devices currently listed on the Northern Ireland drugs tariff. Other more complex CGM devices are not currently listed on that tariff and cannot be prescribed by primary care. I will follow up with the Member. If she has written to me, I will ensure that she gets a response.

Ms Mulholland: A national diabetes audit was announced in 2016 along with the diabetes strategic framework. It has yet to be carried out. Will you commit to establishing a diabetes audit in this mandate?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. I am not fully aware of the 2016 recommendation, but we are taking steps to support people living with diabetes, including the regional pump framework that we have set up, and also in how we look at other advances and support mechanisms, whether that is the closed-loop system or other systems. I will take that on board and get back to the Member.

Mr McGlone: I listened to the Minister as he committed to working on NICE guidelines, options appraisal and commissioning various arrangements. Is the Minister developing a strategy for diabetes? If so, when will that strategy be available, and what level of commitment will be made to that financially and resource-wise?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question on how we look at our overall service of supporting people living with diabetes and their carers and for mentioning the NICE guidelines on changes in support devices, should that be closed loops or CGMs, that we must ensure are taken into a wider piece of work on where we sit. As I said earlier in regard to NICE guidelines on some of those additional devices, we are seeing what is being done in England, where there is a phased roll-out. No work is ongoing on a specific strategy, but all the other steps that I have identified in the work that is being done in my Department show that we are committed to supporting people with diabetes as we see the evolving set-up for how their treatment can be supported.

Mr Allister: On the timeline for the hybrid closed-loop system, do I discern from the Minister's answer that it is pretty long term, that he is waiting to see what is happening in GB and that he may take refuge in a phased roll-out? There is not a lot of comfort in that for people who are waiting day upon day for such help, is there?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point, and I know where he is coming from. However, it is not about taking refuge. It is about identifying to the House and updating Members on the process that has taken place in England, where they are looking at a phased implementation strategy over the next five years. I need to be clear that significant additional investment will be required to support the implementation of a hybrid closed-loop system for people living with type 1 diabetes. Again, it is about how we look towards the phased implementation of this and at what can be best learned from colleagues in England.

Mr Speaker: Mr Buchanan is not in his place to ask question 2.

'A Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland 2022-2032'

3. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister of Health to outline the progress that has been made to deliver 'A Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland 2022-2032', published in March 2022. (AQO 107/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I am glad to have been asked about the cancer strategy, as I consider it one of the most important documents currently in my Department. As Members will recall, it was published in March 2022 with the aim of transforming our cancer service to ensure better care for those who need it, when they need it. With the crisis in cancer services being so real and serious, I am always clear that it cannot be allowed to become yet another strategy sitting on a shelf. The absence of an Executive, unfortunately, limited some of the potential, but, thankfully, over £11 million of annual recurrent funding has enabled work to commence on delivery of some of the actions.

In December 2022, rapid diagnosis centres in Whiteabbey Hospital and South Tyrone Hospital saw their first patients. Those centres allow people who would not otherwise be eligible for a red-flag referral to receive an earlier diagnosis of cancer, and that addresses the major challenges in haematology. A review of the three main blood cancers has recently been completed, and an implementation plan is expected shortly. In addition, a review of adolescents and young adults' cancer support has been completed and draft minimum standards for the treatment of adolescents and young adults developed. My officials have also encouraged partnership working with the voluntary and community sector and have fostered new ways of working that relate to

pancreatic cancer. As a result, Northern Ireland was the first part of the United Kingdom to commit to implementing the pancreatic cancer optimal care pathway.

Going forward, there is undoubtedly more to be done, but, with long-term investment in our cancer services, I am confident that we can start delivering improved cancer outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dodds: Minister, your strategy indicates that you will require a total of £145 million or more each year in order to fully develop the strategy towards its end. That, obviously, increases through the years, starting from 2022. Will you ensure that the funding is ring-fenced in your budget, so that we can continue to improve cancer services?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point and for her support on the issue, because I know where she is coming from. Having listened intently to the deputy First Minister's answers on the need for a recurrent Budget, I ask everyone in the House to fully support and endorse that. We have always been vocal that a single-year budget does not allow the Department of Health to do the transformational pieces nor commit in the long term to the strategies that were costed when they were produced so that people knew how much they would cost and what they would get for their money. I am looking forward in anticipation to see what budget I will get next year, before I make any commitments about ring-fencing any allocation, unfortunately.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his answer on this very important issue. The Minister will know that many of the 17,000 women in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area who are involved in the cervical smear review will still be very anxious. Will the Minister give an update on the review's progress and on when he anticipates that it may conclude?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. She may be aware that another Member has tabled that question for oral answer. I will give her an initial answer in regards to the work that is being done.

Women affected by the review in the Southern Trust will receive letters from the trust in the next few days to update them on progress and further timescales. I will update later, if we get to that question.

Mr Dickson: Minister, can you indicate to the House how the Encompass project has impacted the red-flagging of cancer cases? Has there been a positive outcome from that?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. One of his party colleagues has raised that directly with me. There has been a piece of work on the identification of pathways. That was to make sure that clear pathways were established in our system for everybody who received further notice about treatments and red flags, for example. The learning from the implementation and roll-out in the South Eastern Trust will be embedded as we go forward and, hopefully, see Encompass starting to be rolled out across the Belfast Trust in the summer.

Mr Chambers: I especially welcome the continued operation of the two rapid diagnostic centres that the Minister opened in 2022. Can he provide an update on any plans to make the centres available across Northern Ireland?

3.00 pm

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for an important question on how to take what we are doing now and future-proof and develop it. Those rapid diagnostic centres were established in four of the five trust areas so that a vague symptom pathway was available for patients with non-specific but worrying symptoms that may indicate cancer. There are now plans to make that service available across the entire region by the summer. Additionally, a project group has been established to consider new cancer pathways where the rapid diagnosis centre model could improve outcomes for patients.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, this is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. What steps do you intend to take to raise awareness of that disease? Is more funding needed to make sure that people are aware of the symptoms?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The original question from Mrs Dodds referred to the cancer strategy. One of the strategy's first aims and enablers was about raising cancer awareness across all the different cancer sectors and subspecialties in order to make sure that people are aware of not just symptoms but treatment pathways. It is also about having that wider conversation about cancer across society, including among families, so that if people have troubling, niggling symptoms that they do not feel they should go to a doctor with, their family will encourage them to do that. That was the key enabler of the cancer strategy. As I said to

the Member who asked the previous question, those rapid diagnosis centres are about how we could move that forward.

Specifically in regards to Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, my Department will be supportive of any request that we receive to highlight what steps are being taken, how we make sure that people are aware of their symptoms and the potential identifiers, and the services and support that are available.

Dual-diagnosis Services: Emergency Departments

4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to outline what dual-diagnosis services are available in emergency departments for patients with poor mental health and addictions. (AQO 108/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Addressing the harm that is related to alcohol and other drugs is a key priority for my Department, which leads on the Northern Ireland Executive's 10-year substance use strategy entitled 'Preventing Harm, Empowering Recovery'. The strategy aims to directly prevent and reduce the harm that is related to substance use through a range of cross-departmental actions and support. We are seeing an increase in the complexity of cases that are in mental health and substance use services as well as in those that present to emergency departments. It is vital that there is no wrong door and that people get the right treatment at the right time, particularly when presenting in crisis. Implementing the new regional crisis service is a commitment in the mental health strategy 2021-2031. The strategic planning and performance group and our Public Health Agency (PHA) are working in partnership to develop a regional mental health crisis service for Northern Ireland.

Dual-diagnosis services vary in how and where they are offered in trusts, with treatment and support being located in addiction services, early intervention support services or acute mental health services. Dual diagnosis or co-occurring mental health and addiction problems are a key priority in the substance use strategy and the mental health strategy. Therefore, it is critical that we reinforce linkages with the mental health strategy's early intervention and action plan, the development of that regional mental health crisis service and the development of the regional mental health service in order to devise better pathways and models for those who are in mental health crisis and who have co-occurring addiction problems.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for his response. He knows me well enough to know that I am not saying this lightly, but that will not mean anything to families, the police or community groups who are in ED from Thursday to Sunday or Monday with people who are struggling or in crisis through drugs or alcohol or both. When the budget is confirmed, will the Minister give more security to those very services that are under threat, including to the staff, who are working under extreme pressure in our emergency departments right across the North?

Mr Swann: I know the Member well enough to accept what she says. I know about her engagement on the issue and her passion for and commitment to it. She knows me well enough as well to know what will happen when the money and funding come forward. Co-occurring mental health and addiction problems and dual-diagnosis problems were of such importance to me that they are both in the substance use strategy and the mental health strategy. They do not fit neatly in to either of those categories. There was always a concern that those people would get lost and fall between both strategies. To address the problem, it is about how we work not just in health but with our PSNI colleagues and the voluntary and community sector, which plays such a crucial role in supporting those people who present to EDs and helping them address the challenges that they face.

There is a big piece of work to do on what both strategies not only intend but want to produce. They are both needed and will be supported by the funding allocation.

Mr Donnelly: Sadly, in recent years, we have seen a sharp increase in drug deaths across Northern Ireland. What is the Minister doing to increase accessibility to naloxone and to progress an overdose prevention centre?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for the question. His party leader, the Justice Minister, and I have promoted the increased use of naloxone by not just my blue-light services — the Ambulance Service and the Fire and Rescue Service — but the PSNI and other community settings that have the appropriate support.

As regards an overdose prevention centre, the Member will be aware that drug consumption rooms or safe injecting facilities are not permitted under the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The issue of criminal sanctions for those found in possession of drugs is governed

by the Misuse of Drugs Act and remains a reserved matter. Pilots for overdose prevention facilities are being progressed in Glasgow and Dublin. I will give due consideration to the new interventions, as appropriate, within a wider legislative framework.

Health Service Pay Negotiations

5. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health for an update on ongoing pay negotiations. (AQO 109/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question, which follows on from his question for urgent oral answer a couple of weeks ago. Pay negotiations with Agenda for Change trade unions completed on 22 February, and I wish to commend the constructive approach of trade union colleagues to negotiations. Under the proposed settlement, our health and social care Agenda for Change staff will receive a consolidated pay uplift of 5% and a non-consolidated pro rata payment of £1,505.

In addition, any remaining staff in band 1 and staff on the lower point of band 2 will have their pay increased to match the higher pay point of band 2. Those awards will be backdated to April 2023. Unions are now consulting their members, and I want to give them time and space for that to happen.

As for other medical professionals' pay, I have asked officials to move to immediately implement the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB) recommendations for 2023-24 pay for all doctors and dentists employed in health and social care. That represents a pay uplift of 6% for 2023-24 for all doctors, plus an additional £1,250 for doctors and dentists in training, known as junior doctors, and an additional 3% for new contract specialty and specialist (SAS) doctors.

For junior doctors, the DDRB recommends an average pay increase of 9.1% in 2023-24 and that those in their first year receive a 10.7% uplift. That offer should be viewed in the context of pay settlements across the wider Northern Ireland public sector. Despite that offer, junior doctors have indicated their intention to take strike action for 24 hours over 6 and 7 March.

My Department remains willing to engage with the BMA to discuss the way forward on outstanding issues. That includes a commitment to further engagement on pay, contract reform and non-pay issues relating to working conditions. Any pay discussions will, of

course, be better informed when there is greater clarity with respect to the outcome of the current industrial action being taken by doctors in England.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Mr McGrath: Junior doctors are telling us that their pay has diverged from that in other places across these islands by 30%. Does the Minister believe that our junior doctors are worth 30% less than their colleagues elsewhere?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Following on from the discussion that we had when he raised the question for urgent oral answer, the 30% to 35% divergence is from where they would have been in 2008 had inflationary pay increases been enabled year-on-year. The Member will be aware that that was a national decision based on national funding. It should not be left solely to the Department of Health to sort out an issue that resulted from decisions on financing taken nationally at that time.

Mrs Dillon: Minister, in the same vein, will you give us an update on what you plan to do about junior doctors, and the challenges that they face, in the workforce plan and tell us how we are going to have a workforce if we do not pay it adequately?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments, specifically on the workforce plan and the workforce strategy. She will be aware that my Department's ambition for developing our workforce is outlined in 'Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026 — Delivering for our People'.

I was pleased that the strategy's second action plan, for the period 2022-23 to 2024-25 was published in June. It was developed following widespread engagement with stakeholders from across Health and Social Care. The implementation of that ambitious programme of work is ongoing and includes initiatives to enhance our attraction and retention of staff while removing barriers to recruitment. It also reduces agency spend and supports employers in the provision of staff health and well-being services.

Mr Nesbitt: I would be grateful if the Minister could provide a more detailed update on the implementation of that workforce strategy.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that. As I said, we have published updates, and I am committed to working with stakeholders from

across the system on the strategy's continued implementation. I again caution, however, that my Department will require significant funding in order to do that.

It is encouraging to note that that strategic approach to workforce development has supported an additional 8,911 people — a 15.7% increase — in the whole-time equivalent staff employed directly by the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland between March 2018 and December 2023. That workforce strategy has therefore seen nearly 9,000 additional whole-time equivalent staff employed in our health and social care system.

Miss McAllister: I am thankful for the Minister's answers, specifically on workforce and pay negotiations. I will go back to the first few questions on the pay negotiations. What discussions has the Minister had about working conditions that could be alleviated, for junior doctors specifically, in the here and now rather than if he waits for the overall safe staffing legislation, since we are not sure when that will come to the Assembly?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question on safe staffing. It is legislation that I want to introduce. It is in my legislative programme for the coming year, if the Executive support it. I am committed to introducing such a Bill in this mandate, and work continues in partnership with key stakeholders to ensure that a consultation document to inform the development of safer and effective staffing legislation is ready for publication later this year.

I have said to the BMA and to junior doctors specifically that they can have the conversation with me about the additional things: their working conditions and how they are being treated and managed in their trusts. I am open to having those conversations. Once we get over Wednesday, I hope to be able to engage further with the BMA's junior doctors committee, and I am always open to having that engagement.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Cervical Screening Review: SHSCT

7. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the progress of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust's (SHSCT) cervical screening review. (AQO 111/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The ongoing cervical cytology review

in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust involves up to 17,500 women. It contains two elements: a review of the cervical screening slides held by the trust for women who have had a smear test; and a call forward inviting women to have a new cervical smear test where a previous slide is no longer held or is no longer suitable for review.

As of 28 February, 2,564 slide reviews had been completed, and the trust has called forward 1,960 women to attend for a cervical smear test, of which 621 have attended to date. An additional 2,255 women with the overall review cohort have already attended for their next routine cervical smear test, which will remove the need for them to have their older slides reviewed, as their latest test will provide the most up-to-date and accurate assessment.

My Department continues to work closely with the Public Health Agency and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to ensure that the review is progressed in a safe and timely manner. It is a complex review. Plans to increase the number of slides to be reviewed weekly are now well advanced, with the intention that the full review will be completed by early summer.

3.15 pm

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that NHS England has set a target of eliminating cervical cancer by 2040. The Minister recently set out his plans for a women's health action plan for the next three years, but will he also commit to a women's health strategy that will extend a similar target to Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: The Member's question raises a very important point about where we move with the development of our women's health action plan as we take it to the next step of developing a strategy from the action plan. We announced the introduction of primary human papillomavirus (HPV) testing. When that is introduced, my hope is that, not only will it remove a significant part of the current backlog, it will speed up the ability to report on those slides and tests. Those steps are being taken to address the issue.

Mr Speaker: We now move to topical questions. Before I call Mr McGrath, I note that a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health on Nexus NI has been accepted. No Member should raise that issue before the question for urgent oral answer is asked.

Community and Voluntary Sector: Funding Cuts

T1. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health, in light of the fact that during the most-recent collapse of the institutions, the Department of Health slashed the amount of funding allocated to the core grant received by the community and voluntary sector, impacting on some 62 groups, whether he thinks that slashing that funding so drastically was fair. (AQT 71/22-27)

Mr Swann: I do not think that it was fair that the Department of Health had its funding slashed so dramatically and that it may be under similar conditions in the forthcoming financial year. The measures that had to be taken in the absence of an Executive, a Minister and a recurrent Budget were drastic, and I hope that next year's Budget puts us in a better position.

Mr McGrath: Given that the grant is core to the work that they do and to their ability to draw down additional funds to help people in our community, does the Minister intend to write to the Finance Minister, specifically on this issue, to ensure that additional funding is given for those groups?

Mr Swann: The Finance Minister has already indicated her direction of travel for the preparation of a Budget for next year. That will be done through one-to-one engagements with each Department's Minister about their core needs, not just for funding for the likes of our voluntary and community sector but about how we fund what we in Health want to do across the entirety of that sector. I will have those engagements and discussions with the Finance Minister about what our overall financial package looks like.

ADHD Medication: Waiting Lists

T2. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health what his Department is doing to reduce the long waiting lists to access ADHD medication. (AQT 72/22-27)

Mr Swann: The Member will be aware that supply disruptions of some attention deficit hyperactivity disorder treatments have been resolved, but my Department is aware of ongoing supply disruptions involving various strengths and preparations of other ADHD treatments across the UK. Those disruptions have been caused by a combination of manufacturing issues and increased global demand for those products. As the Department of Health and Social Care leads on the

maintenance of medicine supply chains to the UK, my Department has been working closely with them, as well as with the other devolved Governments and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), to ensure that the impact of these shortages is mitigated and that patients continue to get the medical supplies that they need.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for his answer and welcome the fact that he is looking at the issue. What is his Department doing, and how will he be able to prevent any inconsistencies across trusts when it comes to accessing ADHD services and medications?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. She has moved slightly away from medication into services. She will be aware that there is disparity among our trusts with regard to ADHD supports. That is especially the case now, as we are seeing increased presentation of adult ADHD. There is no commissioned service for that at this time, but my departmental officials are looking at that, at how we establish that pathway, having identified it, and at how we use the supports that we currently have for those who are presenting with ADHD.

Orthopaedic Services: Veterans

T3. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Health when he expects to receive instructions from the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to orthopaedic services for veterans, given that, in answer to a recently tabled question for written answer, the Minister highlighted that it is the responsibility of the Executive Office to implement the provisions of the Armed Forces Act 2021. (AQT 73/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. He has raised the point with me, and I know that he has a strong interest in it. He rightly points out that the responsibility for implementing the Armed Forces Act 2021 and taking forward the New Decade, New Approach commitment to further legislation to incorporate the armed forces covenant lies with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I would sincerely like to see progress in that regard, but I am unaware of the most recent instructions. After this session, I will ask my officials to engage with their counterparts in TEO to ascertain whether or when further direction or clarity will be forthcoming to my Department.

Mr Allen: Several veterans have told me that they struggle to access the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt orthopaedic service on the

mainland, whereas their counterparts on the mainland and in other parts of the United Kingdom can access it. Will the Minister commit to meeting me, with his officials, to discuss the matter?

Mr Swann: Of course. As the Member is supportive of me in this role with regard to what we can do, I am keen to meet him to discuss the issues he has raised.

Annagh and Waterside Medical Practices, Portadown

T4. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Health what assurances about continuity of care provision he can give to the almost 10,000 patients of the Annagh and Waterside medical practices at Portadown health centre, given their notice to withdraw and to hand back GP contracts, which has caused much concern. (AQT 74/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for raising the issue of GP contracts. He will be aware that, unfortunately, the two practices that he mentioned are not isolated occurrences. I can say that, for all the contracts that have been handed back, we have not seen a practice having to close at any stage, because other options have been brought forward: other trusts' GPs have come forward to take on those contracts, trusts have taken them over or local GP federations have stepped in. There are a number of months to go on that position, and I ask the Member to reassure his constituents, as I do, and to work with my Department and the GP federations to identify and support any future provision and to give reassurance and stabilisation not just to the patients but to the people who work in those practices.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am thankful for the manner in which the Department has stepped in thus far. The Minister will agree that this is an alarming, recurring situation, particularly with one of the practices. Is the Minister aware of any other practices across Northern Ireland that are in a similar position, on the brink of handing back their contracts?

Mr Swann: Unfortunately, yes. A number of GP practices are in a similar position. As I said, my Department is working with our colleagues in GPNI and the British Medical Association committee on what can be done to stabilise those positions and look to the future of the GP contract. I want to ensure that our general medical services (GMS) contract is fit for future

purpose and can better meet the changing environment and context of primary care. Discussions with the Northern Ireland general practitioners committee on the 2024-25 GMS contract and beyond are ongoing. My aim is that the negotiations promote stability in our general medical services.

Children's Social Care Services: Action Plan

T5. **Ms Mulholland** asked the Minister of Health for an update on his Department's action plan to undertake the recommendations from Ray Jones's independent review of children's social care services. (AQT 75/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I am due to meet Ray Jones next week to discuss his recommendations. If the Member has made herself aware of the review, she will realise that it is a detailed, in-depth piece of work. It was co-produced very astutely, with Mr Jones at the head. I was pleased to be asked to speak when the review was launched recently in the Stormont Hotel. I am due to meet Ray in the next week or so about the steps that we will take and in order to identify the more challenging pieces of work that have already been taken forward that sit within his recommendations that will require not only the support of the House but significant change in the Executive in regard to how we look at the wider children's social care piece.

Ms Mulholland: One mechanism for the protection of at-risk young people is the use of the national referral mechanism. Figures that came out last week showed that there were 530 referrals in the past year. Does the Minister agree that we need to work more with our health service cohort to raise awareness of the national referral mechanism as a mechanism to protect children who are in danger of criminal child exploitation? The health service could utilise it more.

Mr Swann: The Member raises something that has been in the media recently. To the Member and the House, I say this: any form of child abuse, including exploitation, is totally unacceptable and must be appropriately addressed. All children and young people in Northern Ireland are entitled to live in safety, to achieve their full potential and to have their rights respected. Prevention of and protection from abuse, including exploitation, is a complex matter, with many risk factors that require input from a range of statutory and non-statutory partners. I think that the Member's point is about making sure that everybody is aware.

In 2023, my Department, working jointly with the Department of Justice, led a two-year action plan to address child criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland. That was done under the auspices of the child protection senior officials group, which is a cross-departmental strategic forum that provides direction on existing or emerging child protection issues. My Department chairs that group. The wider point is about how we make sure that the information about direct routes of referral and support is communicated across the entirety of our service.

Disposable Vapes: Ban

T7. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to introduce legislation to ban the sale of disposable vapes, given the prevalence of their sale to underage children and the associated environmental concerns. (AQT 77/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I will take a point of clarity at any point, but I think that banning the sale of disposable vapes falls within the responsibility of his party colleague the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I am working on legislation with my UK colleagues, however, and, this morning, I met the Secretary of State for Health, Victoria Atkins, to discuss Northern Ireland's place in the tobacco and vapes bill that will shortly go through Westminster in regard to how we look at the sale of tobacco products and the wider piece about vapes.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given what he said, will he engage with DAERA and come back to me with clarity on the lead Department on that issue?

Mr Swann: I certainly will. I think that I sent out a request this morning to meet the Member's party colleague about that, and I am sure that one of us will update him at the appropriate point.

Waiting Times

T8. **Mr Honeyford** asked the Minister of Health, given the recent publication of waiting times, to outline when the data from the South Eastern Trust will be made available and to state whether Encompass has helped to reduce the waiting times and to improve matters. (AQT 78/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point about the validation of statistics in Northern Ireland. We take that very seriously in the Department. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the information and analysis directorate (IAD) advise on what we publish. The South Eastern Trust figures are delayed until we get them completely validated in what is a new system. I hope that Encompass produces a more streamlined, safer healthcare records system, because it is being brought forward at a significant cost to the Department of Health and Northern Ireland. I look forward to the information that is held on those computer systems leading to a more effective, safer healthcare system in Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

Mr Honeyford: I thank the Minister for his response. A lot of concern has been raised locally by healthcare staff about morale in the service. It is vital that people work in a place with high morale and that they look forward to going back to work. Will the Minister outline what he is doing to inspire and give positive leadership in order to make sure that health service staff work in a positive environment with high morale?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister for a succinct response, please.

Mr Swann: Since my return to office, I have engaged extensively with healthcare professionals across the system. One of the things that is giving healthcare staff a sense of improved morale — I will not say that it is high morale — is the fact that we are back in this place. That is because our health service staff value and recognise what this place can bring to them and their working conditions. That has been demonstrated by the fact that, once again, I was able to bring forward an offer for a pay resolution for Agenda for Change staff, which this place was unable to do.

Staff morale is not based solely on money, however; it is about the reward for the work that they do. The Member will know that we have a highly dedicated and highly professional cohort of people working across health and social care, not just in our system but across GP surgeries, Community Pharmacy and domiciliary care. No matter where they are found, we should applaud and thank them for the work that they do, rather than coming to this place or to the media to deride some of the work that they do.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Health.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

Nexus NI

Mr Speaker: Cara Hunter has given notice of a question for urgent oral question to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask supplementary questions, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact that funding cuts to Nexus NI will have on the delivery of specialist counselling services for victims of sexual abuse.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I want to reassure Members of my recognition of the absolute importance of sufficient specialist counselling for victims of sexual abuse. I can advise the Assembly that Nexus was awarded a three-year contract in April 2019 to provide a specialist counselling service for victims of sexual abuse, with an option for two one-year extensions. The second of those extensions ceases on 31 March 2024.

My Department has been in communication with Nexus over many months in connection with the contract and has worked extensively with the organisation to improve waiting list times and the standard of service that is being delivered. Unfortunately, significant performance and operational issues have been identified in the delivery of that contract. I should clarify that those issues relate largely to efficiency and lower than expected numbers of sessions, rather than the quality of the counselling that is being provided. The areas of underperformance that were identified include the number of counselling services provided, with a projected 24% gap this year between the contracted sessions and the total delivered. To put that in perspective, on the current trajectory, that is over 4,000 fewer sessions being delivered than expected. Considering the need and demand for such services, that causes concern.

My Department has been examining potential alternative arrangements, following the

conclusion of the Nexus contract. A number of options have been identified, including the provision of support from the community and voluntary sector, our health and social care trusts or primary care. However, having discussed the situation with officials, it is clear to me that further work is required on mapping out future sustainable arrangements. In that case, I have therefore instructed that the Nexus contract be extended for a further 12 months, with close monitoring of performance throughout that period. Whilst there may be some deep concerns about the broader delivery of the contract, equally, I am not prepared to tolerate a position in which, come April, new victims and survivors have no service at all.

This one-year extension will allow proper consideration and a decision on and implementation of the best way forward for counselling services of this nature. I should also advise Members that the planned ending of this contract was not a cost-saving measure. The intention has always been to use the available funding to continue to support people who are victims and survivors of sexual abuse, in line with the draft domestic and sexual abuse strategy 2023-2030.

A priority had been to ensure that clients currently in receipt of counselling services would continue to receive them after April 2024, and my Department has been involved in detailed discussions with Nexus to make the necessary arrangements. That was intended to ensure that anyone currently in receipt of counselling, or who has had an initial assessment, will receive an appropriate service from Nexus. However, that still left a potential gap in provision for new people coming forward for counselling, and I believe that the one-year extension that I have announced today addresses that concern.

Ms Hunter: I really, really welcome that, Minister. It is really fantastic news. Over the weekend, I spoke at length with survivors and victims of sexual violence, and, understandably, it was very triggering for them. How can we make sure that this never happens again and that there is never again a gap?

Mr Swann: That is the question that I have asked departmental officials. I asked how this was being managed in identifying alternative pathways to ensure that, come 1 April, no woman was left without a port of call and without that support mechanism. That is why I have taken the decision and directed that the contract be extended for one year, with the caveats that I outlined in my initial answer.

Ms Sugden: Minister, this was originally a three-year contract, but it has been extended twice and, now, a third time, which I very much welcome. However, how did we find ourselves in the position where Nexus was contacting MLAs, with less than a month of the contract to go, to suggest that services will come to an end? Has your Department not been engaging, over the past two years of extensions, to try to ensure that we have a proper service in place that performs well?

Mr Swann: My officials have been engaging extensively with Nexus in the past few months, as we approached the end of the contract, to ensure that those who had already engaged with the service received the support that they need. The challenge was identifying who would take over and provide that support, because, as I said, this was not about funding; it was about ensuring that we had the appropriate support and mechanisms in place. The conversations between my Department, the strategic planning and performance group (SPPG) and Nexus have been looking towards how, in the last two years, we have addressed the underperformance that I spoke about in my initial answer.

Mrs Dillon: I reiterate the words of Cara Hunter: this is very, very welcome news. Like the Member, I met a number of people who are survivors of sexual violence and require the services of Nexus. Some of them did not get any services because there were none there, and we want to ensure that that never happens again. In the same vein as the question asked by Ms Sugden, I say that we need an understanding of how we will be kept updated on what will be put in place and whether Nexus is being given an opportunity to improve that performance or to deal with those performance issues, because we need to ensure that, at the end of this one-year contract, we are not in this position again.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point, because that is crucial in regard to my announcement about extending the contract for a year. I want to see improved services and delivery, and my officials have been engaging with Nexus over the past few months to make sure that we close the gap between what we expect — what we are paying for — and what is being delivered. I have asked my officials to engage with Nexus to make sure that there is a regular monitoring update on how that new contract is being taken forward. Unfortunately, this may be the first time that Nexus has been made aware of this, because I wanted to give the House the opportunity to hear that through

my answer to the question for urgent oral answer.

Ms Bunting: Going forward, what will be the wider impact of the Minister's decision on contracts? What will it mean for other Departments — for example, Justice — and the PSNI? What consideration did, and will, he give to those factors?

Mr Swann: This specific contract to provide that support is held with SPPG and my Department, and that is why I felt that it was within my gift to extend it for a year. That is the direction and the advice that I have been given by my officials. If the Member knows different, I will follow up with her later.

Ms Egan: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. It is excellent news that this has been extended for one year. For clarity, over the weekend, I spoke to victims and survivors of abuse, and the impact and the need for these services is absolutely essential. Can he please confirm that everybody on the waiting list will be able to access counselling this year, and can he confirm that, moving forward, this will not be handled in this way again? People who are on the waiting list have been devastated by the announcement and extremely stressed by the way in which it has been handled.

Mr Swann: The waiting list for the Nexus provision has been discussed extensively between departmental officials and Nexus to make sure that everyone who is on that list receives the due and timely support as provided for in the contract. That is what we want to do, working in partnership with Nexus, during the extension of the next 12 months, while a further scoping piece of work takes place to see what the service looks like at the end of that time and at who provides it.

Mrs Dodds: Like everyone else in the House, I am relieved and gladdened to hear of that extension for Nexus. What worried most of us was the loss of that specialist service for people who have suffered in such a violent and terrible way.

Will the Minister assure the House that, going forward, we will not think of putting people who have suffered rape or violence on to general mental health lists? That would be the worst outcome. We really want to see the Minister and the Department build up that specialist advice and help for people who have suffered.

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. Again, having discussed the situation with

officials this morning, it is clear to me that further work is required on mapping out future sustainable arrangements so that we can make sure that that support and guidance are there on what is needed. That one-year extension will allow proper consideration of and a decision on the implementation of the best way forward for counselling services of that nature.

Miss McAllister: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far and for the extension. I am sure that service users, specifically those who are on the waiting list, will be glad to hear that.

I am concerned about a few things that have been said. Members were informed that a tendering process had been started but was then paused. If that was not for financial reasons and was instead operational, why was it paused? Why did people not sit down with Nexus to discuss those issues and get to the bottom of them? Was that your decision, or was it made by the SPPG? What can we do to ensure that that does not happen and that we actually have solutions, rather than simply cancel a service?

Mr Swann: As the Member has the update about the tendering process, I am sure that she will be aware that the decision to pause it was taken before my time. There has been ongoing engagement with Nexus on current provision. I look forward to working in partnership with Nexus in the next year to make sure that service delivery not only meets the needs of the women who present to the service in the future but allows my Department and the SPPG to do that further piece of scoping work on what is actually required for mapping out future sustainable arrangements.

Mr Chambers: Has the lack of an Executive over the past two years contributed in any way to the current situation that we find ourselves in with Nexus?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I refer back to my response to Miss McAllister's question about when the contract and procurement were actually paused. Those decisions were taken without ministerial input. What has happened today shows the advantage that this place has: when concerns are raised in the House, Ministers can intervene and implement what needs to be done. We can also take into consideration the monitoring arrangements that are needed for the contract over the next 12 months.

Opposition Business

Executive Reform

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly is ashamed of the long suspensions of devolution over the past 10 years; accepts responsibility for the decline in public services that has taken place over that time; apologises to public-sector workers who have experienced pay injustice over the past 10 years; resolves that the functioning of the Assembly and the Executive should never again be subject to the veto of a single party; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to include a specific commitment to reform of the institutions in the Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: The Question was first put before Question Time, and the Assembly was not in agreement. Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 32; Noes 46.

AYES

Mr Allen, Ms Armstrong, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Brown, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Miss McAllister, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Toole, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Durkan and Mr McGrath

NOES

Mr Allister, Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Miss Brogan, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Mrs Erskine, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Miss Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Miss McIlveen, Mrs Mason, Mr Middleton, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Mr

O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Miss Reilly, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dillon and Mr Frew.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Carroll

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: Members, take your ease while we change the top Table for the next item of business.

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

4.00 pm

Public-sector Pay

Mr McCrossan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the immense burden placed on public-sector workers by the political uncertainty and the failure to deliver equitable pay awards; resolves that all outstanding public-sector pay negotiations for 2023-24 will be concluded by the end of this financial year; and calls on the Minister of Finance to make a statement to the Assembly upon the conclusion of these negotiations or at the end of the financial year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the motion.

Mr McCrossan: I see no more critical issue for the House than this. Over the past number of weeks, months and, indeed, years, colleagues from across the House will have stood on picket lines with our public-sector workers: our nurses, our doctors, our healthcare workers, our teachers, classroom assistants and teaching and non-teaching staff, people who are the life blood of our community and society, who keep the clock ticking on a daily basis. They are the people who educate our children, save our loved one's lives and care for those who need them most. Where were they in the past number of weeks and months? They were standing in the freezing cold, demanding the fair pay they truly deserve. Where were we? We were not in the House; that is a certainty.

However, this is an issue that has gone on for far too long.

When public-sector workers were needed, they were there. Throughout COVID and some of the biggest challenges that our society has faced, they were there. When they needed us, we were not where we should have been. The House was collapsed on two separate occasions, once for three years, as noted earlier, and again for two years. All along, we could have been here, helping to resolve the challenges that are faced by our nurses, midwives and healthcare workers. On 18 January, those people stood on picket lines in the largest strike action that this place has seen for 50 years. That is an unforgivable situation. I heard, while I stood on those picket lines, Executive parties tell public-sector workers, "When we are back in there, we will resolve this problem. We hear you". It is time that they put their money where their mouths are and ensure that our public-sector workers receive the pay that they are entitled to.

The truth is that, over recent years, particularly since the Conservatives came into power in 2010, overall real average pay has fallen by a significant percentage for public-sector workers. Indeed, here, in more recent years, particularly between 2021 and 22, we saw an average fall of 4% in public-sector pay, and a further 7% fall between 2022 and 23. Pay has fallen sharply for public-sector workers in Northern Ireland over the past number of years because of the combination of high inflation, the Stormont Budget crisis and — the truth — a lack of devolved government. The people who needed us to speak up for them were left without a voice, because we were not here where we should have been.

Hard-working teachers who were in classrooms during COVID, at high risk, and on whom we relied to look after and educate our children, have stood on picket lines. A significant gap has opened up between teacher pay here and in other parts of the UK. Newly qualified teachers in England earn about £30,000 per year, compared with £24,000 in Northern Ireland. We hear a lot about borders and concern about the border in the Irish Sea, but there is no discussion or debate about the financial border that exists between people across the United Kingdom. The truth is that, in England, Scotland and Wales, teachers and nurses are all much better paid than they are here in Northern Ireland. Let us talk about economic borders. I do not hear the same stand-off when it comes to ensuring that people are duly paid for the job that they do. The hypocrisy on that matter is absolutely

astounding. The truth is that the teachers, doctors, nurses and classroom assistants are not buying it. They do not see the same level of concern when it comes to their wages. Teachers' pay has dropped by a staggering 25% in the past decade, which has caused recruitment and retention issues and a continued shortage of teachers.

Substitute teachers have also been treated appallingly in this place. They are not paid appropriately for the job that they do. That has led to huge issues with attracting substitute teachers. The Executive must act and offer a fair pay settlement for those who are responsible for providing an outstanding education for our children and young people. Teachers' pay has absolutely stagnated while the cost of living continues to rise, which has left many teachers struggling to cope. A couple of teachers recently said that they can no longer afford to teach. How is that for a damning indictment? Others rely on food banks. This is a huge crisis that needs to be resolved. We have been back here for nearly a month. Conversations are ongoing, but not quickly enough. We need to resolve this issue so that we can settle the industrial disputes in schools and ensure that there is minimal disruption to children's education. The continued devaluation of the teaching profession cannot be tolerated and must be challenged in the strongest terms. Teachers continue to express their frustration, and they are united in their determination to get what is rightfully theirs.

The one clear message that I received during my time on the picket line, standing shoulder to shoulder with the people whom I represent, is that they did not want to be there. They do the job that they do because they love teaching. They love helping people and caring for those in our community. Those nurses, doctors, classroom assistants and teachers, who keep our society going on a daily basis, were forced on to that picket line because they were making choices about heating their home or feeding their family and, at the same time, continuing to do an outstanding job in supporting our people. They feel undervalued. They feel that what they do on a daily basis is not appreciated. If we cannot stand up for our public-sector workers, what is the point? It sends a message to wider society and employers that if that is how Government treat public-sector workers, it is OK for other employers to do the same. When are we going to send a message from this House that we must pay people appropriately and fairly for the job that they do?

The whole debate about public-sector pay is talked about as though it is a pay increase. It is

hardly even levelling up. In truth, we do not pay our public-sector workers enough. Instead, we perform acts of random appreciation by clapping them. When it comes to paying them, we are not there.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

Mr McGlone: As we know, during the worst excesses of COVID, our health service workers were at the coalface, helping to save people's lives. Does the Member agree that many of those people are emotionally and mentally fatigued as a result of that, and that they deserve much more than claps?

Mr McCrossan: Absolutely. I completely agree. With hindsight, it is embarrassing that politicians in this House were clapping those health workers, because, when it came to delivering for them, they let them down. That is the message: public-sector workers have been continually and consistently let down by the House.

In 2024, our public-sector workers should not have to worry about whether they will have enough money to cover their bills. Every single person in the Chamber has been cared for, or has a loved one who has been cared for, by our NHS staff, particularly over recent times. Last year, our healthcare workers received below-inflation pay offers. It is time that those in power in the Executive delivered for those workers. Even if parity with the pay bands in England were to be restored, it would still leave Northern Ireland health workers in third place behind Scotland and Wales.

We need to be ambitious for our public-sector workers. We need to demand more for them. If the House does not start realising the importance and value of our public-sector workers, and if we continue to let them down, the crisis that this place now faces in healthcare and education will worsen. We need to show our public-sector workers that they are valued. Today, we need to send a message to the Executive that it is time to pay up. Pay our public-sector workers, and let them get on with the job that they love doing.

Mr Kearney: Beidh Sinn Féin ag tacú leis an rún. Ní mór gach féidireacht agus ardán a ghlacadh le infheistíocht agus acmhainní a mhealladh go dtí an áit seo ar leas an phobail. Lena chois sin, tá malairt slí de dhíth.
[Translation: Sinn Féin will be supporting the motion. Every possibility and every platform

must be used to attract investment and resources to this place for the benefit of the community. Moreover, a change of direction is needed.] Last week, I said that an effect of Tory policy in the North was to turn this region into an economic backwater. The crisis in public-sector pay that we are discussing this afternoon is a direct product of that. The 14 years of Tory austerity in the North were not just a political choice and a political decision from London. The imposition of austerity here reflects a policy mindset towards the North and all our people — all sections of our community. English politicians have never cared about the priorities of working families here or, indeed, wider society. I contend that, for the rest of the mandate, a step change needs to be embraced right across the Chamber and in our political institutions with regard to workers' pay and rights and the sustainable investment that is required to maintain good, proper public services.

We do not need to reinvent the wheel, because a pathway was set out for us to address those issues in NDNA in 2020. I suggest that two key steps need to be taken. First, we need to see the implementation of social dialogue with our trade union movement and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), the Assembly, our Ministers and the political structures of this institution. Secondly, we need increased investment and a new funding model secured for the North, linked to the maximum transfer of fiscal powers from London. That is not a job for the Finance Minister alone. Instead, we require cross-party, all-of-society and whole-of-government solidarity that campaigns for and secures the kind of economic and financial stability that is required for everyone in this region.

The challenge that we face in meeting that scale of vision and ambition will be to deliver on proper power-sharing in these institutions and on the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Mar fhocal scoir [*Translation: Finally*] it will be to show the political leadership that is, in fact, required for all parties, all politicians and all Ministers to be progressive and to work for all.

4.15 pm

Ms Forsythe: Public-sector workers deserve fair pay in return for the vital contribution that they make to delivering essential front-line services across the Province. That includes all groups of public-sector workers, with none left behind. Public-sector workers also deserve honesty as to what can be afforded and delivered at this time. We should not be in the

business of misleading people on that, and to imply a commitment that all public-sector pay negotiations would be concluded by the end of this month should not be taken to lead people to believe that we are in the position to settle all awards in that time.

The letter from Laura Trott, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, to Dr Caoimhe Archibald, the Northern Ireland Finance Minister, on 13 February offered an additional £846 million to meet needs in 2023-24, with £584 million of that for public-sector pay. Local decisions have increased that, which is most welcome, but the Finance Minister has made it clear that that is not enough to settle all public-sector pay negotiations, and some entire groups of workers are not included in that figure. Again, is it important to be clear on that point.

The obstacle to delivering fair pay awards has not been political uncertainty as the motion suggests or, indeed, a lack of political will; rather, it is the fact that public services have been underfunded by the Treasury for a number of years. Baseline funding in Northern Ireland is simply not sufficient to meet our needs. As public-sector pay is a key component of departmental spend, and our public-sector workforce is disproportionately larger than elsewhere in the UK, it is, perhaps, the most visible symptom of allocating funding in Northern Ireland on the basis of a population share rather than on need. All of that creates challenges for the recruitment and retention of people working across public services. In some cases, that is due to higher wages in the private sector or in other countries. In the health service, many can attain better pay and more-flexible work when employed by an agency.

When £584 million has been made available by the Treasury to meet public-sector pay negotiations for 2023-24, it is right that those negotiations should, where possible, be concluded by the end of the financial year and that the Minister of Finance should make a statement to the Assembly upon their conclusion. However, again, we must be clear that we know that that will not cover all public-sector pay negotiations. We also need to be clear that the money awarded by the Treasury for 2023-24 is a one-off. It does not inform the baseline going forward, so while it might be possible to claim that we have retrospectively been funded to need in 2023-24, the £846 million does not address the deficit in baseline funding arising from our having been underfunded in 2022-23 and 2023-24 going forward.

The Laura Trott letter makes provision for an additional £520 million for the financial years 2024-25 and 2025-26. If all the moneys allocated for public service stabilisation in those years are spent on public-sector wages, and nothing from the stabilisation pot on the public services themselves, there will be a £60 million wages shortfall in both years, and, from 2026-27, there will be no money available to meet that £584 million public-sector pay shortfall, as funding to Northern Ireland plunges below need for the second time in the space of four years.

In that context, while it would be possible to use this debate simply to note that £584 million has been made available and to agree that negotiations for 2023-24 should be concluded this financial year and that the Minister of Finance should make a statement to the Assembly, the debate also affords an opportunity to demonstrate that the DUP is doing more than looking at the immediate future and is taking the lead in developing creative ideas to find sustainable longer-term funding solutions. We continue to be committed to making sure that Northern Ireland is funded to need. The UK Government must afford Northern Ireland the same two protections that it provides to Wales to prevent the block funding from falling below need: a 5% uplift to slow down the impact of the Barnett squeeze; and a fiscal floor at the Holtham definition of need below which funding cannot fall. Our staff in health and education and across the public sector in Northern Ireland deserve to be treated the same as their counterparts across the United Kingdom. Let us be clear that it was the DUP that fought hard for an increase in funding for Northern Ireland, and it continues that fight.

Mr Tennyson: One of the most shameful outworkings of successive periods of suspension of the House in recent years has been the degradation of public-sector pay for some of our most essential workers. Take our nurses as one example. In December 2019, the Royal College of Nursing was forced to commence strike action for the first time in its 103-year history. With the arrival of New Decade, New Approach and the restoration of these institutions just one month later, it was promised that never again would our nurses be forced on to picket lines. Not four years later, following yet another collapse, our nurses watched as pay awards were made in other parts of these islands whilst they received nothing and once again became the worst paid in the UK. Backed into a corner by our politicians, those workers, whom we applauded during the pandemic, were left with no option other than to protest over pay parity and unsafe staffing levels. I remind Members that those

nurses sacrificed pay to engage in that strike action. That is a stark contrast with those in the House who were on strike from their roles for 18 months and received a healthy salary. Those same MLAs who were animated about the Northern Ireland protocol, the Windsor framework and academic arguments about the Irish Sea border made barely a whimper when it came to the very real sea border that they created for pay, conditions and living standards for some of our most essential workers.

It is welcome that the Assembly and Executive have now been restored and that progress on pay is being made, but, earlier this year, I spoke to those who were on picket lines, and it is clear that this is about so much more than simply pay.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that, in addition to the damage that was done in the past two years, going back to 2019, when I was diagnosed with cancer and nurses went on strike, I, along with many other people with very serious illnesses and diseases in Northern Ireland, was treated shamefully not by the nurses but by a House that failed to sit and to deliver?

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

Mr Tennyson: I could not agree more. I know that he has personal experience of the issue.

The House is asking health workers to operate under extreme pressure and in unimaginable conditions. The numbers speak for themselves. Over 8,600 patients waited more than the recommended 12 hours in A & E in the months up to December 2023, and almost 342,000 people are on a waiting list for their first consultant-led appointment. That is against a backdrop of almost 6,000 vacancies across the health and social care system.

I feel like I am participating in the debate in a parallel universe, given the vote that has just happened. While I agree that Tory austerity and underfunding have had an impact, it seems that the DUP and Sinn Féin are blind to the fact that one of the biggest impacts on our health service and public-sector pay has been stop-start government. It is all well and good for Mr Kearney to talk about working for all, but he seems to be very happy with a position where voters for the Alliance Party, People Before Profit and the Green Party are treated as second-class citizens in the House.

Platitudes are one thing, but delivery in the Chamber is quite another. Frankly, I think that Members, particularly those on the Sinn Féin Benches, have brass necks, given how they voted on the previous motion, to decry a lack of stability in public finance and services. It was the now First Minister who published the Bengoa report in October 2016. A matter of months later, in January 2017, Sinn Féin pulled the institutions down. We then had government for a matter of months during a global pandemic when no transformation was possible, before the DUP decided that it was time to walk out. So, while the photo ops are all well and good and we can talk about parties working together, our public-sector workers and services need and demand the promise of stability. That stability can be delivered only through reform of the institutions.

The degradation of pay and conditions for our health workers has been replicated across our public sector. Transport workers, teachers, classroom assistants and so many others have been impacted. I am conscious that our junior doctors also have action planned and that our classroom assistants and other non-teaching staff are awaiting their long-promised pay and grading review. I accept that that pay and grading review languished with the Department of Education and the Department of Finance when there were no Ministers, but I sincerely hope, now that Ministers are in place, that we will be able to make progress on it.

We are in a better place, but if we are to sustain the progress that has been delivered over recent days and weeks, parties in the Chamber need to be honest with the public, who demand reform of these institutions, about their position and grasp the opportunity to ensure that the institutions endure into the future.

Mr Chambers: Over recent weeks, a lot has been said in the Chamber and on the airwaves about public-sector pay. The debate will likely replicate much of that. Thankfully, in recent days and weeks, real progress has been made on resolving many of the public-sector pay disputes, and many unions are consulting their memberships on the respective offers on the table. I hope that those offers will begin to be accepted very soon.

While we await the outcome of those processes, it goes without saying that the almost two-year absence of this place, from March 2022 to February this year, inflicted real damage. No public service escaped unscathed. Among the people most greatly impacted were so many of our public-sector workers. Given that medical staff in Northern Ireland are signed

up to the wider UK terms and conditions of the NHS, my party's long-standing position has been that when the independent pay review body recommends a percentage increase, it should be implemented — no ifs, no buts. It is a simple matter of fairness. Yet, regardless of whether individual pay awards were based on the recommendation of pay review bodies or the internal deliberations of individual sponsor Departments, very little was possible in the absence of an Executive, as we all came to see. In particular, it was an absolute travesty that, once again, our health workers felt that they had no choice but to take industrial action. It is simply not in the DNA of our valued HSC staff to cause any disruption to those whom they serve.

We all remember what happened in late 2019 and early 2020, with what were, then, wholly unprecedented scenes of widespread industrial action. Equally, we remember how, after the restoration of the Executive in January of that year, Robin Swann secured political unanimity around the Executive table not only to restore pay parity but to maintain it. For a while, it appeared that things were going well. Pay awards were being honoured and, when finances permitted, our health workers were even awarded additional in-year uplifts over and above what some colleagues elsewhere received. Then, barely two years after that restoration, the Executive once again collapsed and public services were pushed to the brink. The collapse in February 2022 came about only weeks before the Executive and the Assembly should have been agreeing a Budget with future allocations. That made it even worse. Instead of Departments having financial certainty and the scope to deliver on even the most important of the independent pay review recommendations, the ability to decide on anything was robbed from them.

I appreciate that there may be a difference of opinion as to the rights and wrongs of holding the people of Northern Ireland to political ransom, but I am categorically in the group that thinks that the pain and disruption inflicted was far too high a price to pay. The animosity felt by our public-sector workers boiled over into record levels of action. While for many pay has, thankfully, been resolved, the implications of the disruption will be felt for some time yet. That is particularly so in the health service, with not just cancelled consultations or procedures but the loss of so much precious capacity meaning that so many fewer appointments are even booked.

I appeal to the workforces that are still holding out for a revised pay award.

In particular, following my focus on health, I appeal to our junior doctors to think again about their actions later this week.

4.30 pm

The Health Minister has already said that he has instructed his officials to deliver the DDRB recommendations. For junior doctors, that means an average pay increase of over 9%, with first-year doctors receiving a consolidated increase that is closer to 11%. Although I know that some are sticking by their ask of 35%, we just need to be realistic. There is not an unlimited pool of money, and all Ministers have had to live within the funding realities of what has been made available.

There is no doubt that political uncertainty has had a damaging impact on our public services, but, instead of further action, now is the time to try to repair the immeasurable damage that uncertainty —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr Chambers: — has inflicted.

Ms Kimmins: I can safely say that, given Members' speeches, no one in the Chamber would disagree that our public-sector workers should get the pay increase that they well and truly deserve. As other Members have said, we have witnessed, particularly in recent years, during COVID, that it was our front-line public-sector workers who stepped up to the mark and delivered. When the vast majority of other workers had the option to work from home and adapt their working pattern to deal with the public health crisis that we faced, our healthcare workers kept our health service running. As has been said, we came out and clapped for those workers every week, yet, when it came to giving them what they were entitled to, the Tory Government showed that they felt that clapping was sufficient reward for their hard work and dedication.

It is disappointing that the proposer of the motion has allowed the Tories to abdicate their responsibility to fund this place in line with the needs of our people by failing to acknowledge the role that they play in preventing us —

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Kimmins: I will not, no. The proposer of the motion failed to acknowledge the role that the Tories play in preventing us from properly investing in our public services, particularly our

health service. The SDLP joined the rest of the parties in the Assembly just four weeks ago in passing a cross-party motion that called on the British Government to fund public services here properly and to place public finances on a sustainable footing. Thirteen years of Tory austerity have decimated our public services — no matter which way you package that — including pay for health and social care workers. That is a shameful indictment of just how high on their list of priorities the Tories place those individuals, who work in the most challenging environments and in deteriorating conditions, which are driving health and social care workers away from the jobs that they love in their home towns and cities to the South of Ireland, across the water and, in many cases, to the other side of the world.

That continued trajectory is undoubtedly the fundamental issue of the huge crisis that we are witnessing in every corner of our health service. If we do not have adequate finances to pay our health and social care workers a fair wage, not just now but in the future, and do not ensure that they work in conditions that are properly resourced, issues such as the constant firefighting to deal with colossal waiting lists, a lack of respite provision and delayed cancer diagnoses and treatments, amongst the long list of serious issues that our health service faces, will not be resolved.

In recent days, I met the junior doctors committee. It will take to the picket lines this week as a result of 30% pay erosion over the past 16 years, yet we ask ourselves why our GP practices are collapsing around us and why we cannot access our GPs. If we do not look after our public-sector workers, we will have no workforce, and no workforce means no public services. Sin é. [*Translation: That's it.*] I am happy to support the motion, but I urge the Opposition not to get lost in their efforts to grab a headline but instead to join the rest of us in focusing our collective efforts on securing a financial package from the British Treasury that is reflective of the needs of the people of the North and that will deliver a long-term, sustainable footing for our health service and all our public-sector workers.

Mr Frew: I am really enjoying this Opposition day for a number of reasons. One is that I like the idea of an Opposition. I believe that this place has been lacking because we did not have one, so I like the idea of having an Opposition and Opposition days. For the process of democracy, it is only right that the Executive be held to account. Another reason that I like the fact that the SDLP is in opposition is that, frankly, it was woeful in government. Let

us hope that it can do better in opposition. Earlier, in my room, I was watching the proceedings shown on this camera, here. It is brilliant because, when you are all sitting in your place, one camera can get you all in shot at the one time. That is really effective-looking, although you have a Member away at the minute.

I wish the SDLP all the best in opposition, and I am glad that the second motion brought by the SDLP —.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I do, however, take some exception with his description of the SDLP's performance when in government as "woeful". Could he perhaps highlight any example of that woefulness that compares with the loss of over £600 million of taxpayers' money, as happened with the RHI, which was presided over by the DUP?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Frew: Of course, interventions are meant to be short, but, yes, I can do that. Again, it is disappointing to know that the SDLP has only been in opposition for a matter of weeks and there are already more cracks showing in the party than in the car lifts in our MOT centres, which you failed to address at the last run-in. The hypocrisy is astounding from the party that was prepared to sack nurses. The party that is in opposition was prepared to sack nurses if they did not adhere to a vaccine mandate. That is the sort of party that is now in opposition, and I am glad that it is not now in government.

I welcome the fact that the second motion brought by the SDLP is about public-sector pay, because it is fundamentally about people. Given the enormous size of our public sector, there is an enormous burden on this place to fund it, but we must also recognise that, within that massive monster of a public sector, there are people. They are the people who help our population every day, so it is important that we recognise that. It is also important that those people — the people who work on our behalf in our Departments and in our front-line services — are paid respectably and paid what they deserve. That has not been the case, and I am glad that most of the Executive Ministers who are now in post see this as the number-one priority, because it is about people, and our public sector will not function without paying those people the correct remuneration.

However, the truth is that the money that has been allocated as a one-off — the £584 million — will not cut it, because it really is looking

backwards to the 2023-24 year. What about next year? What about the recurring costs? What about the year after that and the year after that? It is important that we make sure that we get the funding that we require. It is true to say that Barnett just does not cut it any more, that there now has to be a better measurement of need and that we should look towards Wales to see how it is getting on and make sure that we get sufficient pay and funding for our need in Northern Ireland. Of course, our public sector is bigger than those in Wales and Scotland, so it is inevitable that we will probably require more, especially in the short term, to counter the size of our public sector.

I have also heard today about fiscal powers, and that scares me, because I do not believe that the Assembly — the Executive, more to the point — has the maturity to have more fiscal powers. At this stage, you are basically saying that we want to give public-sector workers pay with one hand but then we want to take it off them with the other hand.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will in a wee minute, once I make progress.

Not only that, you are also saying that you want to burden the private sector. I grew up in construction, and you are basically going to burden the private sector with further taxes, rate rises and everything else that goes with having more fiscal powers. I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate my colleague on the Finance Committee giving way. He says that he thinks that we are not mature enough to have more fiscal powers; I disagree. Is one reason for him thinking that we are not mature enough because certain parties in the Assembly keep collapsing the institutions and completely denying basic political and institutional stability?

Mr Frew: The party in opposition has used that as a mantra since the Assembly has been back. I get why the SDLP is doing that, but it is not really constructive, as the party claims to be, to keep raising this issue when every single one of the parties in the Executive is looking forward. You are creating a ghoulish situation that is not actually there.

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

Mr Frew: I will end on this, Mr Deputy Speaker: I value the work of an Opposition. I wish you all the best. I really hope that you are effective.

Mr Honeyford: I echo the comments that have been made. I start by acknowledging the tremendous dedication and hard work that has been exhibited by public-sector workers, especially during the past seven years, when, for five of those, the Assembly did not sit. I come to the debate as the Alliance Party's spokesperson on the economy to support the motion. To grow, the economy needs strong, vibrant public services. Unfortunately, the damage that has been done to public services, the image of this part of the island for inward investment and the lack of stability in this place has haemorrhaged confidence for those looking in. Recently, I have asked the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Communities about reform for Invest NI and Sport NI respectively. Both of their Departments have a chequered recent past. While raising the reform issue there, I made it clear that, in both cases, we have some really talented individuals working in those bodies. Unfortunately, it is not them who are causing the problems; it is the complete lack of leadership, direction and focus. The responsibility for that starts in the Chamber.

Life for everyone in society has challenges. Life is not a straightforward path. It takes direction. There is always a turn and a twist, and it takes energy to keep moving forward. I use the analogy of an escalator in one of our shopping centres. All aspects of life can feel like walking up the downward escalator. When parties here have walked away and collapsed this place, everything here in the Assembly stops, but when you stop on the escalator that is going down, and you think that you are standing still and pausing the institutions, in reality, life everywhere else goes on. You automatically move backwards. When you eventually try to start up again, you start from further back, while the rest of the world has moved on. That is true of public-sector workers and their pay and also, really importantly — I think that this point needs to be stressed — their working conditions, the pressure that they are put under and have to work in, and the services that they are expected to deliver. Fundamentally, this is about making public-sector workers feel valued.

When parties here choose to take their ball and walk off the pitch, there are far-reaching consequences. The financial cost is being paid by public-sector workers. I come from business. In business, your employees are your first customers. After all, if they cannot be positive about the business that they work in, why should anybody else? That applies to Departments too. Public-sector workers are their first customers. If you want first-class public services, you need to show the people

who provide those services that they are valued. It is obvious, yet incredible, that we think that pay can be regarded as an afterthought. The cost of the Assembly suspension will be felt this year and every year as the gap grows between pay here and in other regions of the UK — as has already been said about pay for nurses and everyone else — and the massive difference that is now emerging between here and the South. Suspension can never happen again. I echo the comments of my colleague Eóin Tennyson about Sinn Féin's just voting against that reform and preventing that from happening again.

It is the Alliance Party that has consistently called for structural reform. We continually lead on that debate. Genuinely, we are thankful to the SDLP for joining us on that. We welcome that move. We can work together in that direction. Let us be honest: suspensions of the Assembly have been happening since 1998. The House must ensure that we collectively do all that we can to reform these institutions and bring them up to date with the reality of life in Northern Ireland in 2024.

4.45 pm

We acknowledge the tremendous dedication and hard work exhibited by our public-sector workers, and we urge the Minister of Finance to make a statement to the Assembly once these negotiations have concluded or by the end of the financial year. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that public-sector workers receive the equitable pay that they deserve, and we must act with urgency to make that a reality.

Ms Hunter: Our public-sector workers are the very backbone of this place. Our society could not and would not function without them. They are the very tapestry of our society. Our nurses, bus drivers, junior doctors, teachers and more are the threads that hold us together. Yet, in the face of a relentless cost-of-living crisis, they are being stretched to their limits. With inflation rates soaring, the value of wages has plummeted, leaving many unable to afford the basics of life.

Our healthcare staff, who are at the front line in saving lives, find themselves struggling to pay bills. Bus drivers who ensure our mobility and connectivity are forced to make hard choices between heating and eating. As was, rightfully, talked about earlier, junior doctors have had no choice but to go on strike. Again, they are the very backbone of our healthcare system, and they work exhausting hours only to face

financial instability. Our teachers, tasked with shaping the future of our children and young people, are being undervalued financially and are questioning their ability to continue in their vocation, as are our important classroom assistants.

Recently, I attended the picket line outside Rossmar School, which is a special school in Limavady, and spoke with classroom assistants there who detailed that they are working two or three jobs due to the level of financial stress that they are experiencing. When we see the level of care that they provide in that role, it is just crazy to think that they have to do that. We must see an uplift in their pay. That is why this place must honour them and deliver equitable pay awards and resolve all outstanding public-sector pay negotiations. That is why the SDLP tabled the motion.

The financial pressure that our workers face has taken a toll on their mental health. Recent studies have shown an uptick in anxiety, depression and stress among all public-sector workers, which directly correlates with financial pressures. Pressure is the key thing when we talk about the need for a pay increase. Our public-sector workers are under significant stress: the pressure is crippling, and it is crushing people.

That brings me to my next point, which is the sheer lack of simple pleasures for people. Things that were once considered mundane — a family outing, a small vacation or even a simple dinner out — have, in the eyes of so many, become luxuries that they simply cannot afford. Recently I was speaking with a constituent who said, "After a tough work week, you used to be able to go down to the pub, have a pint and talk it over with your friends, and that was it". Now, even going for a pint does not fit into their budget. That is the level of financial stress that we are seeing. This is not just about economics, it really is about those simple things: the quality of life and the mental well-being of our constituents — our workers — who should not be living to work but working to live so that they can have a high quality of life for themselves and their families.

Articles published over the past two years paint a grim picture of the situation in Northern Ireland. For instance, a recent piece highlighted that over 60% of nurses in Northern Ireland are considering leaving the profession. I am the daughter of a nurse, so, over the decades, I have seen the level of stress that nurses are under and the hours that they are on their feet. A former nurse is an MLA in our Chamber. I talked before about the level of stress that our

nurses are under and the long hours that they do. They deserve their pay for the job that they do: they are incredible, but they cannot afford to live on their current wages. Another report pointed out the alarming rates at which our bus drivers are their leaving jobs, leading to reduced services and impacting on the daily lives of thousands of citizens. My constituency is very rural, so our bus routes are vital.

Those are not isolated incidents; they are symptoms of a broader crisis. Fair pay, in this context, is not just a demand: it is a necessity and it is about acknowledging the fundamental role that those workers play in all our lives and communities and ensuring that they can live with dignity and fair pay. It is about recognising that a society that undervalues its public-sector workers is a society that is at risk of losing them, which would lead to an unimaginable impact on our daily lives and future generations here in the North of Ireland.

As we stand at this crossroads, the question before us is not whether we can afford to increase pay for our public-sector workers but whether we can afford not to. The implications of inaction are far-reaching and affect not just the workers and their families but the very fabric of our society here in the North. We must represent the needs of workers within these four walls and we must not see another shameful collapse of these institutions. It is all interwoven and interlinked: let us not kid ourselves. It is time to invest in those who invest in us and recognise their worth with more than just applause. Let us come together to ensure that our nurses, bus drivers, junior doctors, teachers and others can live with the dignity that they deserve, reflecting the invaluable service that they provide to us all. Let us give them the pay that they so rightly deserve.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on a very important matter that has been a priority for the Alliance Party for a long time: the pay of our public-sector workers. At the outset, I declare an interest, in that I have been a public-sector worker for all my working life. Prior to coming to the Assembly nearly 12 years ago, I had the unique opportunity to work in the public sector and look at public-sector pay and conditions. For over 30 years, I worked as an employment relations officer in the Labour Relations Agency, assisting public-sector and other trade unions to negotiate their pay and conditions.

I welcome the long overdue work that is now being done by Ministers, Departments and trade union negotiators across the public sector

to determine and deliver pay increases. Those negotiations, however, must go hand in hand with long-term fiscal guarantees and mechanisms to ensure that we can adequately fund our public services and implement the necessary transformations. Public-sector workers are not looking for special treatment. They are merely seeking fairness and equality in pay and conditions, and their funding must reflect that.

Funding has been delivered to their counterparts in England and Wales, but, as others reminded us in this debate, successive failures by Sinn Féin and the DUP have denied stability and certainty to, in many cases, underpaid and undervalued public-sector workers. One really wonders how contributors to today's debate believe that public-sector workers can take them seriously. It is that stop-start failure that led to the absence of proper long-term planning. Strained budgets have led to cuts and overspending. Our services have deteriorated more than in any previous period of collapse, falling far short of public expectations and damaging the resilience of public-sector workers. It is evident that it is an accumulation of longer-term issues that have been neglected for far too long.

The current one-year package, which, broadly speaking, allows us to achieve pay parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, falls short of addressing the systemic pressures on public-sector pay going forward. Ultimately, without a long-term, sustainable option, the recurring costs of the pay awards will put continued significant, if not impossible, pressure on the Executive's finances, forcing them into a predicament in which they must choose between cutting services and ensuring fair pay. Those are not the only challenges that Northern Ireland faces. Improvements are needed in areas like healthcare, waiting lists, school budgets, infrastructure, childcare, poverty alleviation, climate change mitigation and many more. All that would be difficult enough for a well-functioning Government, let alone one that struggles with stability, unity and strategic focus.

In the face of such pressures, we cannot have more of the same. Without genuine change, how will the Government work? Northern Ireland has little chance of addressing its problems, not least given the scale of the challenges that now face us over the next three years, with what are, hopefully, the dying days of a Tory Administration and the uncertain days of a new Government. Those changes can happen only if Northern Ireland has sustained stable government, and, to achieve that, reform

of our institutions is needed. Furthermore, the repeated cycles of what can only be described as ransom politics have not only pushed the government structures to breaking point but eroded public confidence in the very concept of devolution.

If we are to safeguard the future of the Good Friday Agreement and our institutions, it is imperative that we implement significant changes in those structures. My party's reform proposals, which respect the fundamental principles of the agreement, offer a pathway to stability and fairness. The reforms must ensure that no party can stop the formation of a Government or single-handedly collapse one in the future. That approach protects the rights of parties to participate in government, but it also gives them the option to opt out if they so choose, which the largest two parties cannot do under the current system. No party would be excluded, but, equally, no party would have a veto over the operation of government. Such a veto denies others the right to do their job and deliver for our constituents and public-sector workers. Moreover, a long-term Programme for Government and a multi-year Budget are essential. They will set out agreed priorities for the next three years, maintaining a sustained focus on improving public services so that benefits are tangible in the day-to-day lives of our citizens. While the financial packages agreed upon with the UK Government provide some relief for Northern Ireland's Budget, they do not solve the systemic issues in our public finances.

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

Mr Dickson: I will. In conclusion, the time to reform is now, the time to defend our public-sector workers on pay and conditions is now, and they should no longer be used as a political bargaining chip.

Mr McNulty: We need to do better than playing catch-up with our overburdened and underpaid public-sector workers' pay packets. We need decisive action and ambition from the Executive to ensure that our public-sector workers feel valued and are fairly rewarded. If we continue to delay fair pay for our teachers, midwives, nurses, doctors, classroom assistants, physios, radiographers, dieticians and public transport workers, how can we be surprised when they vote with their feet and walk out as they did on 18 January, when tens of thousands of hard-working and hard-toiling workers from 16 different unions walked out in a demonstration against unfair and unjust pay? I have to

applaud the unions for organising an event of such significance — the major such event of the past 50 years — with such goodwill from everyone on the day. Well done to them on that. We need to pay public-sector workers what they are worth and ensure that they feel valued for keeping the wheels of our economy and our society turning. Pay them what they are worth. Fair pay now.

Mr Carroll: I must say that this motion is absolutely typical of the Assembly. Across the Chamber, we have parties of all shades that have cut public-sector pay whilst in government yet have no qualms talking about the burdens faced by public-sector workers, real burdens though they are. Public-sector workers, who have had their living standards attacked, do not want more crocodile tears, not least when Stormont, at this minute, is offering them another real terms pay cut. Words of concern from the establishment parties here, both those in the Executive and in the official Opposition, are as useful to those workers as a chocolate fireguard, because nothing less than a pay rise will even begin to address the pay erosion and enforced poverty that they have suffered at the hands of these very institutions.

When public-sector workers took strike action and demanded a pay rise, they did so with an eye to skyrocketing prices and rising inflation, which peaked at around 11%. I am sure that many public-sector workers found it galling when Stormont Ministers paraded their 5% deal in the media. Five per cent not only is a cut in real terms but does not even come close to restoring overall public-sector pay levels, which have declined by at least 20% on Stormont's watch. People Before Profit was alone in opposing the Stormont Budget Bill on that basis: it copper-fastened a real terms pay cut for public-sector workers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the motion makes no mention of that real terms pay cut and puts no concurrent demand on the Executive to give them a pay rise and to invest properly in our public services. The motion seems more concerned about the timing of a deal than with delivering a deal that gives workers a real pay rise of what they need above that 5%.

I urge any public-sector worker to be wary of demands and promises from parties that have been in an Executive for the past two decades and played a part in pay erosion. I also have a reminder for parties here that think that they can quickly ram through a deal or pass off a pay cut as a pay rise. They may hold the purse strings for now, but the 170,000 public-sector workers who took strike action in January have the real power here and across our society. If

they choose to reject this pay cut, Executive parties will have to cough up the money. It is time to pay those workers. It is time to pay them properly and to invest properly in our public services as people were promised.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Minister of Finance has up to 15 minutes to respond.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I thank those who have taken part in today's debate on public-sector pay. I will respond to some Members' comments in the course of my remarks and address others at the end.

Our public-sector workers are at the heart of service delivery. The Executive are united on the need to resolve public-sector pay.

One of the first actions that I took as Minister of Finance was to seek flexibility from the Treasury around the funding that was made available in the financial package to deal with the departmental overspends and public-sector pay. Getting that flexibility meant that the amount that the Executive could allocate for pay was over £100 million more than originally provided for in the financial package, so there was some £688 million in total. I was pleased that the Executive supported the proposal to allocate that amount towards public-sector pay. It signals that we value our public-sector workers. Those workers, including our civil servants, deliver public services in our communities on a daily basis in our schools, our hospitals, across the transport network and right across the public sector. It was important that we went as far as we could, and that is what we did as an Executive.

5.00 pm

That funding, along with the £380 million for departmental overspends, has now been provided as a total resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) allocation for each Department. Gaining Executive agreement to those departmental allocations meant that Departments could immediately begin to take forward negotiations to agree public-sector pay awards for 2023-24. Providing that allocation for pay as part of a broader funding envelope granted flexibility to Departments to manage pay awards within the overall funding available. As Members will also be aware, I then brought forward a Budget Bill for 2023-24, which gave Departments the legal authority to spend the funding that the Executive agreed to. You will know the urgency with which that had to be taken forward, and I am grateful for the support and cooperation that I received to enable the

legislation to be introduced at such pace. It was borne out of necessity.

I agree entirely that public-sector workers have waited too long to get the pay rise that they are entitled to for 2023-24. The fact that the delay has taken place in the context of a severe cost-of-living crisis and a squeeze on household budgets has only exacerbated the impact that we know that so many of our citizens have felt.

The pay negotiations that I, as Finance Minister, am directly responsible for are those for Civil Service pay. On taking office, I prioritised meeting Civil Service unions. Those meetings were among the first that I had in my first week as Finance Minister. I quickly gave officials a negotiating remit to engage with unions on the 2023-24 pay award. I asked for those discussions to conclude as quickly as possible in order to get the offer made, and I am pleased to advise that negotiations started on 19 February and that the pay offers were issued on 26 February. The Civil Service pay offer will see the majority of civil servants receive a 5% consolidated increase plus a one-off £1,500 non-consolidated payment. Some will also receive progression increments.

I am also pleased to maintain the commitment for the Civil Service to be a Living Wage Foundation (LWF) employer, and pay will be increased to match the most recent Living Wage Foundation real living wage rate of £12 per hour. The lowest-paid staff in the Civil Service earn £21,053 a year. By increasing pay in line with the Living Wage Foundation rate, the annual pay will rise to £23,177. That represents a 10% increase. The pay offer that I have made will, if accepted, see that 10% increase for the lowest-paid staff backdated to August 2023. The eligible staff will also receive the further £1,500 non-consolidated payment.

I understand that the unions will ballot their members on the offer. I am pleased to note that NIPSA, the union with the biggest membership in the Civil Service, has recommended the offer to its members. I hope that staff will look favourably on the offer and that unions' consultation with their members will proceed as swiftly as possible so that we can get pay to staff as soon as is practicable. For my part, I have done what I can as quickly as possible to make sure that public-sector workers receive the pay awards that they are entitled to for 2023-24. I know that other Ministers with responsibility for other groups of public-sector workers are seeking to agree pay awards for this year as quickly as possible.

My strong hope is that the negotiations will come to a conclusion as soon as possible so that the pay awards can be implemented as quickly as possible and provide some relief to public-sector workers and their families. The motion calls on:

"the Minister of Finance to make a statement to the Assembly upon the conclusion of these negotiations or at the end of the financial year."

As I said, I am not responsible for finalising pay negotiations for public-sector staff groups, except for those who get Civil Service pay. It is right that we afford unions the time and space that they need to ballot their members.

In the case of civil servants, we expect that non-industrial unions' consultation with members will be concluded by the middle of March, with industrial unions' consultation expected to take eight weeks. I will update members once negotiations around Civil Service pay have been concluded. As for the other public-sector staff groups that are involved, it is for the relevant Ministers involved to update Members on those negotiations as they will be closer to the details of each. I know that the Health Minister, for example, has submitted a written statement to the Assembly that sets out the latest position on health pay negotiations.

I will address some of the comments that Members made in the debate. Mr McCrossan mentioned giving unions time and space. He said that the negotiations were not going quickly enough, and that it is important that unions' processes are respected. I know that Ministers and employers are trying to progress their end of negotiations as quickly as possible.

Declan Kearney and Liz Kimmins both mentioned the impact of Tory austerity, which I agree was a political choice to run down public services across Britain and here. I agree with Mr Kearney about the need for a social dialogue and a new funding model. Diane Forsythe mentioned the need to settle disputes quickly. She said that we were not able to give Departments everything that they want. That was the case, but we allocated as much as we were able to, and I am glad that the Executive supported the proposition that was put forward. I agree with Alan Chambers: no workers, healthcare or otherwise, want to be on picket lines and suffer financial penalty for being there.

I do not agree with Mr Frew's assertions on fiscal devolution, but I am sure that we will debate that many times in the time ahead. Mr

Honeyford, Cara Hunter, Stewart Dickson and Justin McNulty all mentioned the value of our public-sector workers. They need to be valued, and to have a good quality of life and good working conditions as well as decent pay. That is particularly pertinent in healthcare: when staff are on strike, it is about not just pay but safe staffing levels. It is important that we progress that also. Public-sector workers right across the public sector will be key to delivering the transformation that we all want to see, so it is important that they are properly recompensed.

As I have said, I want to see public-sector pay awards for 2023-24 made to staff as soon as possible. For my part, I think that I have done what I could in the short space of time since the return of the institutions to make sure that that happens. We are not there yet, and more work remains to be done. I know that the workers involved have waited a long time for the increases that they are entitled to, so I will continue to do what I can to ensure that negotiations are concluded and awards made as quickly as possible.

Although we are discussing pay issues for this year, we will soon need to turn to public-sector pay considerations for next year. I had a constructive first meeting with the Treasury last week and look forward to continued engagement in the time ahead. I welcome the agreement of the Treasury to immediately commence work together on the development of a fiscal framework that reflects our level of need. That will be critical to delivering sustainably funded high quality public services, including on public-sector pay.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Minister, for that response. I call Colin McGrath to conclude and wind on the debate. Mr McGrath, you have up to 10 minutes.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to wind on the debate. It is an important one for many people. It shows the important role of an Opposition. It is not about just shouting from the sidelines or being opposed to the Executive for the sake of being opposed; this has allowed us to highlight the issues that are critical to people right across this place. Surely, after more than a decade of stop-go politics, it is time for change. Stop-go politics does not serve anyone's interests. It does not deliver positive outcomes for the public. It has been effective in diminishing people's trust in politics, damaging public services and delivering a decade of pay erosion for those in our public sector.

Today's business is important. It highlights the importance of having the Opposition here in the

Assembly, even though one Member took to Twitter last week to refer to the Opposition as an irrelevance. It is time for reform. The need for reform is evidenced so clearly by the matter of pay. Since 2010, our nurses have suffered a year-on-year real-terms reduction in pay, so much so that experienced nurses are being paid, in real terms, the same amount for five days of work now as they were being paid for four days of work in 2010. Grade-5 nurses here can earn between £27,000 and £33,000. Meanwhile, in the South, they can earn between €33,000 and €50,000. What about our doctors? In the South, their wage can range from €102,000 to €121,000, which is almost a third more than they get here. To set that in a specific context, although the amount that we pay our healthcare staff has eroded over the past 10 years, the amount that, for example, we expect them to pay for a house has skyrocketed above the rate of inflation. In 2012, the average house cost 3.7 times the salary of a top band-5 nurse. It is now five times that salary.

Let us think of our domiciliary carers. Those heroes are out and about in our community providing a lifeline for so many, but they are grossly underpaid. Forcing them to pay for their petrol and, at times, equipment tells those key public-sector workers that this and previous Executives do not care about them. For them, we need to see public-sector pay reform.

Our teachers, too, working in classrooms right across this place, more often than not take work home with them in the evenings and purchase their own resources, because of their passion for teaching, instilling knowledge in our young people and forging leaders for the future. There are even principals who went out and bought toilet rolls for their school because the school budget had run out. For those public-sector workers, we must see public-sector pay reform. Whether you are a refuse collector, a consultant, a teacher or a cleaner — whichever public-sector role you play — you have been let down by these institutions, by Executive after Executive and by collapse after collapse, and that needs to change.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. Lots of Members, particularly Sinn Féin Members, were right to call out Tory austerity and its impact on public-sector workers here. Does the Member agree with me, however, that there is a contradiction between calling out Tory austerity and its impact on public-sector workers and saying that you want to retain a veto that allows one party to collapse government, thus handing complete power to Tory Ministers to do what they like with this place?

Mr McGrath: Absolutely. We hear time and time again that the Tories are the big, bad beast, yet, for five of the past seven years, we have left them in charge. We have let them take the decisions. We have let them put their ideology on our public-sector workers. Then what do Members do? They complain that the Tories have done that.

We demand that reform begin now. We are under no illusions, however, that the reform that we seek in order to make good for the people of Northern Ireland has to be made here, not in London. Just one month in for these institutions, we have had a party leader — an Executive Minister — say that the Secretary of State, who is currently polishing his CV and having his P45 drawn up, needs to do the heavy lifting on reform. That is the same Secretary of State who has proven himself to act against the wishes of people here, with no understanding of what life here is like.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Member for giving way. Surely he recognises that reform of these institutions requires legislation at Westminster and that it is therefore imperative that there be engagement among the UK Government, the Irish Government and all parties. Although I share his scepticism about the current Secretary of State, there is a contradiction in saying that reform should happen urgently but that we should not engage with the current Government.

Mr McGrath: Time and time again, people have said that it is London that needs to take the decisions, yet, every time that you speak to it, London says that it is up to the parties here to take the decisions. We should start by taking the decision here that we want to see reform, and then, I hope, change will follow.

It is time to put an end to failure. Addressing the issue of public-sector pay is inherently tied to the reform of these institutions. We cannot and must not divorce poor public-sector pay from the collapse of these institutions. That is why we, as the Opposition, sequenced today's motions.

5.15 pm

We saw already today who voted for the opportunity for reform and who voted against it. It is worth noting that those who voted against reform are likely to be the ones who will be complaining in the future if there is any collapse and about the impact of that on public-sector pay.

Significant pay divergence, which is the opposite of pay parity, occurred when there was no Executive — also, shamelessly, when there actually was an Executive. Our nurses, doctors, teachers, civil servants and others have been forced to work here for less, doing the same jobs as those in other places. That is totally unfair. To the public-sector workers, the grafters of our community, I say this: when a Member of an Executive party complains about the amount that you, as a public-sector worker, are being paid and say that it is a disgrace, remember that they set your wages, and, time and again, they set them too low. Then, when they allowed the collapse of these institutions, it was the Tories who set the wages.

We must remember other things. RHI got sorted. The social investment fund got paid. Pet projects were developed and funded, but public-sector wages were not. If any of them tell you that your current pay level is too low, remind them that it is because they set it too low. Tell them to wipe the crocodile tears from their eyes and demand that pay parity is locked in for the future so that it cannot diverge again. That would be true public-sector pay reform.

I will take a quick look at some of the remarks made during the debate. "Blame the Tories" — as ever, they blame the Tories even though they took some of the decisions. It was remarked that it was a job for all politicians to resolve. It is for the Executive to resolve the pay for the public sector here. To hear that there is some money, but not enough, is not going to be comforting for public-sector workers. Time and again we heard that the biggest impact on public-sector pay was the collapse of these institutions, which only two parties brought down.

Of course, there were Mr Frew's contributions, which were typically drab and childish. Those who fear what is being said know that they are losing the game —

Mr Frew: Will the member give way?

Mr McGrath: — when they play the player and not the ball. I thank my colleague Cara Hunter for highlighting the fact that lower pay rips families and workers from — *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, I am being interrupted here. I am sorry, I am not giving way.

We heard from the Minister that people have waited too long for the pay award in 2023-24, but that has been in no small part because of the contribution of parties collapsing the institutions.

I hope that Members will support the motion and be part of the positive change that we want to see in this shared home place. It is time for that change; that time is now. With so many swipes at us as an Opposition today, I look forward to seeing everyone in the Chamber voting to support public-sector pay.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the immense burden placed on public-sector workers by the political uncertainty and the failure to deliver equitable pay awards; resolves that all outstanding public-sector pay negotiations for 2023-24 will be concluded by the end of this financial year; and calls on the Minister of Finance to make a statement to the Assembly upon the conclusion of these negotiations or at the end of the financial year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, I suggest that you take your ease while we change the Top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Ad Hoc Committee to Consider Legislation to Prevent the Suspension of the Devolved Institutions

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider legislation to prevent the suspension of the devolved institutions at the discretion of a single party or an Executive Minister; and to submit a report to the Assembly by 16 September 2024.

Composition: Sinn Féin 2
Democratic Unionist Party 2
Alliance Party 1
Ulster Unionist Party 1
Social Democratic and Labour

Party 1

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee shall be nominated by the Leader of the Opposition, and a Deputy Chairperson shall be nominated by the Committee.

Quorum: The quorum shall be 5 members except when no decision is taken or question put to the Committee, when the quorum shall be 4.

Procedure: The procedures of the Ad Hoc Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

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

Mr O'Toole: This is the final motion for debate on our Opposition day. I am sure that some Members are relieved that that is the case. I think that we have put down some markers. We may make some progress. Hopefully we will make some progress with this, the final motion of the day.

All three Opposition motions are designed to complement and, indeed, to implement one another. The first was designed to set out principles around the need to end the toxic veto and to express to the people whom we serve our regret and shame about what has happened in this place over the past decade. The second motion, which I am pleased to say we have just passed, was designed to reflect the importance of public-sector pay and to get a speedy resolution to the outstanding pay settlements. This motion is an opportunity for those who voted against the first motion to do the right thing. To use another phrase, it is never too late to do the right thing.

We designed this motion as an implementing vehicle to carry through the will that was expressed by the Assembly in the first motion. Only one Member from Sinn Féin spoke in that debate. The First Minister and deputy First Minister declined even to live up to the convention of the House by coming to answer the first Opposition motion of the mandate. What we heard from the one Sinn Féin Member who contributed to that debate was that their objection, such as it was, to the previous motion was that it did not specifically call out Tory austerity. In our remarks as Opposition, we were clear that Tory austerity and, indeed, Brexit have been part of devastating the public realm and public services in this place and other parts of the UK. That is a given. I have repeatedly made the point that, if you believe that there is an economic ideology of making the most vulnerable pay the price of austerity, surely the worst and most objectionable thing that you can possibly do is to give that Government — those ideologues in London — the power to do whatever they like to the people here. If Sinn Féin Members are serious about that being their objection, this follow-up motion

should not give them any trouble. That is presuming that what they were actually troubled about was the apparent absence of a reference to that in the motion or to this not touching on public services, because this motion is very specifically about a Committee of the Assembly to debate options for reform.

I will run through the motion briefly, because my time is limited. It sets out the composition of the proposed Committee. I have no difficulty acknowledging that the two big parties, who, let us face it, have the biggest mandates of any in the Chamber, collectively have the right to the biggest presence on that Committee. We think that the Committee should look at the options for ending the veto; we think that it should be focused on ending the veto and not get into broader conversations about reform of the institutions, although there are legitimate debates to be had about reform of the institutions. I would like to see emphasis on durability and delivery of strand two, which has been sorely neglected over the past years — in fact, in many ways, it has been neglected since 1998. I also want to understand how strand three will fit in with some of the new things that, apparently, have been bilaterally agreed between the DUP and London. Many of the comments that have been made about looking at designation and how it works in 2024 are completely legitimate and necessary, but, first, we have to focus on veto. We must remove that one toxic, nuclear button that threatens not just political stability but our ability to do anything — pay public-sector workers, reform the health service or take economic advantage. We cannot collapse the institutions again.

The Committee is designed to look at the issue and make legislative proposals by September this year. A huge amount of homework has been done. This does not need to take years. The Committee's members will not need to go away and undertake a PhD. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at the Commons did a report earlier this year. There have been multiple reports, and there are multiple options. Given that we propose a Committee of different parties, it can look at the options and reflect on them.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I do not have time. I do not think that I will get an extra minute. I would normally give way, and I am not seeking to be difficult, but I am very limited in time.

We have heard a lot in recent weeks, including from the new Economy Minister, from the First Minister and from the president of Sinn Féin,

the leader of the Opposition in Dáil Éireann, about the need to look at and take forward reform of the arrangements. We have heard fairly warm words about that. If people are serious about reform, let us get the Committee set up, get it working and get it reporting by September. Then, if people want to have a longer look at reform, that can happen in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Bluntly, this is the chance to do the right thing. Having done the wrong thing a few hours ago and voted with the DUP and Jim Allister against reform, let us do the right thing. Let us not gaslight people. Let us reform the institutions, deliver political stability and get the Committee up and running.

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

Mr O'Toole: I commend the motion.

Mr Sheehan: When I saw the motion, I was somewhat bewildered because, as everyone knows, we have the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Its role is to review matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly and the Executive. It exists for the very purpose of reforming the institutions. Therefore, it makes no sense to establish an Ad Hoc Committee that will effectively duplicate the work of an existing Standing Committee that can deal with the issue that the Opposition want to address. Who will sit on the Ad Hoc Committee? Will the Ad Hoc Committee and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee deal with the issue simultaneously? Will they call the same experts and witnesses? With only three years of this mandate remaining, I hope and expect that the Assembly will be extremely busy with introducing new legislation, so why would it be a good idea to create what amounts to a less effective or powerful Committee? Moreover, an Ad Hoc Committee will have to be resourced and funded in a similar way.

I appeal to the SDLP to join the rest of us and address the issue and others in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The SDLP has a strong representative on that Committee, who is more than capable of addressing any concerns that the SDLP may have. My final question is this: how does an Ad Hoc Committee trump the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, whose function is to deal with the very issues contained in the motion?

Mr Buckley: The Opposition will be glad to hear that I intend to be brief. There is no point in going over significant ground that was covered in the earlier Opposition debate. The

party's position on the issues that have faced the Assembly over the past 25-odd years has been made clear. At the heart of it — all Members who spoke touched on this — is the need for consensus politics. That will be crucial, not only now but in the time to come. At different times, these institutions and the wider political scene faced troubles in Northern Ireland. It was only through consensus politics that we were able to chart a way through. It is no different now from how it was in times past.

5.30 pm

Looking in particular at the formation of another Committee, I share the sentiment that was expressed by Sinn Féin's Pat Sheehan. The Opposition look at me with rolling eyes, but what is the point of the formation of another Committee? Surely this place is "committed" to death. It is in the remit of the Assembly and established under its procedures that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee look at those very matters.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I have only three minutes, and I know that there will be time at the end.

I chair that Committee, and I look forward to working constructively with every member of it to discuss the issues that have been raised in today's debate, whether by the Alliance Party, the SDLP or other parties. The vast majority, bar the TUV and People Before Profit, are represented on that Committee. We have a Sinn Féin Deputy Chair. We have the Alliance Party, the DUP, Sinn Féin again and Cara Hunter from the SDLP, who will represent the Opposition. That is the place in which those conversations will continue, in which parties can put their legitimate concerns on the record and in which the Committee can do a detailed piece of work and report its findings. The matter will be resolved, however, only if there is consensus across the House. That will be crucial if we are to cement long-term, sustainable devolution. I am afraid that provisions such as an Ad Hoc Committee or, indeed, those debated earlier will not provide that clarity or certainty.

Mr Tennyson: We must be clear that these institutions are as stable today as they were the day before they last collapsed. The public are weary, and they want to be assured that we in the House are taking steps to ensure that the last collapse was the last collapse.

I am of the Good Friday Agreement generation. That agreement allowed me to grow up in relative peace, which was not experienced by my parents and grandparents, but I am clear that it was about more than the mere absence of violence or the minutiae of political structures and that it was never intended to be a ceiling on our ambitions. It was designed to be a foundation on which, together, we could build a brighter, more prosperous and shared future. Instead, mechanisms that were designed to protect minority rights by requiring cross-community support on key decisions have been turned on their head and abused to deny fundamental human rights, to derail bread-and-butter politics and to spare the blushes of the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member give way?

Mr Tennyson: Of course.

Ms Bradshaw: Does the Member agree that we in the party have concerns that another Ad Hoc Committee similar to the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights would cause a lot of work and a lot of people to become invested in it, only for the wider public to be disappointed?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Tennyson: I agree, and I will come to that point later in my remarks. Whether it was the blockage of marriage equality, the vetoing of health regulations during the pandemic or protecting Ministers who had clearly lost the confidence of the House, repeated abuses of the system are nothing more than a perversion of democracy. More than that, cross-community votes are the least cross-community votes of any in the Chamber. The case for reform may well be indisputable and supported by three quarters of the public, but it will be resisted because the current system privileges the two largest parties. A bit like Orwell's 'Animal Farm', it seems that we are all equal, but some are, simply, more equal than others. Again, I lay this challenge to Sinn Féin Members in particular: having talked about equality, about wanting to work for all and, in the past, about the importance of "one man, one vote", how can you, with a straight face or a clear conscience, argue that it is acceptable that those who vote for Alliance, People Before Profit or the Green Party be treated as second-class citizens? How can you, having called on the DUP to end its boycott for two years, argue that its ability to wield a veto should be protected?

I share my colleague's concerns about an Ad Hoc Committee. It will duplicate AERC. It will be ineffective because it will have at its core an inbuilt Sinn Féin and DUP majority. All that said, I genuinely welcome the SDLP's coming to this conversation, so, in an act of good faith, despite the concerns that we have about the Ad Hoc Committee, its operation and its ability to deliver, we will support the motion. Equally, I hope that the SDLP will support our calls for a proper root-and-branch review of these institutions, as was envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement but was never delivered, that is inclusive of both Governments and all parties in the House. That will instil the confidence in these institutions that is so desperately needed.

Mr Nesbitt: As this is the first time that I have spoken in the Chamber outside Question Time today, I take the opportunity to wish Mr O'Toole well in his new role and wish the SDLP well as the official Opposition. It would be churlish and perverse of me, as the political leader who brought in the first post-1998 Opposition, not to wish you well. I think that an official Opposition is a step in the right direction towards normalising the politics of this place. In fairness, you have structured your first Opposition day a lot better than the first Ulster Unionist/SDLP Opposition day in 2016.

The Ulster Unionists have supported your first two motions, and it will be case of "two out of three ain't bad", I am afraid, because we do not support this one, and the reasons have already been articulated.

I sat on the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights. We do not have a bill of rights. The Ad Hoc Committee went nowhere because we could not get agreement, and I cannot imagine for one millisecond that setting up this Ad Hoc Committee would be any more successful. The point has been made repeatedly that the role for review rests with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and we support that Committee's taking a look at this issue.

Finally, there is a little confusion that the leader of the Opposition might clear up. The motion says that the Ad Hoc Committee would:

"submit a report to the Assembly".

However, in your remarks, I believe, you said that the Committee would submit proposals for reform. Are you prejudging the outcome? Which is it?

Mr O'Toole: [*Inaudible.*] If the Member looks at the motion, he will see that it says that the

Committee will "submit a report" and "consider legislation". I think that it would be perverse for the Committee not to submit legislative proposals. I would not presuppose, however, that there would be a perfect majority or complete consensus on what those proposals would look like. That is why we have set out what the composition of the Committee should be, and that is why people have talked about a deadline, unlike with other Ad Hoc Committees.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The point is that the line:

"to consider legislation to prevent the suspension of the devolved institutions"

does not mean that the consideration will end in saying, "Yes, we should put forward a proposal so to do". However, I accept the clarification from the Member and conclude my remarks there.

Ms Armstrong: I will not stand in anyone's way of them discussing the necessary reforms, as it will allow parties the opportunity to catch up on what Alliance has been talking about for, to be honest, a couple of decades. Although I will not block the motion, I have to ask why we keep on needing to have Committees.

I sat on the AERC in the previous mandate. We went through an investigation, but, because of the make-up of that Committee, we did not come to any recommendations. It was drawn out and dragged on so that nothing came out of it. I hope that the current AERC might go back over the wealth of experience that was brought into some of those reports and come out with some recommendations. However, let us be very clear: even if the AERC comes out with a recommendation to move towards reform, as has already come out and was clarified at last week's Committee on Procedures, it will still be for the UK Government to bring forward those reforms in law. Any changes to the Northern Ireland Act cannot be taken forward by this House. Then, of course, once that happens, it will be for the Committee on Procedures to make any changes to Standing Orders. Therefore, there are a lot of things to go through before we get this. As the leader of the Opposition said, time is tight on this one, and we have a lot to get through before we even get to the stage of changing Standing Orders.

I point out to the House that any changes to Standing Orders will require a cross-community

vote, and guess what, folks? I am standing here again saying what I said earlier: my vote will not count the same. It makes a mockery of this whole place.

As I said, I will not stand against the motion today, but I have to say that, of the seven people who are talked about in the motion — the seven representatives on the Committee — four will vote against anything to do with reform of the institutions. They have done that today and will continue to do so. We could take the matter out of the House and go to a citizens' assembly. I am happy to consider that, because the people outside the House actually get this an awful lot more than the people in the House do. Collapse without any reforms is unforgivable. In the debate on public-sector pay, we heard that it is hurting the very people who elect us to the House. It is time for reform to go forward. Unfortunately for the Opposition, I believe that the motion will be voted down. I will not vote against it, because any discussion is better than no discussion at all. I hope that other Members will count the clock down. It is time to change this place, and the time is now.

Mr Speaker: I call Ms Cara Hunter to make the winding-up speech on the motion.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the large number of contributions that I heard on reform. In my own time, chatting to constituents and speaking to young people, I have heard about their want for us on the hill to instil a sense of hope that the institutions can stand and work and that the parties in them can work together without collapsing or the ability to collapse them. We can and must use every tool that is available to us to prevent the suspension of the devolved institutions. We in the Opposition believe that the Ad Hoc Committee that our motion calls for is the best mechanism to create proposals that will lead to reform and options to end the veto and create legislative proposals.

The motion seeks to create an Ad Hoc Committee. We ask these questions. Why not now? If not now, when? If not this process, what? I will touch on a few comments from Members.

Mr Brown: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: Yes.

Mr Brown: Does the Member agree that it may have been helpful if the Opposition had published some proposals on reform prior to, say, May 2022?

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention, but, as my colleagues stated, we previously published a number of things on reform. You can see from previous comments by a number of our representatives that we are extremely passionate about the issue. I welcome that Alliance shares that position.

Mr Buckley mentioned that the AERC could be utilised as a tool to discuss reform. A more targeted Committee, with specific aims, timelines and targets, would be beneficial.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving away. Does she accept the assurances from the Chair of the AERC that it will deal with the issue, or, like me, does she believe that Mr Buckley does not know his AERC from his elbow? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. Should the motion not pass, what we will have seen from the DUP and Sinn Féin is that they are not committed to talking about reform. In the event that it does not pass, I would welcome Mr Buckley's comments and ask that we work collectively on the AERC, but, from our perspective, we believe that a more targeted Committee, with timelines, would be better suited to discuss reform.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: No, because I need to make some progress.

One of our main concerns is that the AERC has a number of issues to deal with, and we fear that reform might get eaten up among its other priorities. That is a concern for us. The public is watching us today, and we believe that it would welcome a Committee such as that proposed.

Pat Sheehan touched on reforming the institutions and mentioned fears around duplication of a Standing Committee. We have seen the votes from the DUP and Sinn Féin today. Again, I argue that they are not serious about talking about reform and working for all. Reform is necessary to instil that sense of hope not just in young people but in all people across Northern Ireland. The Committee's specific purpose would put that at the forefront of political discussion.

Eóin Tennyson talked about the importance of root-and-branch reform, which the Ad Hoc Committee could look at, as it is important. Mr Nesbitt reflected on his time in opposition previously — there was a touch of nostalgia there — and his concern about the motion. Ms

Armstrong touched on the importance of reform and said:

"any discussion is better than no discussion at all."

It is important that we have conversations on reform. It has been a pleasure to contribute to the debate. I thank the Members for tabling the motion. We need reform of the institutions. In five of the past seven years, we have left constituents, workers and families with no answers and in significant financial distress. We have a mental health crisis. We talk at length about issues such as women's health and violence against women and girls, yet some Members cannot see how reform and those societal issues that each and every one of us is trying to fight and tackle every day are linked. I am at a loss to understand how that can happen. I thank Members for their contributions, and I urge them to support the motion.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 24; Noes 51.

AYES

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Brown, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Miss McAllister, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Toole, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Hunter and Mr McCrossan

NOES

Mr Allister, Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Beattie, Mr Boylan, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Miss Brogan, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Mrs Erskine, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Miss McIlveen, Mrs Mason, Mr Middleton, Ms Á Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Miss Reilly, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brooks and Mr Delargy

Question accordingly negatived.

Adjourned at 5.59 pm.