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Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
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Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (Strangford)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 4 October 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Members' Statements

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

Neurology Recall Scandal

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to speak about the neurology recall scandal and revelations in the recent BBC 'Spotlight' programme. Thousands of people have already been affected by the scandal and the subsequent recall. The neurology recall patient support group made a statement to the neurology inquiry in which it thanked the team for the opportunity to submit questionnaires and give oral evidence. It has also requested a briefing from the inquiry team prior to the inquiry making a report public. Those people have suffered enough, and they continue to suffer.

Understandably, former patients of Michael Watt are dismayed and traumatised that he continues to refuse to give evidence to the inquiry. Michael Watt will not provide evidence to the inquiry either orally or in writing, despite the inquiry's willingness to receive a general written statement. The decision by Dr Michael Watt not to contribute to the inquiry has, to say the least, deeply hurt some of his former patients. I have met some of them. The anger, hurt and mistrust that has been caused by the scandal has deeply impacted on them. Some patients have told me that they were advised not to have children as it may negatively impact on their condition; a condition that is still in dispute.

On Tuesday past, BBC 'Spotlight' revealed some texts between Dr Michael Watt and a former patient known as "Jane". The impact of

those exchanges on that very vulnerable woman was nothing short of shocking.

I have since met "Jane" and other members of the patient recall group, who have shared with me the texts between Michael Watt and "Jane". It is my understanding that "Jane" referenced these texts in her statement to the neurology public inquiry. "Jane" has not yet had any response from the inquiry team, which causes her ongoing anxiety. I will share what I have with the public inquiry to ensure that it has the entirety of the exchanges. "Jane" is content for me to do so. Reading these texts is deeply distressing, to say the least. There appears to be a complete lack of acknowledgement of, let alone any regard to, the seriousness of the allegations.

A real concern is that Michael Watt, having refused to give evidence, should not be able to contribute to or comment on any forthcoming report. Understandably, many patients feel that his refusal should also preclude him from giving further contribution to the inquiry. If he is unfit to give evidence, how can he be fit to make commentary?

I have left those texts with Minister Swann. At last week's Health Committee, he said that it was not appropriate for him to comment on the independence of the inquiry. I look forward to the public inquiry panel appearing before the Health Committee soon. I assure all the patients that we will continue to monitor this situation very closely.

Mr Speaker: Your time is up.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat.

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Unionist Opposition

Mr Stalford: I wish to speak in relation to the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. Later today, the Assembly will debate a motion calling on the United Kingdom Government to enter into a phytosanitary

agreement with the European Union. In itself, that is an implicit admission that the Northern Ireland protocol has failed and that those who called for its rigorous implementation were mistaken so to do.

In the press today, the noble Lord Frost is quoted as saying:

"using the Article 16 safeguard mechanism to address the impact the protocol is having in Northern Ireland ... may in the end be the only way to protect our country, our people, our trade and our territorial integrity, the peace process and the benefits to this great UK".

I totally agree with him.

This week, the collective leadership of unionism will participate in an event at the Conservative Party conference. I welcome the fact that my leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Doug Beattie, and the Member for North Antrim Mr Jim Allister are showing a collective position in opposition to the protocol. There is not a single elected unionist representative in Northern Ireland who supports the protocol; not one. History has shown that the consent of the governed is a prerequisite for the existence of any system of government that is not a dictatorship. We do not consent, have not consented and never will consent to living under this system.

In the past, the Prime Minister has talked a good game in respect of his unionist credentials. Now, it is time for those words to be backed up by firm action and resolve. The Prime Minister leads the Conservative and Unionist Party. It would be good to see a little more unionism injected into that party. We know who we are and what we are for. Who is he and what is he for?

Omagh Bomb: Public Inquiry

Mr McCrossan: I rise to speak about the Omagh bomb, and reiterate the SDLP's calls for a public inquiry into what was one of the worst atrocities and acts of terror on this island.

On 15 August 1998, four months after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the Real IRA detonated a bomb in Omagh that killed 29 people, including a woman with unborn twins, and injured 220 people. Since then, the victims and their families have fought and searched for truth and justice. After 23 years, they are still searching for truth and justice. No one has yet

been convicted of what was one of the most brutal atrocities of our lifetime.

I thank the campaigners in Omagh, the families of victims, in particular Michael Gallagher, Stanley McComb, Kevin Skelton and many others, who have dedicated every fibre of their being to the search for truth and justice. I have met them many times and continue to do so. Today, 23 years on, their pain is as raw as it was on that terrible day. The SDLP has stood shoulder to shoulder with the victims' families for over two decades and will continue to support them in their fight for truth and justice.

While we should never lose sight of the real perpetrators of the bombing and their callous, indiscriminate, heinous, cold actions, there exist major concerns over the role of the security forces in preventing the bombing, as outlined in the recent High Court judgement on the issue. In July, following a long legal case brought by campaigners in Omagh in their endless determination to seek out truth, Justice Horner said:

"I am satisfied that certain grounds when considered separately or together give rise to plausible allegations that there was a real prospect of preventing the Omagh bombing. These Grounds involve, inter alia, the consideration of terrorist activity on both sides of the border by prominent dissident ... republicans leading up to the Omagh bomb."

The judge said that the threshold for an investigation under article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights had been reached and:

"Any investigation will have to look specifically at the issue of whether a more proactive campaign of disruption, especially if co ordinated north and south of the border, had a real prospect of preventing the Omagh bombing".

Against that backdrop, I want to use today to reiterate my calls and those of the SDLP on the Secretary of State, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the British Government and, indeed, the Irish Government to do the right thing and order a public inquiry into the Omagh bombing that will, after two decades, finally bring some truth and, hopefully, justice to those families who have been suffering for over 23 years.

MOT Tests

Mr Beggs: I wish to highlight once more the continuing pressures on drivers seeking an MOT test. First, I acknowledge the hard work of our Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) technicians, with many working overtime at evenings and weekends, and admin staff, who are trying to field hundreds of phone calls from frantic drivers. Staff are working extremely hard, but it is still not meeting demand. The Minister has acknowledged that the PSNI has given guidance that, provided the car is roadworthy and has an MOT appointment, a degree of flexibility will be shown to drivers. Insurance companies have indicated that, provided that cars are maintained, they should still be covered even if they do not have an MOT certificate, but there is an element of doubt with the use of the word "should". Despite all that, I continue to be contacted by frantic drivers. I am thinking of an NHS worker who cannot use her car to get to work. I can think of a parent who cannot get her children to and from school. It is a particular issue for those who live in the rural community or in an area where public transport will not meet their needs.

There is an added pressure that is not being dealt with, and that is the DVLA in Swansea. If you do not have an MOT, you cannot get your car taxed. Legally, you are required to make a statutory off road notification for your vehicle and declare that you are taking it off the road, yet there is a potential £80 fine for late declaration of that and a potential £2,500 fine for failing to tax your vehicle. So what are we doing to help our drivers who are in a real quagmire at the minute? They are struggling to keep their cars on the road to meet their families' needs.

In a recent answer from the Minister, I was advised that no temporary exemption certificates were issued during August or September. The Minister cited road safety reasons. Last week, during the Infrastructure Committee meeting, I asked an official to state the number of accidents that were caused by mechanical failure, and the answer was:

"Mechanical failure makes up a tiny, tiny percentage. I think that it is point something per cent of the cause of accidents. That has not impacted — or, at least, it is not showing through in the data as having an increased causal effect — on accidents since MOTs began to be delayed. It is a tiny percentage. The main issue is driver error."

Minister, we are not meeting the demand. There are huge numbers desperate to get an MOT test. Please issue some more temporary exemption certificates. I understand that we are

testing virtually the same numbers that we would each year, but we have a backlog. Please issue some more temporary exemption certificates so that people can get a timely test.

12.15 pm

Police: Violence Against Women and Girls

Mr Blair: Like so many others, I was horrified and outraged that a Metropolitan Police officer should abuse his position of power and authority to abduct, rape and murder Sarah Everard. There is no doubt that the case has had an impact in this jurisdiction and in others. Before he murdered Sarah Everard, Wayne Couzens was the subject of three separate allegations of indecent exposure, one of which was made just weeks before his latest abhorrent crime. It is unequivocally apparent that there were fundamental failings by the Metropolitan Police and, indeed, the Kent Police to investigate those allegations properly, as well as failings in the vetting system. The subsequent statement and advice, "If you're concerned about the police, you should call the police", issued by the Met Police, demonstrates a complete lack of insight into and understanding of the issue of women's safety with the police and does not address the imbalance of power between a police officer and the person whom the officer is arresting.

The fact is that this is not an incredibly rare event, nor is it a localised issue. To end male violence against women across these islands, we have to face up to the magnitude of the threat and recognise that it stems from the inequality and power imbalance between men and women in society in general. We need research commissioned, resources allocated and funding deployed to meet the moment and stand up to the challenge in order to establish a society in which women are safe and free. We also need to recognise and address the sexism and misogyny that infect all our major institutions. Misogyny is deeply rooted in the institutions that are meant to protect us, including in the police. It is entirely unacceptable that those who are responsible for enforcing the law and protecting the public should have such reprehensible disregard for their safety, as was the case in the recent Metropolitan Police statement. Policing is part of the solution. A violence against women and girls strategy is vital, as is serious investment and political consensus on the issues. Specifically on a commitment from political colleagues, we need to do more. Anything less

is a continued betrayal, day in and day out, of women and girls.

I am pleased to state in the House that the PSNI has started the conversation, including stakeholder engagement, and, as a Policing Board member, I am pleased to have been involved in the process so far. I welcome that progress, but I want to hear more from the police about what wide-ranging reforms they will introduce to ensure, as far as they can, that a serving police officer never rapes or murders a woman again. There remains a need to investigate institutional misogyny in police services and identify the intersections between sexism and racism, because, as we know, women of colour have a different experience when engaging with police across the country. Hopefully, the strategy being brought forward by the Executive Office can now progress at pace. One life sentence is not justice for the fear that every woman feels because of the failures in our systems and institutions.

Border Poll: Preparations

Mr Lunn: I wish to raise the topic of a potential border poll and what should happen in advance of the Secretary of State perhaps calling a referendum. We may not all agree with the outcome of the 2016 Brexit poll, but the lack of planning, the level of misinformation, the deceit and the misleading nonsense are self-evident now and clearly influenced the result. A border poll in Ireland, if it is to genuinely reflect the will of the Irish people, including unionists, will require detailed information gathering and presentation to allow voters to make an informed choice based on correct facts and proposals. We can learn from Brexit and conduct a fair and open poll.

The matters of most concern have been well rehearsed. For instance, what do we do about the health service? Is Sláintecare a runner, or is it not? It seems to be running into the sand at the moment. Can the education systems be harmonised? We have two splendid police forces on this island: can they be brought together into one unit? What do we do about pensions? What about identity, Britishness and cultural expression? What about the position of Stormont? Can we have regional assemblies under a new regime, or is that not possible? We have four provinces in Ireland, so we could work it in that way.

I am aware of the Southern Government's Shared Island unit, without knowing much of the detail. It sounds a bit vague to me, although it is hardly fair to say that. Likewise, I do not have

any details about the SDLP's New Ireland Commission. I do not wish to criticise it. It is a good initiative, so let us wait for the outcome.

Ireland's Future, the organisation to which I now belong, has been consistent in calling for a citizens' assembly drawn from North and South to meet in order to establish the facts, positive and negative, on the unification question. They are also clear, like all political parties of any substance, that the population North and South must consent to allow any change to take place. I ask and recommend that all parties adopt the principle of a citizen's assembly and encourage its formation. Hopefully, with the right membership — frankly, probably not including politicians — such a body can progress the debate in time for the inevitable border poll.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Ms Sugden: I, too, want to talk about Sarah, a woman who was just walking home, yet she was abducted, raped and murdered by a man in a trusted position for his selfish and depraved gratification. I offer my heartfelt condolences to the parents, family and friends of Sarah Everard and extend those condolences to the victims and to the families of every woman and girl who has been abused, assaulted, raped or murdered. Our condolences and anger are no longer enough. At this point, words are in vain. We need action from government, society and each of us as individuals.

We need to tackle misogyny, and we do that by making it a hate crime. It is not enough to expect people to edit their behaviour; it is not happening. We need to make it law. How is it that we live in a society where being a woman can be used against us? How is it that women are subjected to sexist comments in public and private organisations without the expectation of redress? How is it that women experience the worst of society but do not feel supported to speak out?

We need to ensure that perpetrators in trusted positions who abuse their position are sentenced to reflect that abuse. If necessary, we should legislate to make such abuse an aggregating factor. It is appropriate that we protect those serving on the front line to show that we trust them and are thankful for the job that they do, but with trust comes responsibility. For the few who abuse the trust, we must proportionately hold them to account, not just for the victim but for the confidence of wider society.

It is not all men, but, when women, girls and, indeed, other men are attacked, beaten, raped or murdered, the perpetrator is most likely to be a man. We can no longer ignore that fact. I call on men to help us to eradicate violence against women and girls. Women know and feel what danger looks like. We are used to it, so stop trying to advise us. Women know how to equip themselves. We are already stocked up, so do not sell us products. Women know when to walk away or cross the street — we do it regularly — so do not protect us. You can stop the abuse, stop the violence and stop the toxic culture that diminishes, sexualises and violates women and girls. Do not beat her; do not rape her; do not murder her. Raise boys to be men who respect and cherish women and girls. Communicate healthy relationships, control and accountability. Be good role models. That is where we start.

Free School Meals and Uniform Grants

Mr Sheehan: I am sure that many Members have been alerted in recent days to the unacceptable delays in processing applications for free school meals and uniform grants that many families have experienced. They do not appear to be isolated incidents. Across the North, our offices are receiving complaints from frustrated families whose applications have not been processed. We are now six weeks into the new school term. That is totally unacceptable. Amid the growing cost of living crisis and the proposed cut to universal credit, this is another burden on our already hard-pressed families. It is not acceptable, and it needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency.

My party colleagues and I are following up on the issue. I hope that the Education Minister and the Education Authority will move with haste to process the applications and ensure that that crucial support is put in place for children and families without any further delay. I hope that the Education Minister and the Education Authority are listening this afternoon.

I also want to mention that I have a private Member's Bill with the Bill Office. The Bill was originally brought forward by my colleague Karen Mullan, and I intend to introduce it. If enacted, the Bill will put it on a statutory basis that children who are entitled to free school meals will get support all year round, not just while schools are open but during the summer holidays, Christmas, Easter and so on.

That will help hard-pressed families who need that support, particularly in the current

economic crisis, when it is hard-pressed and vulnerable families who face the most challenges and difficulties at this time.

Nick Griggs

Mr K Buchanan: I rise to congratulate a young gentleman from Newmills, just outside Dungannon: Nick Griggs. Yesterday, Nick won the under-17 mini marathon in London. He was selected to represent Northern Ireland only recently, and, yesterday, went and won that event.

I will give the House a brief background on the young gentleman and his recent wins. He won a gold medal in the men's 3,000 metres at the European Athletics U20 Championships in Estonia. He accomplished a record-breaking performance in the under-18 Irish youth games and under-17 British records for the 5,000 metres and 300 metres respectively, and a three-time record-breaking performance in the Irish juvenile championships, smashing the times to date in the 3,000 metres and 5,000 metres. The young runner has won an impressive three Irish titles at under-18 and under-20 levels. It is a great achievement by my constituent. I wish that young man well for his future career, whatever that may be.

South Belfast Foodbank

Ms Bradshaw: I take the opportunity to thank the South Belfast Foodbank in my constituency for its outstanding contribution to the community during the pandemic. As the £20 uplift to universal credit comes to an end, its services will be in demand more than ever as people struggle to feed their families this winter. It has been a lifeline for so many, from people who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 to those who faced increased household bills as a result of furlough or the closure of schools. When people who found themselves with a severely reduced income were falling through the cracks between support schemes, the South Belfast Foodbank stepped up to give vital support. When the pandemic forced the closure of its drop-in service, the food bank adapted to the needs of South Belfast residents by providing a much-needed door-to-door delivery service. I am immensely grateful to Bruce Gardiner Crehan and the rest of the team for going above and beyond to help people through such a tough time.

My thanks also go to all those people who donated directly or via the drop-off point at Tesco in Newtownbreda. Over the Christmas period, I was pleased to be able to make my

contribution by offering my office as a drop-off and collection point, and by volunteering in the delivery of food parcels, which were delivered to individuals and families to get them through the holidays. Although Christmas is a period of joy, the financial burden can place a huge strain on households. I look forward to helping again this year.

I know that my constituents will look forward to spending the £100 from the high street scheme. For people who are in need, it will provide a welcome boost to their income to spend on essentials. For others, it will be an opportunity to treat themselves after a difficult 18 months. I hope that they will use many of the fantastic local businesses in South Belfast. Others will look to make use of it for charitable purposes. While it is my understanding that the prepaid cards should not be donated directly to a charity, I encourage people to consider purchasing items for those organisations that can make use of them. In that way, the money can still not only benefit the local economy as intended but go to people who are in need of it. A local food bank or shelter is a perfect choice. Anyone who wishes to make a donation can make contact to ask what is required. The South Belfast Foodbank is always in need of donations to continue its amazing work.

I also take the opportunity to thank the wider Trussell Trust for its UK-wide network of support, of which the South Belfast Foodbank is a part. In the last financial year, the charity delivered a record 2.5 million emergency food parcels — a 33% increase on the previous year. That is a staggering number, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic but is, unfortunately, a reality of the current Government. While I question the policies that make food banks necessary, I remain incredibly grateful to be able to offer my constituents the service to access the South Belfast Foodbank.

Bann Foot: Bridge

Mr O'Dowd: I wish to raise the issue of the Bann Foot in my constituency. It may not be known to many Members in the Chamber. The Bann Foot is a crossing of the River Bann from Charlestown to Columbkille and Maghery. In this day and era, one would hope that there would be a bridge across it to facilitate cyclists, pedestrians and even cars. Unfortunately, that is not the case. I have urged the Infrastructure Minister to bring that forward. She tells me that the council has not brought that forward as part of the greenways projects.

12.30 pm

It is time for a strategic decision to put the bridge in place to allow Lough Neagh, the largest inland waterway in these islands, to be circumvented by vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists. That has huge potential to increase tourist numbers and investment in the area. Genuine concerns among residents have to be dealt with through the planning process; if the planning process shows that concerns are genuine, the scheme should not go ahead, but we cannot have this go on as it is now without a strategic decision.

I urge that the Bann Foot be bridged, that the potential for tourism in the area be built upon and that the situation of residents having to travel 18 miles instead of 300 yards over a bridge be brought to an end.

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Article 16

Mr Buckley: The House is well versed in the problems of the Northern Ireland protocol. They are societal, with the violence that was brought to our streets and the disruption of the delicate cross-community support for these institutions across Northern Ireland, the institutions having been damaged as a result. We have also seen cancer drugs blocked from entering Northern Ireland because of the protocol, and a leading retailer recently talked of stock on shelves going down from product lines of 9,000 to 4,500.

Despite Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Alliance Party calling for rigorous implementation of the protocol, the problems exist, and they will only get worse unless the problem is dealt with effectively. Lord Frost, in his speech to the Conservative Party conference today, said that he was putting the EU on notice that the UK would trigger article 16. Lord Frost has drafted a full legal text to override the protocol. He will forgive me for saying, and I hope that he understands, that Ulster people will not purely take his word for it, because it is a case of once bitten, twice shy in relation to Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol. Action, not words, is required now.

In his keynote speech, Lord Frost mentioned that there was continual dragging of heels from the European Union. That will not surprise any Member in this place. We have to look at the real intention of the Northern Ireland protocol. It was not in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. It was a cruel and callous punishment beating for the people of Northern Ireland, fawned on and backed up by the

parties opposite. Northern Ireland was collateral damage in a European game.

To Lord Frost and the Government, I say: stop the dithering and dilly-dallying. Stop grandstanding. Get on with the job, but not next year or next month; trigger article 16 this week. Let us bring the issue to a head and restore the delicate equilibrium that is Northern Ireland, and let our economy and society prosper for the next century.

Assembly Business

Public Petition: Badger Cull Opposition

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

Mr Easton: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to present a petition of 3,606 people, mostly from my constituency of North Down, who are opposed to DAERA's consultation on culling badgers to tackle TB.

The Assembly has to tackle TB, and we need to help farmers, but, when there is an alternative to the culling of badgers through a vaccination programme, we have to look seriously at it. That is the positive way to go. I am passionate about this issue, and I cannot support a badger cull.

There are only 43,000 badgers in the Northern Ireland countryside. That is not a huge population. If the cull goes ahead across Northern Ireland, it will put the badger population at serious risk. Some 80% of badgers do not carry TB, yet that 80% will be at risk, because they will be culled whether or not they have TB. That is not acceptable. Other animals carry TB. Foxes and deer carry TB. In fact, even cattle carry TB and can pass it on to other cattle. So, it is very unfair that badgers are being taken in isolation for a proposed cull by DAERA.

Culls in England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland have proven to be totally unsuccessful. In England, they have culled 140,000 badgers, and it has made very little difference to TB in the cattle population. Why are we not learning these lessons? There is a vaccination programme, and England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland are now turning to that programme, realising that they have made a big mistake with the culling of badgers and that the vaccination programme is the way to go. There is also better testing that can be done with our cattle, and there is better protection in the movement of cattle. Adding that to the vaccination programme will help to reduce the incidence of TB. I am the farmers' friend, and farmers should still be compensated while we look into the vaccination programme as the way to go.

Eighty-five per cent of farmers who took part in a survey on badger vaccination said that they

were willing to allow the vaccination programme to happen on their land. Therefore, even farmers are not totally in favour of a badger cull.

In conclusion, I want to send a message that the Assembly needs to have a mature debate about this.

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Easton: I call on the Executive to block any attempt to cull our badger population.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member. Normally, I would invite the Member to bring his petition to the Table and present it here. However, in light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in his place and make arrangements to submit the petition to the Speaker's Office electronically. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once it is received, I will forward it to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and send a copy to the Committee.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was rising to be called to make a Member's Statement, and, I think, mine was the only party not to be called while a number of independent Members were, rightfully, called. Can you advise why that was the case, please?

Mr Speaker: First, I advise you of the rule about not challenging a ruling of the Speaker in the conduct of any session of the Assembly. That is the first thing that is a no-no. Secondly, for your information and other Members' information, you have spoken five times since we started this process. That is very good and is perfectly in order. You were called properly and duly. There were Members in front of you who were called today who had not been called at all. I will exhaust the list of Members who have not been heard during Members' Statements before I call those who have been repeat contributors. That is fair enough. We do our best to make sure that all Members get treated fairly and equally, and that is what we have done.

Committee Business

Integrated Education Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 24 November 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Integrated Education Bill.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit to this debate.

Mr Lyttle: The Integrated Education Bill, sponsored by Kellie Armstrong MLA, passed its Second Stage in the House on 6 July 2021, with the result that it began its Committee Stage in the Education Committee on 7 July 2021. The Committee opened the call for written views on the Bill on the citizens' space platform on the Assembly website the following week. In deciding the term of the call for views, the Committee was conscious of just how difficult a school year this has been for all education stakeholders and just how important it was that the school holiday should represent a meaningful break. Accordingly, the Committee proposed that the call for written views should remain open until 10 October 2021, just under a week from now.

The provision in Standing Orders for 30 working days for a Committee Stage would run out on 12 October if we did not now ask the House for an extension. Given the varied sectoral interests and the many education stakeholders who wish to have their say, the Committee agreed at its meeting on 15 September to extend the Committee Stage until 24 November 2021. Given that integrated education is in its fortieth year, the Committee Stage will provide an opportunity to reflect on the efforts of all who have dedicated their time to integrated education and to how best young people can access it in Northern Ireland.

At this stage in the mandate, the Committee has a great deal of business in its forward work programme and has commenced biweekly meetings in order to help manage its legislative workload and properly scrutinise the legislation. The extension will enable the Committee to complete that task on behalf of the Assembly and the pupils and parents who support integrated education.

Mr Speaker: No other Member wishes to contribute.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 24 November 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Integrated Education Bill.

Mr Speaker: Members, take your ease while we move to the next item of business.

Private Members' Business

Education (Curriculum) (CPR and AED) Bill: First Stage

Mr McGrath: I beg to introduce the Education (Curriculum) (CPR and AED) Bill [NIA 38/17-22], which is a Bill to require cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training and automatic external defibrillator (AED) awareness to be on the curriculum for pupils at key stage 3.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: Members, take your ease again for a moment or two while we get ready for the next item of business.

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

12.45 pm

Universal Credit Uplift

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mark Durkan to move the motion.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased reliance on the welfare system; notes that the £20 universal credit uplift has provided a lifeline to many low-income families; registers serious concerns about the devastating impact that its proposed removal would have at this critical juncture in the recovery period; further recognises that the removal of £20 per week from thousands of families will push more people into poverty at a time when one in four children already lives in poverty, increase reliance on food banks and increase homelessness, as well as having dire consequences for our local economy; and calls on the Minister for Communities, in the absence of action from the Westminster Government, to liaise with her Executive colleagues to retain this uplift for the remainder of this financial year, and to commit to expediting a long-term strategy to tackle the shameful levels of poverty and social deprivation across Northern Ireland, which remain among the highest in Europe.

Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I very much appreciate —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Mr Durkan. You just say "moved" at this point —

Mr Durkan: Moved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: — and then I will call you to speak. Did you say "moved"?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak in the debate will have five minutes. I call Mr Mark Durkan.

Mr Durkan: Thank you again, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to propose the motion and speak once more on the Tories' callous policy to remove the £20 universal credit (UC) uplift, which is a mechanism that has, and this is no overstatement, provided a lifeline to so many individuals and their families throughout the COVID pandemic and acted as an extra safety net to prevent people from falling further into poverty.

Since we last met to debate this crucial matter, the situation has become even starker. Claimants have already been notified that their last payment will be made this week, coinciding with the end of furlough, the ramifications of which will spell catastrophe for the 134,000 people who will be directly impacted by this cruel cut. There will also be wider implications for the local economy.

Last week, myself and fellow Foyle MLAs spoke about what the removal would mean for our constituents and our constituency. The effect will be most profound in areas of high deprivation such as Derry. Since then, not a day has passed when I have not listened to desperate and, indeed, frightened people who attest to the lifeline that the £20 per week has been for them.

Over the weekend, I was contacted by a young single mother, someone who has contacted me continually since being notified that her last uplift payment will be made this Friday. She works hard to provide for her two children, yet her wages barely cover the essentials. The £20 uplift merely allowed her to keep her head above water, put food on the table and remove the added stress of having to borrow a few pounds from family or friends to buy a packet of

nappies that week. That is the reality of what we are dealing with. The uplift was not, and is not, a luxury. It is not "yet another payment for scroungers", contrary to a the characterisation that I have seen being bandied around on social media and, indeed, by senior Tory politicians in recent weeks.

One third of claimants here, like the young lady who I referred to, are working. She is genuinely worried, as are so many thousands of people, about what the weeks ahead will mean for her and her children. She is juggling a stressful job in the social care sector with raising two children under the age of five and maintaining a household. As a single parent, that is no mean feat, but to have to contend with being plunged into debt and poverty on top of that has left her at breaking point. Yet, that case is, I am afraid, far from unique: 84,000 children across the North will be impacted, and we definitely need to do more to protect them. The consequences of going ahead with the cut will be catastrophic and will undoubtedly hit harder here in the North than anywhere else. If the families affected needed the help 18 months ago, they certainly need it now.

I welcome the move by the First and deputy First Ministers over the weekend to join other devolved leaders in urging Boris Johnson to abandon the removal of the universal credit uplift at this critical juncture in post-pandemic recovery. I fear that that eleventh-hour intervention may be too little, too late. Nevertheless, I am glad to see the Executive finally coming to the fore on the matter. It is not enough to just oppose the UK Government's plan to remove the £20 uplift; the Communities Minister, alongside her Executive colleagues, must now plan and prepare to protect people here should the Tories persist with this punitive policy.

The cut is not only cruel but short-sighted. It creates the perfect storm for poverty. As has been referenced in the Chamber and over our airwaves in recent weeks, people now have to battle the spiralling costs of living such as a 35% gas hike that, in real terms, means a rise of almost £200 for annual household bills. Electricity prices are going up again, and, with the implications of Brexit, grocery bills that have already risen massively are expected to continue to rise. Rising property values mean rising rents. I have witnessed the outworkings of that, as, I am sure, many others have, with more and more people contacting our offices for housing support because they have been forced from private rented properties due to affordability issues. It is clear that people are at breaking point. They cannot afford to lose over

£1,000 a year, and we cannot afford to let them lose it either.

This unique set of circumstances will lead to evictions, homelessness and unthinkable social costs and consequences. In Foyle alone, it will remove over £7.5 million from the local economy in this financial year. The consequences for local businesses will be dire and will cost jobs, forcing more people to become even more reliant on welfare support. Where is the assessment of the impact of removing that lifeline, ending the furlough scheme and increasing National Insurance contributions? It appears that the Tories' policy of levelling up is a euphemism for walking over the poor and vulnerable.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr McNulty: Does the Member agree that the Tories' policy of austerity is sickening and that it is destroying and creating havoc for families and the most vulnerable in our society? The most sickening part is that three parties in the Assembly — the DUP, Sinn Féin and Alliance — tripped through that Lobby arm in arm and voted to hand over welfare powers for this part of these islands to the Tories? That is disgusting.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I concur that it is somewhat ironic that parties here bemoan the Tories' approach to welfare, yet they were content to hand over welfare powers to them, in a move that was akin to handing a fox the keys to the henhouse.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Ms Armstrong: I am sure that the Member will join me in saying that many people in Northern Ireland would be in greater poverty if the welfare mitigations that were enabled by the vote that took place had not come forward.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her intervention, and I welcome the fact that parties here were able to agree a mitigations package that has mitigated the worst effects of the Welfare Reform Bill. However, that does not detract from the irony — they say that, in politics, irony is hypocrisy with panache — of parties now lamenting the Tories' draconian approach to welfare, yet they handed over

powers to them to inflict more pain on people here.

For the UK Government to imply that the retention of the universal credit uplift would be too costly is a slap in the face to every struggling family across these islands, particularly when we have witnessed £37 billion pumped into a failed track-and-trace system. This morning, we woke to news of the Pandora Papers, a major investigation into the secret wealth and dealings of the mega-rich and politicians that attests to eye-watering levels of tax evasion or avoidance and further highlights a system that is not only broken but rotten to the core. The Tories should be asking why its Government has 10 times more staff dealing with the poorest in society abusing benefits than investigating the tax affairs of the super-rich. Real, tangible levelling up would be a substantial increase in wealth tax. Rather than focusing on billionaires paying their fair share, the Tories seem dead set on penalising the poor.

As such, it is becoming less and less likely that the Tories will do a U-turn on their decision to drop the universal credit uplift, despite interventions from devolved leaders and outcry from just about every quarter. We need to see the Communities Minister and the Executive coming together to mitigate the impact of the cut and protect people from the pain it will inevitably bring. I am convinced that action taken now, albeit lamentably late, will actually save lives.

I am under no illusion that the task will be easy, but it is not impossible.

Continuing the uplift for the rest of the financial year would account for just 0.5% of the Executive's Budget. While I recognise that the Executive will face challenges in amending universal credit structures, alternative and innovative mechanisms must be considered. Minister Hargey and her Department should look at mechanisms similar to those used to make free school meals payments or COVID heating payments to determine which individuals are most at risk and to ensure that the money gets to where it is needed most.

I implore the Minister to find the resource to protect hard-pressed families across the North from the devastating cut to their income. If the Tories will not do it, we need to roll up our sleeves and get on with the job in hand. There is too much at stake for people here for us not to act. Let us unite and fight this cut together.

Ms Ferguson: What stopping the weekly £20 universal credit uplift payment will mean for lives already upturned by the pandemic hardly needs explaining to Members. The decision by Boris Johnson and the Tory Government to withdraw support from the poorest in our society will increase hardship and poverty for people who already struggle. It will have a devastating impact on people in the North at a time when they need financial support most.

In the Foyle constituency in September, over 7,500 constituents were claiming universal credit. That is the highest number of people across all our jobs and benefits offices and an awful lot of people who, I sense, will seriously struggle and will have to make difficult decisions. In this day and age, no one should have to choose between putting the heating on, putting food on the table and paying their rent, but that is the reality for so many of our families right now.

This is outright recklessness by the Tory Government. Their notion that people can make up the £20 that they are about to cut by working an extra two hours a week shows a real lack of understanding of how wages and universal credit interact. It also totally ignores childcare and its availability in our communities. They assume that everyone can work, has a job and can increase their hours. When 40% of people on universal credit already work really hard, the Tory Government's "Back to work" mantra is downright foolish.

The additional £20 a week applied to universal credit and working tax credit as part of the response to the COVID crisis was required long before the pandemic began. Like community workers, social workers, welfare rights workers and teachers, I am fully aware that most people could never make their universal credit last, let alone without a further £80 a month. As in many other constituencies across the North, my constituency has seen the number of food banks rise for well over a decade. Since 2010, in the outer north area of the city, where I worked for 20 years, we have been working closely with the four Churches and the Churches Trust to provide food parcels to our most vulnerable. In the past five or six years, we have been inundated with support for our communities and our food banks from organisations such as FareShare, Barnardo's and Children in Need and from local businesses. Moreover, every year for the past six or seven years, most of the communities in which I work in the North have seen the reality of holiday hunger. Poverty and child poverty rates, particularly in my Foyle constituency, where poverty levels are already among the highest in

the North, have increased and will continue to increase.

The Minister has to be commended, and the Foyle community in which I work really has to commend her for prioritising the anti-poverty strategy. I know that the community has been working closely with departmental officials to progress that. Boris Johnson and the Tory Government have always pushed poverty and benefits to the margins. They have no understanding of what the cut will mean for individuals, families and communities, and I do not think that they really care. Add in the rise in energy prices, the recently announced increase in National Insurance contributions, the rising cost of living and the end of furlough, and we see that the Tory Government have created a cost-of-living crisis in the North. As we know, it is always particularly tough over the winter. People struggle during that period every year. I know that local support groups and charities will do what they can in our communities, but it will be a tough winter for a lot of people.

We must continue to stand together, demand a complete U-turn on the decision and argue for the need to strengthen the support that universal credit offers, not weaken it. I call, as my colleagues did last week in the Assembly, for the Tory Government to wake up, to acknowledge the increasing hardship that our families on low incomes face and to reverse the decision. Twenty pounds a week may not be much for those in Westminster who make such decisions, but it can make the difference between eating and heating for so many people. The Tory Government's decision will have a negative impact not only on our most vulnerable families but on our local economy as we struggle to get back on our feet and make our way out of the restrictions. Once again, we are left to deal with austerity, cuts and regressive policies conceived and imposed on us against our will by the British Tories in London.

1.00 pm

Ms P Bradley: I support the motion and thank the Members for tabling it.

The DUP strongly opposes the Government's plans to reverse the uplift in universal credit and has made that abundantly clear through its MPs at Westminster. The extra support has been a lifeline for millions of families across the United Kingdom as they grapple with the unprecedented pressures created by the pandemic. A mountain of evidence suggests that any cut will disproportionately and adversely affect working families and single-

parent households. Tragically, it will also pull thousands more children into relative or absolute poverty across Northern Ireland.

Rather than, as the Prime Minister suggests, helping to level up communities in the four parts of the United Kingdom, the overnight cut in universal credit will promote regional inequalities. Northern Ireland will be one of the hardest-hit regions due to the nature of our population and the high numbers of children and families. Demand for universal credit is higher in certain parts of Northern Ireland, including the north-west, so any cut will not be felt evenly by families and households.

We have heard it said many times that the pandemic has disproportionately affected women and, in turn, families. We know that women are more likely to be in low-paid and part-time employment. It is those women and families who will be hit hardest yet again by the removal of the uplift in universal credit. I thank the Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland for its help in preparing this speech, and I refer to its 'COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan' — I have a printout rather than a glossy copy — which every Minister in our Executive should read to give them some indication of just how hard it is out there for women and families.

Pre pandemic, the rate of women's participation in the workforce was at a record high, although, typically, the work was part-time, low-paid and on temporary or zero-hours contracts. Studies have shown that those in precarious employment saw a greater loss in earnings and hours than those in secure employment. There are strong links between female poverty and child poverty. The pandemic has increased the negative impacts felt by women and children. Women who were already struggling are under even more financial pressure as they, their children and their families are pushed even further into poverty as a result of the pandemic.

The pandemic has caused a huge surge in the number of universal credit claimants due to the scale of job losses and the impacts of lockdown on people's working lives. The pandemic has highlighted the need for the benefit system to act as a safety net for people in difficult times. It is likely that, as the economy emerges from lockdown and faces a significant recession, many households will continue to struggle with their finances. Part of the solution must be to ensure that the benefit system provides sufficient support to those facing a temporary income shock as well as to those facing longer-term financial hardship. Universal credit's role as the main safety net for new benefit claimants

is likely to be the focus of attention as we emerge from the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, women were already more vulnerable to poverty. They made up the majority of lone parents, those with precarious low-paid jobs and those with caring responsibilities that limited their availability for paid work. Women are also more likely to claim social security benefits. Job losses and the need to provide increasing levels of unpaid care as a result of the pandemic are likely to increase poverty and dependence on social security benefits, especially for women.

I am not foolish enough to believe that this can be solved at the stroke of a pen. As someone who sat on the scrutiny Committee for the Welfare Reform Bill, I know that any divergence comes at a cost. I also know that it is not simply a case of instructing Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to continue the uplift in Northern Ireland. I heard earlier from the SDLP Benches about how it was opposed to welfare reform. I do not remember the SDLP, at any stage, giving us a fully costed plan for how it would have continued with welfare benefits, given that that is not a devolved matter.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how she, along with her colleague in the Department of Finance, intends to bring forward options for how we as an Assembly can ease pressures on working families, children and the many with disabilities as we go forward, because, for many, it will be a case of "Eat or heat" this winter, and, as an Assembly, we need to ensure that people are not faced with that question.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member opposite and his party for tabling the motion, which we will support.

Today's motion focuses very much on the removal of the £20 uplift for universal credit and the impact that it will have on the poorest in our society, and I will cover some of that towards the end of my speech. While that is absolutely true, I do not believe that talking about that in isolation is useful; we need to talk about universal credit and the difficulties that it has brought in more general terms. The removal of the £20 uplift magnifies the underlying issues for some of the poorest in our society, and that is from a position that, for many people, was not good to start with.

The reality is that universal credit has proven to be an unworkable benefit in its current form, and, in many cases, it is worse than the legacy benefits that it was created to replace.

Universal credit was first developed in 2013 and was rolled out in Northern Ireland in 2017, and it is regrettable and lamentable that the benefit retains many of the unworkable problems that have existed since its launch.

I want to unpick a few of the problems that, I am sure, just about every Member in the Assembly has come across in their constituency offices. Many families get less on universal credit than they did on the legacy benefits. Universal credit is a means-tested benefit, and it absorbs six previous legacy benefits. The individual components can amount to less than you could get under the previous system and are affected by the benefit cap. For most families, universal credit will not give any additional amount for children past the second child. I was thinking about that and what they have done in other parts of the world in trying to affect the social population, but I could not find the words to use. It is perhaps like social engineering, or it could be seen as such. I am not sure that it was meant in that fashion, but, for some people in that part of the fiscal environment and the fiscal community, that will possibly determine whether they have another child, and that is not a good place to be.

When we look at applications for universal credit, we see that many people have to wait up to six weeks to get their first payment. I have even had experience of people having to wait between 10 and 12 weeks. In that intervening period, people accrue debt and maybe borrow money from other people and other sources, and that is a toxic position for people who do not have a lot of money. Some cannot even recover from that position. Once you apply for universal credit, all other legacy benefits stop, so, until universal credit kicks in, some people get absolutely nothing. As I said, that puts many people further into debt.

Universal credit is paid in arrears, as if it were a job. Other benefits were paid up front. Again, that forces people into accruing debt. If your income diminishes, you sometimes have to wait for a full payment window to pass before universal credit picks that up. Advanced payment is an option, but, unfortunately, I do not think that people are clear that that function is there. A lot of people do not know that until they contact us or the advice sector. That could be communicated a lot better.

Universal credit is punitive for those who are self-employed. It often assumes earnings that have not been realised. Universal credit was designed to be a benefit that encourages and incentivises people to work. I listened to the Secretary of State talk about that today, and I

think that such people are sometimes totally detached from reality. The system assumes that self-employed people achieve a base level of earnings, and that means that, even if you earn next to nothing in a lean week or month, universal credit will still penalise you as if you were earning your average wage.

There is great difficulty for people in verifying their identity online even to make a universal credit claim. In some ways, the system still affects those who, maybe, cannot avail themselves of the online access system or cannot access it due to disability. Very often, there is a cohort of people who, perhaps, cannot work in that section, and the system stills kicks against them. It is not deliberate, but it is not the way it should be. The vast majority of universal credit is administered online, and many people in Northern Ireland do indeed need to use the online service.

The sanctions of universal credit are becoming so much stricter and progressively punitive as time goes on. People have come into my constituency office who, through an oversight on their part, did not tick the right box, and had their claim suspended.

I would like people to remember that we are moving towards Christmas, and a lot of people are already under pressure fiscally. This is the worst message that we could send out on this side of December.

Ms Armstrong: While we have been in the House, Rishi Sunak has said that recovery "comes with a cost". He could not have said truer words. Unfortunately, the cost is children living in poverty, and it is children in Northern Ireland who will be living in poverty with this £20 per week COVID uplift being removed.

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 obliges the Executive to develop a strategy:

"to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need".

That remains the case.

Child poverty rates are getting worse. The executive summary of 'Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy' confirms:

"two-thirds of child poverty is made up of children who have lived in poverty for three of the past four years".

The recommendations of the expert panel on the anti-poverty strategy ask for the following: an anti-poverty Act, an anti-poverty commission to monitor progress on reducing poverty, and a poverty truth process. Yet here we are, still in COVID in Northern Ireland, with the COVID uplift being cut for people who are living in poverty.

The COVID uplift cut of £20 per week comes at a time when, as others have said, the cost of living has increased and furlough has now ended. Indeed, the Chancellor has said that, now that furlough has ended, he expects more people to become unemployed and therefore join universal credit. I do not expect Rishi Sunak will confirm today that he will extend the COVID uplift.

Instead of praising and welcoming food banks, we should be shamed. If we in the House were to deliver what we were supposed to deliver under the obligations of the 1998 Act, we would have a strategy to tackle poverty. I thank the Minister for bringing together the anti-poverty expert panel, but how long is it going to take before we see its recommendations coming true? How are we spending money at this stage?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree wholeheartedly with the point she has made. Would she agree that, while the uplift was temporary, the poverty, sadly, appears to be permanent, and the failure of the Executive to tackle it has been damning to date?

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

Ms Armstrong: Rather than damning the Executive, what I am going to ask is that we start to think a bit smarter about how money is spent. For instance, we have just heard that we are throwing another £21 million at the high street voucher scheme. The original cost of the high street voucher, £145 million, could pay for the £20 per week uplift for all those people who are living in poverty and for the people who are off or coming off furlough and going into unemployment.

We know, from figures produced by the Department about the current number of people who are sitting on universal credit in receipt of the COVID uplift, that it would take £55.5 million to pay that uplift until the end of the financial year. However, let us be very careful. We do not want to set up people for another cliff edge so that, at the end of the financial year, when that £20 is cut, they do not know where to go.

We need to be thinking a little bit more carefully.

I asked the Economy Minister, when the high street voucher was coming out, "Is this the wise thing to do? Should it be means tested?". I was told, "No. This is to help shops". Well, people who are on the £20 per week uplift will be spending that money in shops. Unfortunately, after that £20 uplift is finished, they will no longer be able to spend that money in the shops — not just for one week but every week.

Recovery does come at a cost. Recovery is coming at the cost of £20 per week. What does that mean to people? When you start to add up a grocery list — milk, bread, potatoes, pasta, vegetables — that is food that we are taking out of the mouths of our community. Can we afford to replace the £20 a week? In the recent Adjournment debate on the impact of the removal of the universal credit uplift in Foyle, I asked the Minister whether she would consider applying to the Finance Minister through the October monitoring round for the £55.5 million.

1.15 pm

To all parties in the House, I say this: it is time for us all to come together. The high street voucher scheme could have been means-tested and provided to people who are living in poverty, but we chose a different way. It is time for all of us to consider the £500 million that Rishi Sunak has brought forward to help workers so that, when the Barnett consequential happens, that unhypothecated amount does not disappear into health and so that we start to deliver something for people who are poor and living right on or below the breadline. If we can work together to provide that amount of support to them directly, we can go some way towards taking away from this disgraceful cut that the Chancellor has brought forward.

Ms Á Murphy: I welcome this opportunity to speak on the motion. As elected representatives, we all know the positive impact that the £20 uplift has had on many families. For many people, £20 is the difference between having food on the table or going hungry. That is the cold, hard reality of this attempt to cut the uplift payment. Boris Johnson has argued that higher paid jobs are the best alternative to UC. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Thérèse Coffey, has also stated that UC claimants would have to work only a couple of extra hours a week to make up the rest. Both of those MPs are completely out of touch with the everyday struggles that people face.

As UC is withdrawn, for every additional pound that is earned, it is likely that more than nine extra hours of work would be needed. The cut to UC and tax credits along with the increase in National Insurance contributions, a rise in energy and food costs and the end of furlough will be a devastating combination for those who are already on the poverty line. Many people also undertake caring responsibilities parallel to their work. To simply tell them to accept a few more hours' work is not a realistic situation, nor is it a long-term solution.

To be absolutely clear on this matter: the decision has not come from the Executive. It has been made by the British Tories — the same party that enforced Brexit on the North as well as a litany of other poorly thought-out policies. This cut to UC is further evidence of what many of us here already know, which is that the interests of the people in the North are not best served at Westminster. We were told repeatedly by one party in particular that it could deliver at Westminster. Now, on this issue, it would seem that it is openly conceding that it cannot, in fact, deliver, nor can it have any influence on decisions that are made in London. Ironically, the Tory party conference kicks off today. I suspect that, unfortunately, the £20 universal credit uplift will be at the bottom of the conference's priority list.

As they try to deal with damage limitation in relation to the protocol, the British Government are under pressure from every other devolved Government to keep the UC uplift. We need to maintain that pressure, and that should be the one and only message that comes from this Chamber today. I commend the Minister for Communities for her support in jointly calling with the Ministers in Scotland and Wales on the Tory Government to reverse their decision. I also want to acknowledge the Executive for putting their collective focus on this matter, joining with the First Ministers in Scotland and Wales to maintain the pressure on Boris Johnson.

I support the motion, but I want to be unequivocally clear that its purpose needs to be aimed solely at the British Government in order to keep the pressure on maintaining the UC uplift. As well as that, it should go further. The motion calls for the uplift to be kept until March 2022, thus creating a cliff edge. I would like to see the uplift made permanent. Therefore, in the circumstances and time frame that we have left, it is imperative that we all come together to further the case for maintaining the uplift at every opportunity.

Mr Frew: I rise to speak on this very important motion for I realise the impact that universal credit has on our population, not least on people on very low incomes, people struggling to find work and those people's families. I also recognise what the £20 uplift did to instil a wee bit of breathing space and even confidence to get people by in some of the worst times in our recent history.

I listen to people speak in the Chamber, however, and it is as if they will talk about nearly anything except the matter at hand, which is poverty. They blame the Tories. Really? Look at the amount of subvention we have received from the Government over the last number of years to assist with furlough and to assist businesses. There is all that money, yet they still attack them. Do not get me wrong: the Tories are easy prey. They are the ones who are removing the £20 uplift.

The very essence of devolution and the reason we are all in the Chamber is to make a difference to people's lives, but, in most cases, Ministers have failed. Yet, we have one Member from across the way who even wanted to talk more about the £100 cards for the high street voucher scheme. Whatever we say about a scheme that gives £100 to every adult, it puts money into the hands of people who will go out and spend on the high street, supporting our high streets. That can become a circular event of support, money and finance. You cannot, on the one hand, criticise the Tories for taking £20 from the poorest and, on the other, criticise an Economy Minister who is putting £100 into their hands. That just does not make sense. It is perverse.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Ms Armstrong: The point is that £20 per week until the end of the financial year is significantly more than £100. Also, that £100 has to be spent on the high street. We are told not to spend it in Tesco, where the cheaper groceries to feed a child might be. Does the Member appreciate that £20 per week is a heck of a lot more than a £100 one-off payment?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before the Member replies, I remind Members that that comparison has been flogged to death. I encourage Members to get back to the motion, which is about universal credit. I am sure there will be other occasions when the merits or otherwise of the high street voucher scheme

can be argued on the Floor, but we should move back to the motion.

Mr Frew: Of course, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you very much. Of course, I will abide by your ruling on that.

Let us look at the Minister's track record on poverty. Let us look at the fact that feet have been dragged on delivering the review of welfare reform mitigations. Let us look at the failed attempt to provide more staff to process rising numbers of welfare claims during the pandemic. Let us look at the fact that we have had a cut in advice services for the most vulnerable. There is the unacceptable delay in the launch of the Job Start scheme to support those aged between 16 and 24 who are unemployed, the dithering on extending provisions in social security benefits for the terminally ill and the absolute and repeated failure on the personal independence payment (PIP). All those add up to poverty, which is what we should be talking about today. If we talk about poverty, we look at failure. The Minister and the party opposite, which tabled the motion, have impacted on our businesses by imposing regulations on them that have not been explained and have not been evidenced to work. That has impacted on businesses.

I represent North Antrim, where many lost their jobs when the JTI and Michelin factories closed.

A lot of those people started up their own businesses in photography and other things. They got it hard for the first couple of years and could not make a lot of money. Then, when their work was stopped and their businesses were in jeopardy, they could not apply, or, if they could, because they had not earned so much in the years before, they received very little support from the Executive and the Minister.

If we are going to talk about poverty, let us talk about it in a real way. Let us try to do something. I talked last week about the Executive and the Assembly. We need an era of decisionism like never before. We can debate motions all day long, but what about action? Let us see action. When we sit on these Benches, let us try to benefit the people who need us most. At the minute, all that I see is failure.

Mr O'Dowd: I support the motion because its intent is worthwhile and good. The motivation of the motion is open to question.

There are many Members who have been here for a long time and will remember back to the previous mandate, when welfare reform nearly brought the Assembly and the Executive to the point of collapse. My party often stood alone in opposition to welfare reform at that stage, when universal credit was being brought through Westminster. Originally, it was expected that we would pass a legislative consent motion, and, then, the then Minister McCausland brought forward legislation to bring about welfare reform. The Executive and the Assembly struggled over 18 months; a period in which there was great uncertainty about their future. That uncertainty was based on the fact that we were opposed to welfare reform. However, the first Welfare Reform Bill to come through the Assembly in my time was brought forward by an SDLP Minister. It was at a time when we heard about privatisation of the disability living allowance (DLA), as it was then. The SDLP told us that that would improve the welfare system and would be to the benefit of claimants. All of that has since proven to be incorrect.

That brings me to the motivation of the motion. At the weekend, Mark Drakeford, the First Minister of Wales, Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister here issued a joint statement that called on those responsible for the £20 a week cut to universal credit to stop it. Responsibility lies with Boris Johnson and the Tories. There was uniform opposition to that at the weekend. Contrary to what Mr Durkan hinted at in his introductory remarks, that was not the first intervention of the Executive. The Executive have been intervening with the Conservative Party over a period of time to stop this cut, as they have been on a number of other cuts to public spending and finances.

In 2019, the SDLP ran the Westminster election campaign on this slogan: "Stop Boris, Stop Brexit". It appears to me, as an onlooker, that your attendance at Westminster has not stopped Boris, Brexit or the cuts to universal credit. The motivation behind the motion is an attempt to blame the Executive for the £20 cut instead of remaining on the unified side of the pitch and ensuring that there is a unified voice coming from not only this Chamber but Scotland and Wales that the Tories are to blame for taking £20 a week out of people's pockets.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I challenge his assertion that his party ever stood alone in opposition to welfare cuts.

The Welfare Reform Bill that he refers to, brought forward by a previous Minister for Social Development, was a completely different Bill. I am not sure how Mr O'Dowd's party voted on that. I certainly concur that a unified approach is needed. I think Mr O'Dowd is reading more into the motion.

1.30 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Interventions are short [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Durkan: I have been very conciliatory here.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You have an extra minute.

Mr O'Dowd: The Bill, and how it went in the votes, is on the record.

The Member says that we want a unified approach, so let us keep it unified. The idea that the SDLP has been running a lengthy campaign around this is, in itself, silly. The Member criticised the Executive only at the weekend for doing this. It is only in this last two weeks that the SDLP has come forward with this idea that the Executive should foot the bill for the Tory cuts to universal credit. I note Nicola Sturgeon's comments last week that we have to stop mitigating the Tories. The general theme of her argument was that we can no longer afford to mitigate the Tories, because they have cut public spending and services to the point where none of the devolved institutions can mitigate them any longer.

The one thing that has been missing from every contribution from the parties around the Chamber is this: how much are your Ministers prepared to hand over to mitigate the universal credit cut of £20 a week? We are talking about tens of millions of pounds. Is the Health Minister prepared to hand that over? Is the Education Minister, the Justice Minister or the Infrastructure Minister? I look forward to firm proposals coming forward that will help to mitigate the cuts that the Tories have made.

I will end on this point. Let us remain unified. The Tories are taking £20 a week out of people's pockets; the Executive are not.

Mr Dunne: There is no doubt that the COVID pandemic continues to have a severe impact right across society, and that its impact is often hardest felt by low-income families right across

Northern Ireland and in every corner of our country. The uplift in universal credit has indeed been a lifeline for millions of families right across the United Kingdom, and the decision to cut that extra payment will have a devastating impact on working families, including many single-parent households. It raises questions about the Government's levelling-up agenda.

There is much evidence, from those who work on the front line in supporting the most vulnerable, that this latest cut from the Government, which equates to around £1,000 per year and around £85 per month, will disproportionately and adversely impact on children and increase poverty rates across Northern Ireland. Many working families, including many in the private sector, will be adversely impacted on by this unnecessary cut. Some 13% of people here are already in absolute poverty, before housing costs. Local advice services have experienced unprecedented levels of demand over these past 18 months, and Advice NI stated today that, in July of this alone year, it dealt with 259 cases involving debt issues worth £1.4 million. That demonstrates the extent of the problems that face so many right across the country.

For a low-income family, £20 a week is equivalent to six days of energy costs or three days of food costs. Unfortunately, people's bills will not fall by £85 a month from Wednesday. The ever-increasing costs of living, including the recent energy price rises locally, are further challenges to so many in my constituency and right across the country, particularly as the winter months set in and the demand for homes to be heated increases greatly. Indeed, our rates of fuel poverty are among the highest in the United Kingdom. We have seen, just recently, how Firmus Energy announced last week a 33% price rise, affecting some 50,000 customers, SSE announced a 21.8% rise from the start of this month, and Electric Ireland recently announced a price rise of 13.5%. All that clearly demonstrates the real and current challenges that many people face, and the knock-on physical and mental health problems could bring further pressure to our already stretched NHS.

The ending of the furlough scheme, which had been such a lifeline for the 36,000 workers who were still part of it when it ended last week, is yet another blow and challenge and leaves many facing real uncertainty about their future employment, particularly and importantly when restrictions remain in place for some sectors, as those restrictions limit their ability to operate at full capacity and for their staff to earn that full wage. Indeed, Hospitality Ulster stated today

that restaurants are still able to trade at around only two thirds of their capacity. That has a real knock-on impact on staff in that important sector.

The cut will see yet more pressure on our food banks and add further to our unacceptable levels of food poverty. I have seen at first hand the tremendous job that food banks do in practically supporting our most vulnerable, and I commend all those who are involved in that fantastic, commendable and positive work, many of whom are volunteers. I also commend those who provide food banks with practical support and much-needed financial donations.

In my constituency of North Down, there are a number of active food banks, including Bangor food bank, Storehouse North Down, SST food bank in Donaghadee, Millisle food bank and various Holywood food banks, all of whose work is ever expanding to meet demand.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. He is quite right to commend all the volunteers who support food banks and those who donate, but is it not a very sad indictment on 21st-century society that that is the case in one of Western democracy's developed countries?

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

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Yes, it is indeed. It was said earlier in the debate that it is one of the challenges, but we have to face reality. I know at first hand that people who receive donations from food banks are very grateful to those who organise them and contribute to them, but your point is certainly noteworthy.

It is great to see that positive partnership and to see people filling up boxes in our supermarkets to support our most vulnerable. During the height of the pandemic last year, the Department's food parcel scheme, done in conjunction with our 11 councils, was an example of a positive scheme. I know personally how grateful some were to receive those food supplies during what were very difficult and challenging months. The word "unprecedented" is often used, but, at that time, when the scheme was introduced, there was a real unknown factor, and people genuinely were not sure whether they could leave their home.

This situation therefore presents another opportunity for delivery. As my colleague Mr Frew said, it presents an opportunity for the

Communities Minister to step up and deliver. That has not always been the case, but we need to see delivery on this one. The Minister needs to be creative, exhausting every avenue to look at means of supporting the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, to reflect the views of people who will feel this savage cut the most and to give a voice to the many who feel that they are voiceless.

Gandhi once said:

"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."

That is something that challenges us to this very day.

As we attempt to understand and consider its implications for our actions as legislators, let me take Members back to a day in November 2015 that many in the House will remember and that some may wish to forget. On that day, the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party voted for the Welfare Reform Bill. That paved the way for PIP, universal credit and the bedroom tax in the North. Thank goodness that Alex Attwood had the sense to force a recorded vote on that day.

Those parties may not want to remember that, but history will. History will also remember why they did what they did. They may say to this day that they did not have a choice, but, by doing the Tory party's dirty work, the DUP and Sinn Féin got the power to cut corporation tax in return. Implement welfare reform and introduce PIP, and big business will get tax breaks. Was it worth selling your soul for?

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: I will move on with my speech.

The most vulnerable in our society are still living with the consequences of that action. We all know the examples, because we see them every single day in our constituency offices. I look to Newcastle and Downpatrick, where the Pantry and Fountain food banks operate around the clock. Their volunteers, who support the most vulnerable, are heroes in our community, but it is a scandal that, in the 21st century, such services are needed. It is almost criminal that people still rely on those services, and that should cause us all the most abject shame.

In the latest round of Tory cuts, the Prime Minister seeks to remove the £20 a week universal credit uplift payment, equating to over £1,000 a year, from the most vulnerable. This is the same Prime Minister who said at the weekend that the most important metric was not life expectancy or cancer outcomes but wage growth.

Sinn Féin is scrambling to reclaim its position as the voice of the vulnerable. It is as though it had no choice but to do the Tories' dirty work six years ago, but it did. It had a choice then, and it has a choice now. The Communities Minister must deliver on the long-awaited anti-poverty strategy. Also, as an aside, we are still waiting for conversion therapy to be banned. Delivering on those would be something. However, in the immediate future, she can seek money from the Finance Minister to retain the uplift. It is quite simple.

Boris Johnson has shown his cards and proven that he is not to be trusted when it comes to the most vulnerable. Sinn Féin may want to rewrite the history of its role in the delivery of austerity and welfare reform, much like the DUP refuses to acknowledge its role in Brexit, but that is a story for another day. History will remember, and so will those who are affected by this disastrous system. We will hear plenty today about Tory austerity, but let that carry a major health warning: when the Tories could not deliver welfare reform here, Sinn Féin and the DUP handed it back to them. They caved in to the most right-wing bunch of Tories to darken the doors of Whitehall. Remember that when their political spin machine kicks in and tries to pull the wool over your eyes. Today, the Sinn Féin Minister has a chance to do some good by ensuring that the most vulnerable are not adversely impacted further. Then again, the public are quite used to hearing such election pledges from them. It is time to deliver.

Miss Woods: I am in favour of today's motion. The reality of the pandemic's impact is that it has fallen disproportionately on the most vulnerable individuals along racial, ethnic, occupational, gendered and socio-economic lines. Inequalities in people's protection from and ability to cope with the pandemic show the urgency of the changes needed to reassess what is important, which is our population's health and well-being into the future.

The £20 uplift in universal credit at the start of the pandemic was a clear recognition that the basic payments were not enough for anyone at any time, pandemic or no pandemic, so, going back to what was before is unthinkable. The Trussell Trust's research shows that the uplift

has provided vital breathing space to hard-pressed budgets, with seven in 10 of those on universal credit since early 2020 saying that the increase has made it easier to afford essentials. That anyone would even countenance taking away the uplift from the most vulnerable is shocking, but it is not surprising from the Tories.

We know that there should be no going back to the way that things were before the pandemic. We all talk a lot about building back better. Given that Westminster is ploughing on with cutting the uplift, what will the Executive do to ensure that people here are protected and keep the rate that they are on? The question for the Executive is whether they can dig deep to effectively safeguard, with the powers that Ministers do have, our most vulnerable from the cruelty of austerity measures. As Mr O'Dowd asked, are they prepared to do so?

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that simply doing what the Member opposite suggested — salami slicing money from other Departments' budgets to make up the shortfall — would not cut it, because that would not tackle the root cause, which is poverty? Rather, we would just be supplementing a policy that has been delivered by the Tories.

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

Miss Woods: Thank you.

I thank the Member for his intervention. I was just coming on to that and his earlier speech. This hardship is not because of the pandemic. We have had huge and growing inequalities across our society for decades.

I have to agree with Mr Frew. Oddly, his speech makes him sound like a member of the naughty corner. However, Ministers here have failed.

1.45 pm

The motion refers to food bank reliance and homelessness. We know that, in 2019-2020, Trussell Trust food banks gave out 45,000 three-day emergency food parcels in Northern Ireland, and that was before the pandemic.

Research shows that social security policy change had a disproportionate impact on women. Since 2010, 86% of savings to the Treasury from tax and benefit changes have come from women. In Northern Ireland, we know that one in five children already lived in absolute poverty. Last year, 6,219 young

people were accepted as homeless. Those shocking statistics are from the recent Northern Ireland Youth Forum's (NIYF) peer research on youth homelessness. There are strong links between female poverty and child poverty. Women who were already struggling are now under even more financial pressure as they, their children and their families are pushed further into poverty as a result of the pandemic.

In Northern Ireland, 42% of people were already in fuel poverty. We are now facing yet more fuel price increases that will land on the public at a time when furlough is ending and we are entering the winter.

Legislation must be introduced and passed to extend the welfare reform migrations. Where is it? Why is it not being debated today instead of the private Member's motion? No offence, it is good to do that, but where is the legislation to do something?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Is she aware that no Executive business has been tabled for this week or, indeed, next week, except for health regulations? A team of lawyers is sitting somewhere in the Building with nothing to do because of the hold-up in the Executive Office.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for her intervention. I am not aware of Executive business as I am a member of a non-Executive party. Certainly, I would welcome the elusive Executive business that we are supposed to be debating rather than Members' statements and motions. We are tasked with the job of legislating, and that is what we need to do.

There is much to do. The five-week wait for universal credit must be changed. The disgusting two-child cap needs to go. We must protect funding for our independent advice sector to ensure that people get the support that they need. Where is the anti-poverty strategy? Where is the youth homelessness strategy? Where is the feminist recovery plan being implemented by all Ministers? Where is the childcare strategy?

As we look to the future — allegedly to build back better, although evidence suggests otherwise — will the Executive prioritise health and well-being, a roof over people's heads and warm, secure homes with food on the table, or will they continue on an obsessive quest for capitalist growth that will only exacerbate and entrench inequalities in our society? It is not working, and it is not serving our population. We need a radical overhaul of how we do business that reduces inequalities. We must

have a just transition so that no one is left behind and that builds an economy where the markets are designed and public money is used to conserve and regenerate resources rather than squandering them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Two Members have indicated that they wish to speak. Mr Carroll has sat through the entirety of the debate, and it would be unfair not to let him speak. Although, strictly speaking, at 1.46 pm, I should have called the Minister, I will use my discretion and apply a grace period.

Mr McGlone: I support the motion. I welcome the opportunity to debate the decision to cut the £20 a week uplift from universal credit and the impact that that will have on many low-income families and individuals in the North.

The uplift in universal credit was introduced to help people who were struggling during the coronavirus pandemic. As we well know, that pandemic is not over by any means, and we have yet to measure the full extent of the economic fallout from that. Indeed, the possibility remains that we could see another spike in COVID-19 cases, along with increased pressures on the health service during the winter months ahead. The removal of the weekly £20 payment is premature, and the impact on those receiving universal credit will be devastating. Like all Members, I am sure, I am already receiving phone calls from people seeking advice and guidance about their entitlements. Some people had been furloughed and have found that they have no job, and others have had their hours drastically cut, and those people need support.

Energy prices are soaring, and the cost of living is rising. The predicted shortages on food shelves this Christmas and, indeed, to labour as a result of Brexit will place even greater pressures on the budgets of low-income families who are directly affected by the proposed cut to universal credit. Families with school-aged children are already feeling the pinch that accompanies the start of every school year.

Over 134,000 people across the North are currently in receipt of universal credit. They cannot afford to lose that money from their weekly budgets. The cut risks driving even more people into poverty and debt when society is still reeling from the double impact of Brexit and the pandemic. I implore the Minister for Communities, along with her Executive colleagues, to step up and step in to prevent that cut now. That has to be collaborative. The vast majority of people would welcome that,

particularly those 134,000 people who will be hit by the cut. Indeed, it would be perverse if the Minister were to oversee a weekly cut to universal credit while an Executive colleague is handing out a one-off payment of £100 to every registered voter, regardless of their income or employment status. It does, however, fit the pattern of a trickster Tory Government. Rather than tackling the obscene profits of a small number of companies and individuals who have benefited during the past 18 months, the Tory Government in London want to make those who are least able to afford it pay for the economic costs of the pandemic.

As well as the proposed cut to universal credit, the Boris Johnson-led Government are prematurely raising, to 12.5%, the VAT that is paid by the hospitality sector, which is still in shock and has many staff who are still not back at work from the pandemic, before there is any real evidence of a recovery in that sector. By the way, that rise will mean that the cost of eating out, which is already beyond the budgets of families who are on universal credit, is likely to rise along with the cost of food on the shelves. In raising taxes through an increase to National Insurance payments — the so-called health and social care levy — the Tory Government are placing a further disproportionate burden of the cost of addressing pressures in the health service on those who are lower paid.

Previously, the Assembly stepped in and put in place mitigation measures to counter unfair cuts from London to the welfare system. It is time to step up again. It is time for the Minister, with her Executive colleagues, to live up to the title and work together to keep the uplift in universal credit in place, at the very least for the remainder of the financial year. The Minister should use that time to bring forward a long-term strategy to address poverty — Ms Woods referred to that earlier — and social deprivation, which remain rife across Northern Ireland.

The Assembly may not currently have the power to affect the level of National Insurance payments, nor does it have the power to prevent the rise in VAT for the hospitality sector. As we all know, there are lower-paid workers in that sector. We do, however, have the ability to stop the cut to universal credit. I support the motion. *Tacaím leis an rún.*

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for using your discretion. An important motion is being discussed. The impact of the cut looms closer. The cut to universal credit will impact on 105,000 families, and some 300,000 individuals. We know the pressure and stress

that that will put on people's lives. Kevin Higgins from Advice NI has, today, talked about people's lives being at stake due to that cut. That is a harrowing, but likely, result. Already, 25% of workers earn less than the living wage, and 20% of people live in poverty. That cut, coupled with the hike in National Insurance and energy price rises, will drive more and more people into poverty, misery and destitution.

I agree with the call in the motion to put the focus and anger on the Tories. Frankly, the Tories are rotten and hate working-class and poor people, whether they live in the North of Ireland, Scotland, Wales or elsewhere. However, the Tories are not all-powerful. They can be forced to retreat, embarrassed, if met with resistance. What is said here matters, but more important is what happens in communities, workplaces and trade unions. Health workers, civil servants, and retail and hospitality workers will all be impacted by the cut. If the Executive do not cushion the effects of that, and the Tories do not budge, they will have failed people here. All the platitudes about learning from COVID will go completely out the window with that cut. As the Tories meet in Manchester today, my message to them and the Prime Minister is this: grow a spine, go after your rich mates who have seen their wealth balloon during the pandemic, and make them pay.

The Tory dream of "get on your bike" is alive and well with the cut. The idea that was announced by some that the cut would force people to get into work is fantasy. A large number of people, 40%, who are on universal credit are already in work. People have caring responsibilities and barriers to being able to work more, if at all.

Universal credit punishes people who work longer or more hours. Lack of affordable childcare is one of many reasons why more and more people cannot work or work longer hours. While the uplift should remain, universal credit is an unfair and unjust system. It is based on the premise that people are swinging the lead and that benefits need to be reduced. We need a new and fair welfare system.

When it comes to Stormont, we are always told that money is not there, until it is found. Nurses and other healthcare workers were told that, until they walked out and took strike action in 2018-19. As for the conversation about mitigations for things like the bedroom tax that were not in place here, boasting about mitigations that people here have on the basis that people in England do not have them not only sets a low bar but is a bit like kicking

someone's teeth out and then bragging about replacing them.

"The money is not there", we are always told, but this Executive have given Capita £100 million, and PFI millions are spent every day, so the idea needs to be done away with that it is about education or health or welfare. We need a new economic approach, we need to fund the universal credit uplift, and, if the Tories do not budge, the Executive need to make sure that people are not thrown to the wolves.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have been advised that the Minister of Justice is unwell and will not be able to respond to questions today. We will therefore resume the debate at 2.45 pm after questions to the Minister for Infrastructure. The question for urgent oral answer tabled by Ms Sheerin to the Minister of Health will be taken at the end of today's business. I ask Members —

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

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: — to take their ease. We will move to Question Time at 2.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I beg your pardon. Ms Armstrong, do you wish to raise a point of order?

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, reference was made in the House to punishment beatings. I ask for a ruling from the Speaker's Office under Standing Order 65(1)(e) on unparliamentary language. The words may well have been used inadvertently, but such language is unhelpful, as it perpetrates the myth that victims are guilty of something and that such attacks are justified.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I was not present for that but will recommend to the Speaker's Office that Hansard be reviewed and your question answered in writing or via email or what have you.

Members may take their ease.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Planning Applications: Time Frame

1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her plans to reduce the time frame for determining planning applications for houses. (AQO 2496/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The Member will be aware of my commitment to housing here in Northern Ireland, particularly social and affordable housing, given the crisis facing our communities. The planning system here provides a statutory target of 15 weeks for determining local planning applications and 30 weeks for determining major planning applications. In 2020-21, over 8,700 residential planning applications were received. In the same period, over 7,000 residential applications were decided. Ninety-six per cent of those were approved.

You will be aware that, since the transfer of planning functions in 2015, the majority of planning applications are processed by councils, and it is the responsibility of each local planning authority to ensure that they are processed in a timely manner. My Department monitors the performance of councils through a number of mechanisms, including the statutory planning indicators. It also monitors and reports on a number of non-statutory planning indicators, which are in the planning monitoring framework.

Recent performance has clearly been impacted on by the restrictions put in place due to the coronavirus pandemic, but I expect that to improve as we emerge from the pandemic, and my Department is working with all stakeholders to drive forward improvement. Measures that we have taken include the establishment of a cross-government planning forum, the focus of which is on improving performance in the planning statutory consultation process and, ultimately, the time frames for processing major and economically significant applications.

I share Members' frustrations, and I provide assurances that I am focused on moving things forward. I am undertaking a review of the implementation of the Planning Act 2011, which will consider how we can further improve the

system for all stakeholders. My Department has invested, along with 10 local councils, in the replacement of the current planning portal system in order to provide a more modern planning service. That is expected to be operational in 2022.

I also believe that effective and inclusive community engagement is an important part of a fit-for-purpose planning system, and that is why I have also established a planning engagement partnership to look at how we can enhance the quality and depth of community engagement in the planning process at regional and local planning levels.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister. I was glad to hear you talk about statutory consultees coming together, but a few of the key culprits in causing delays in determining planning applications rest in your Department, namely DFI Rivers and Roads, which, as statutory consultees, can be a bit slow. What actions will you take to ensure that they start meeting their targets for a response?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As I outlined in the original response, one area that we are focused on as a Department is improving the performance of statutory consultees in the planning system. As you are no doubt aware, many factors impact on the overall performance of the planning system. Statutory consultee response times, even in my Department, is a reason for delay. To address that, the Department has established a cross-government planning forum. The forum is a group of senior leaders in my Department and from the statutory consultee bodies, as well as representatives from local government, working together. Its key focus is to oversee the implementation of recommendations that were made in an independent report on the role of statutory consultees in the planning process. This work has a particular focus on improving processes and time frames for determining major and economically significant planning applications.

The latest statutory performance figures show that consultees have responded to 76% of all statutory planning consultations within 21 days. Despite the impact of the pandemic, performance has improved on the previous year by 7%. However, I recognise that it remains an issue and am committed to improving the planning system for the benefit of all our stakeholders.

Mr Dunne: In Ards and North Down Borough Council, for example, the average waiting time

for a general application varies from five to 18 months. Generally, consultations are the main cause of delay. I have spoken to applicants and agents, who single out DFI Roads and NI Water. What more can be done to improve the process? What engagement has the Minister had with the councils, given the regional disparities that exist between councils, which can be very frustrating for applicants and agents?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The cross-departmental forum is very much focused on improving response times for consultees, including those within my Department. I am also aware that there are capacity challenges. We have seen a significant increase in the volume and complexity of planning applications, particularly coming through to Rivers. I have been meeting officials to press on them the importance of getting these issues resolved as a matter of urgency. The chief planner and my officials have regular engagement with local councils because, of course, we monitor performance there and have an oversight role.

Ms Brogan: Another significant issue relating to the planning process in housing is unadopted roads. The Minister will know that, before recess, the Assembly passed a motion calling for action to address issues around unadopted roads, specifically with regard to people getting access to services such as gritting and bin collection. Will the Minister give us an update on measures that have been taken to resolve those problems, please?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. A Regional Development Committee looked at that issue and produced a report with a number of recommendations, which the Department has been taking forward. Unadopted lanes and streets are a challenge for my Department. In the most recent assessment, the financial impact of bringing all of the unadopted streets and roads up to an adopted standard stood at £300 million on 2018 prices. We continue to work with residents who live in the affected areas and are impacted on by the issue. We successfully adopt a number of streets across Northern Ireland every year. It is a challenge given the extent but we continue to work on it, even within the current financial and capacity constraints.

Ms Sugden: Does the Minister recognise that the current planning policy is limited, or perhaps misinterpreted, in its ability to enable affordable housing schemes? I am not aware of any

recent affordable housing schemes, in rural areas particularly.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I am clear that we should have a planning system that enables us to build social and affordable homes. My officials have been working with the Department for Communities in this area, but a lot of it is determined in local councils. As councils work through their local development plans, there is an important opportunity to maximise the opportunities that we have across Northern Ireland to build the many homes that we need.

Waste Water Infrastructure: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

2. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how capacity deficits in waste water infrastructure are impacting on building developments in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQO 2497/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for that important question. He will be aware that I have consistently raised the need for investment in water and waste water infrastructure. There are 23 waste water systems with capacity issues in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. On the impact on developments, Northern Ireland Water is a statutory consultee in the planning process and provides recommendations based on the availability of waste water assets and their capacity. The final decision on planning applications rests solely with the relevant planning authority. To help resolve these impacts, Northern Ireland Water plans to invest approximately £56.5 million within the current price control 21 (PC21) programme to upgrade waste water treatment works and waste water networks in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. However, it is vital that sustained and secure availability of funding is provided to Northern Ireland Water throughout the PC21 period.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council is advancing its local development plan. Its draft plan strategy is with the Planning Appeals Commission, and a formal hearing, with independent examination sessions, is due to commence in late autumn or early winter. It is anticipated that my Department will be invited to attend the independent examination hearing sessions to discuss, among other things, the impact of waste water infrastructure and capacity constraints affecting the council area. The development plan growth strategy should seek to maximise the use of existing infrastructure, including waste water treatment and sewerage network capacity and resources,

by focusing growth in locations where capacity exists. Where infrastructure capacity constraints are identified, the council must liaise closely with Northern Ireland Water to establish whether they can be overcome.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I have been in correspondence with NI Water in relation to Aughnacloy, where it has been confirmed that no further connections to the sewer system can be permitted. NI Water has stated that it has no allocation in the 2021-27 business plan and that, as such, no time frame can be provided for when the necessary upgrades will be taken forward. That is having a serious impact environmentally and on people who are building houses and on economic development in my area and in the region of Aughnacloy. When will Aughnacloy's waste water capacity be addressed?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. This is the outworking of historic underinvestment over many years in our water and waste water infrastructure. For this financial year, I was pleased to allocate the funding levels identified by the Utility Regulator. That is the first time that that has happened in a long time, but there is still so much more that we should be able to do.

The Member may know that Northern Ireland Water undertakes comprehensive business planning activities in each price control period. That is informed by my Department's social and environmental guidance. Northern Ireland Water works with the regulator to identify the most benefit to our customers from investment, so the selection of projects is not something that I, as the Minister, am involved in. I am happy to pass on your representations to Northern Ireland Water, but I must impress on Members the importance of sustained investment in our water and waste water infrastructure over the next number of years.

Mrs Barton: Minister, you will be very aware of the Galliagh Shore development in Enniskillen. Can you give me an update on the progress that there has been on the sewerage treatment works there?

Ms Mallon: I really sympathise with the residents of Galliagh Shore, because they are in a very distressing situation. However, as I am sure that the Member is aware, Galliagh Shore is a private development, and neither my Department nor Northern Ireland Water has any legal remit to carry out works in such private developments. The residents have been liaising

with the National House Building Council (NHBC) regarding its responsibilities in the development, and I believe that an offer has been made by the NHBC that has been accepted by the residents. The residents have also advised that they are working with a contractor to have an on-site investigation into the works carried out, a design solution prepared and a full cost estimate for the works detailed. Residents have approached my Department to see whether assistance could be provided in making up a shortfall in the funding should it be required. I am considering whether that can be achieved using my blue-green infrastructure fund, and my officials will be in contact with the residents as the case develops. Once full and final costings have been provided, I will be able to take a decision on any contribution that may be possible from my Department.

Mrs D Kelly: Have the Executive given you a commitment to deal with the water pressures? Can you give us an update on the infrastructure commission?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. From my budget this year, I have allocated a total of £344.5 million to Northern Ireland Water. As I said, this is the first time in a long time that Northern Ireland Water has been fully funded, and I have also provided an additional £20 million in capital funding to help Northern Ireland Water bring forward much-needed projects that were originally planned for delivery later in the PC21 period.

The scale of the waste water capacity issues across the North is such that they will, realistically, take at least 12 years to address. Without sufficient investment, Northern Ireland Water will be at risk of breaching statutory environmental obligations and the ability of the economy to recover could also be affected. I will continue to make representations to my Executive colleagues, because if we do not invest in our water and waste water infrastructure, we will not be able to grow our economy, build the many homes that we need or tackle the climate emergency.

The infrastructure commission is, as the Member will know, an agreed commitment in the Executive's published COVID recovery strategy. I look forward to our realising that commitment.

I hope that we do not experience any further delay, because an infrastructure commission is the game changer that our economy, society and environment need.

2.15 pm

Mr M Bradley: I ask the Minister whether her Department will undertake a review of infrastructure throughout Northern Ireland with a specific focus on the restrictions that a lack of infrastructure for waste water and sewage places on the rural community. I corresponded with the Minister some time ago about the village of Armoyle. It is but one example, but that situation is replicated throughout Northern Ireland.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Northern Ireland Water is extensively engaged with the Utility Regulator to identify the locations that require investment. As I have said on a number of occasions, we are in this situation because of historical underinvestment in our water and waste water infrastructure, but I reassure the Member that Northern Ireland Water is doing everything that it can within the budgetary constraints under which it has to operate.

I absolutely agree with the Member about having an overview of the infrastructure in Northern Ireland. I proposed the establishment of an infrastructure commission in Northern Ireland so that it would take a long-term, strategic approach to the vision for and delivery of infrastructure. That proposal is now contained in the Executive's COVID recovery strategy and has overwhelming support across the business and environment sectors. If we were to have an infrastructure commission, we would be better placed to tackle regional imbalance and to ensure that we have the right infrastructure in the right places and that our rural community does not lose out.

Climate Crisis

3. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her actions to address the climate crisis. (AQO 2498/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In February 2020, as an Assembly, we voted to declare a climate emergency, and the New Decade, New Approach agreement directed the Executive to bring forward legislation that set specific targets for Northern Ireland. It is essential that we work together to ensure that ambitious but realistic targets are enshrined in legislation in order to protect our society, our economy and our environment for both current and future generations.

As political leaders, we need to set out a clear plan for achieving a just transition to net zero in Northern Ireland as quickly as possible. As an

Executive, we have collectively agreed to host a climate summit ahead of the global conference, in acknowledgment of the need to set out urgently a clear, collective plan for achieving that just transition. We had a useful discussion at a recent Executive meeting on the two climate change Bills working their way through the Assembly, and I look forward to a more comprehensive debate with our stakeholders in a climate summit.

As Minister for Infrastructure, I take my duty to people and our environment seriously, and I continue to drive forward projects to help mitigate the climate crisis and ensure that Northern Ireland adapts to the impacts of climate change. Those projects include a £20 million annual investment in a blue-green infrastructure fund to make public transport and active travel a more attractive and efficient alternative to the use of private cars, including a significant investment of £13.5 million to support the development of greenways by councils and active travel schemes by my Department; a £4 million investment in sustainably produced hydrogen buses and hydrogen refuelling infrastructure with Translink, Energia and the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV); £74 million of investment in low- and zero-emission buses for Translink; and investment in excess of £60 million to purchase new train carriages to encourage more people out of their cars and on to rail. In addition, I recently consulted on 'Living With Water in Belfast', which sets out a new approach to the provision of drainage infrastructure in greater Belfast by promoting holistic and integrated solutions that achieve a wide range of benefits at reduced cost and disruption.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for her answer and for the commitment within her Department's remit to challenge the climate crisis and emergency that we face. I also thank her for calling for a climate summit of the Executive to push them to do all the work that they can. Will the Minister give an update on the work of that climate summit and on the preparations for the Conference of the Parties (COP) 26?

Ms Mallon: I was pleased that the Executive agreed that we would host a climate summit in advance of COP26 in November. The call for a climate summit followed the publication of a report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that warned of "a code red for humanity." The summit will provide an opportunity ahead of COP26 for all Departments to develop an action plan to deliver a just transition to net zero. I have

written to the Executive Office twice to ask for an update on planning and arrangements because, as it is a cross-cutting matter, it is, of course, taking the lead. I am keen that we have a wide range of attendees at that summit to ensure that we have wide and varied input. Only when we work together across government and with the private sector, communities and citizens will we really tackle the climate emergency.

Ms Kimmins: Minister, in your response, you mentioned electric vehicles (EVs). One tangible step in addressing the climate crisis would be to ensure that we have an adequate system of charge points in place for those who use electric vehicles. As you know, the current network is in terrible condition, and an urgent upgrade is urgently needed. In the South, the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) received funding from the Government through the Climate Action Fund, and I know that it is asking for similar assistance in the North. We need to encourage people to take up greener transport like electric vehicles, and access to charge points will play a significant part in driving that shift. Will the Minister indicate whether there are plans to provide similar investment in our charge point network?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As Members will be aware, the e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the ESB. I have met the ESB to encourage it to repair non-functioning charge points, and I am pleased that it has commenced a replacement programme that will upgrade a number of faulty charge points with more modern operational charge points. The Member will also be aware that I have changed planning rules so that it is easier to advance e-charging infrastructure and that I have provided match funding for the EU INTERREG-funded Facilitating a Sustainable Transition to EVs in the Regions (FASTER) electric vehicle network project, which will see the installation of additional rapid charging points here.

Funding is available from the Office for Zero Emissions Vehicles. Unfortunately, my Department cannot draw down that funding, but councils can. We have been working closely with councils to encourage them to take up that funding, and that work is ongoing. I recently met the then future transport Minister, Rachel Maclean, to ensure that we can maximise funding. I am also exploring opportunities through my blue-green fund, and I am pleased to say that I have offered match funding of up to £350,000 to councils that wish to draw down funding from the British Government.

Mr Blair: Key to tackling the climate crisis will be a move from combustion engines to electric vehicles. Will the Minister commit to exploring the introduction of interest-free loans for those who wish to purchase new electric vehicles, electric bikes etc, as was done through the Transport Scotland initiative?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The introduction of interest-free loans is a matter that would fall outside my Department. However, I am pleased to say that my Department has been working on the energy strategy and on modes of transport in particular. We are establishing an action group that is very focused on e-charging and how we can roll out the e-charging network and tackle the barriers that remain to encourage people to make that switch. I am sure that that group will consider that.

A6: Update

4. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the development of the A6. (AQO 2499/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to advise that the new 15-kilometre section of dual carriageway along the A6 between Randalstown and Castledawson was fully opened to traffic on 31 May. I am sure that the Member will agree that that significant milestone is improving connectivity to the north-west and delivering journey time savings for commuters, buses and goods vehicles. In addition, construction of the new 25.5-kilometre section of dual carriageway between Drumahoe and Dungiven, which includes a bypass of Dungiven, is progressing well. The earthworks and 16 of the 22 structures are substantially complete, and the main line pavement construction is also well advanced. It is expected that the dualling scheme will be completed in 2022, which is largely as planned.

When both schemes are complete, approximately three quarters of the Belfast to Derry route will be of dual carriageway standard or better. As well as improving the standard of carriageway along the A6, both schemes provide enhanced provision for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. New park-and-ride sites are operational at Drumderg and Drumahoe, with a further park-and-ride site under construction at Claudy.

Together, those flagship schemes represent an investment of over £400 million and will significantly enhance the connectivity of the north-west, improve journey time reliability,

reduce journey times and, importantly, improve road safety.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the Minister's commitment to enhancing our connectivity in the wider north-west.

On rural connectivity, will the Minister give an update on the Dungiven park-and-ride scheme?

Ms Mallon: I know that the Member is supportive of the Dungiven park-and-ride scheme. She has raised the issue with me previously. A pre-application notice has been submitted to Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, and the design is being finalised. I am pleased to report that a public consultation on the proposals will be carried out prior to the submission of a full planning application towards the end of this year.

Mr Robinson: The traffic light system that facilitates the A6 roadworks at the entrance to and exit from Dungiven causes long delays. How long will that arrangement be in place? While the work is necessary, given that roadworks are also taking place between Ballymoney and Ballymena, motorists coming from the north-west to Belfast and beyond are severely inconvenienced.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The ongoing traffic management at Dungiven is essential to facilitate the construction of a new roundabout that will connect the A6 Glenshane Road to the new A6 dual carriageway. Unfortunately, the nature of the work means that lane closures are unavoidable, but it has been sequenced to minimise lane closures by maximising offline working, extending weekday working hours and working weekends when necessary. My officials continue to liaise with the contractor, elected representatives and local residents to ensure that any impact arising from the ongoing works at Dungiven is minimised as much as possible.

Mr Delargy: I am concerned that, while progress on the A6 is welcome, the public reopening of another vital stretch of road for the north-west — the A5 — has been delayed again. Will the Minister provide an update on what her Department is doing to ensure that there will be no further delays to the A5?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We have discussed the challenges and delays to the A5 many times in the Chamber. One of the things that I find frustrating is that, at a previous public inquiry, the scheme was given the green light.

Unfortunately, we had no Ministers in place to take it forward.

My officials are working at pace towards the publication of a new environmental statement addendum so that the public inquiry can be reconvened, as recommended by the Planning Appeals Commission, next year. Receipt of the PAC's final report from the inquiry should then allow a ministerial decision to be taken. Subject to the successful completion of all the necessary statutory processes and environmental assessments, the construction of phase 1A could then commence. The programme for scheme delivery has, in recent years, referred to full scheme completion by 2028, and, although some slippage has occurred, that time frame remains achievable.

I reiterate my commitment to the A5 flagship project, which is of significant strategic importance to the region and will help to tackle regional imbalance, improve the economy, job prospects and prosperity, connect communities and improve road safety.

Planning: Rural Communities

6. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, further to the publication of the new planning advice note (PAN) on development in the countryside, for her assessment of the impact that the planning approval process for single houses will have on rural communities. (AQO 2501/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The PAN provides advice that councils, as planning authorities in their own right, will take into account when determining planning applications for development in the countryside along with all other material planning considerations. It is important to note that the PAN does not, however, change planning policy. It is intended to assist planning authorities and users of the planning system in the interpretation and implementation of extant planning policy as contained in the strategic planning policy statement (SPPS). It re-emphasises and clarifies several policy issues and will assist in ensuring a consistent interpretation of the policy across the North.

I firmly believe that the current policy approach for development in the countryside remains appropriate and facilitates sustainable patterns of development while supporting a vibrant rural community. I will, of course, continue to consider current and emerging issues to ensure that strategic planning policy for development in the countryside is fit for purpose.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her response. She will be aware that there are a lot of concerns about planning in the country. The planning note to which she refers appears to restrict the interpretation of planning policy and make it more difficult for people to build in the countryside. In most instances, that will affect young couples who want to build beside the home place. There is enough pressure in rural communities at the minute, between Brexit, broadband and rural isolation in the middle of the pandemic. Will the Minister reconsider and perhaps withdraw the planning advice note?

2.30 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I want to make sure that we support our rural communities and ensure that they are vibrant places to live. I stress that the PAN does not change planning policy. As I have said, it is intended to assist councils, as planning authorities in their own right, to give their assessment of what material weight is to be afforded to planning considerations. Therefore, as I say, it is, ultimately, up to councils to make that determination, and I emphasise again that the PAN in no way changes the planning policy that was consulted on and agreed prior to me taking up post.

Mr Buckley: Despite what the Minister has said, she will understand that some councils have interpreted the new planning advice note as a change of policy, and it has therefore created complications in different council areas. What consultation did the Minister have with Executive colleagues before issuing the note?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, it is up to councils, as planning authorities in their own right, to determine the relevance of material planning considerations.

The Member asked about the consultation that took place. Since the publication of the SPPS, the Department issued a call for evidence in March 2016 to help inform the scope of a potential review of strategic planning policy on development in the countryside. It attracted responses from a wide of range interests, including local government, environmental groups, business, industry, residents' groups, professional bodies and individuals. In March 2017, the Department procured consultants to undertake research and provide an updated evidential context to inform the best strategic planning policy approach for development in the countryside. That research involved focused stakeholder engagement, including seminars

with council planning managers, professional institutions and environmental interest groups. It also included individual meetings with relevant organisations, including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Construction Employers Federation, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the Rural Community Network and the Ulster Farmers' Union. The aforementioned work helped inform the preferred way forward for strategic planning policy for development in the countryside and my decision to issue the PAN.

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

Trailers/Caravans: Towing Rules

T1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether, following the announcement that new rules for towing trailers and caravans with a car will be introduced in England, Scotland and Wales this autumn, she will commit to ensuring that Northern Ireland also benefits by introducing the changes here. (AQT 1621/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that GB is introducing changes to class B and E trailer tests to help the sector tackle the lorry driver shortage. My Department had no knowledge of the change prior to the public announcement. The implications of the changes for road safety will need further consideration, but I want to point out that testing is not seen as a significant reason for HGV driver shortages here. A recent Road Haulage Association survey identifies driver retirement, Brexit, of course, and changes to off-payroll working rules as the three main reasons for the shortage. Testing was not identified as an issue by hauliers in the UK-wide survey.

At this time, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) can facilitate practical driving tests and theory tests for LGV drivers. The DVA is not aware of any specific concerns being raised by training schools regarding the availability of appointments, but training schools are encouraged to liaise directly with their appropriate centre management team, should additional testing capacity be required. The DVA will continue to liaise with training schools to monitor the demand for tests. In the first full four months since driving tests resumed on 23 April, the DVA has conducted 1,290 LGV driving tests, which is 65% higher than the five-year average for that period. That demonstrates a clear commitment to providing increased testing capacity for the sector.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. Given that there will be divergence if the rules in Northern Ireland do not change, if someone comes from England, Scotland or Wales to Northern Ireland on holiday with their caravan, what will be their legal position when driving here?

Ms Mallon: My understanding is that, if they complete that test in GB and come over here, it should be fine, but, of course, given the seriousness of the issue, I will double-check that with officials and confirm the answer in writing to the Member.

Comber Greenway: Lighting

T2. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether, now that the consultation on lighting the Comber greenway is complete, she will outline the next steps and time frame. (AQT 1622/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The public consultation closed on 30 September. Its purpose was to gather views and comments on whether lighting should be provided on the Comber greenway and, if so, whether it should be installed on the entire route. We received 1,700 responses. Officials are working through the feedback, and the outcome of the consultation will guide not only whether we light the Comber greenway on a pilot basis but the development of policy on lighting active travel routes.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. I look forward to seeing what comes out of the consultation and how they proceed.

I will continue on the subject of sustainable transport. Pre pandemic, the park-and-ride at Dundonald was regularly at capacity. Post pandemic, that will continue to be an issue. Will the Minister outline what plans she has to address that, please?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question and the tenuous link that was creatively provided. I have invested significantly in the provision of park-and-rides, and we are taking forward a number of schemes. Dundonald presents difficulties because of the challenges of land availability. My officials continue to work to identify our options to relieve the pressure on that site. We need to encourage as many people as possible to make the switch out of their private cars and onto public transport.

All-island Strategic Rail Review

T3. **Ms Ferguson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the all-island strategic rail review. (AQT 1623/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I recently met Minister Eamon Ryan and the consultants who are taking the work forward. The purpose of the all-island strategic rail review is to look at our existing rail network to see where it can be improved. That is a particular issue in the north-west. It will also look to identify the potential for new rail links, so that we better connect communities and businesses, and examine the possibilities of rail in connecting our international gateways — our ports and airports. It will also examine the potential for freight. All of those are hugely important as we tackle the climate emergency.

The consultants have been asked to report within a 12-month period. It will be an evidence-based and evidence-led approach, but there will also be the opportunity for public engagement, so I encourage Members to input to that process when they can.

Ms Ferguson: It is vital that rail connectivity is improved in the north-west to begin to end regional inequalities and to unlock the potential of the area. Will the Minister give an update on the ongoing studies that are considering a half-hourly service on the Derry line as well as the additional halts at Ballykelly, Strathfoyle and the City of Derry Airport and say whether the report is still due in November?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. When I took up the post, I said that I was committed to tackling regional imbalance and better connecting communities, particularly in the north-west. As anyone who looks at the rail map knows, it speaks volumes about the lack of investment and connectivity.

My officials continue to work at pace on this. We are linking with Into the West, which has been invaluable in identifying the terms of reference. I am pleased to say that the feasibility study will be completed next month. That will enable us to move forward with the next steps and a business case.

Glider Scheme: Phase 2

T4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the next steps and time frame for phase 2 of the Glider scheme, which will connect north Belfast to the south of the

city, given that the consultation ends today. (AQT 1624/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The public consultation on phase 2 of the Glider scheme closes today, so there still is time and opportunity for Members to feed into that consultation if they have not already done so.

My officials will work through the feedback and will bring to me a submission identifying the best routes. I reassure people that this is not a predetermined outcome. The consultation set parameters in terms of the work of the consultants. I am keen to see the feedback, and that will determine the next steps. A critical component is the Belfast region city deal. This is a project within that, so I am keen that it is prioritised and we can get on to deliver the multiple benefits that, we know, the Glider phase 2 will bring for the people of north and south Belfast.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. She mentioned the city regional deal. When the Glider was first mooted for north Belfast, there was talk that it would go as far as Global Point in south Antrim or Mallusk, which is part of the city deal as well. Why was that not taken into consideration when you put out the consultation? Albeit I do not know how it would manage to get through Glengormley at rush hour, why is it stopping where it is stopping?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The routes that have been identified as part of the consultation were determined by the consultants, having factored in a number of issues around the engineering of routes, accessibility and viability. Those were the parameters on which we went out to consult. Of course, I have been very clear that I want this to be a genuine public consultation exercise. I am very keen to hear views about extensions to the route and to give careful consideration to those views when identifying the next steps.

York Street Interchange: Update

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the York Street interchange project, for which his party secured money through the confidence-and-supply arrangement, given that it is vital for Belfast and for connectivity throughout Northern Ireland. (AQT 1625/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member that that is a very important strategic project. I confirm that I have allocated £2.7 million in this financial

year to continue the development of the project. That funding will deliver a place-making analysis of the project and the wider area in the light of new and emerging policies; an active travel review that will look at walking, cycling and public transport connectivity through the scheme and in the wider area; and the further development of the engineering design, including site investigation works to reduce costs and design risks.

With regard to future funding, the Executive have committed to the delivery of essential infrastructure projects as part of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which, as the Member will know, includes the York Street interchange project. Therefore, I expect that the project will be funded by the Executive in line with other priorities such as the A5 and the A6. Work on the place-making analysis and the active travel review is progressing well, and I hope to be in a position to consider their outcomes shortly before deciding on the next steps.

Mr Humphrey: I am pleased, Minister, with the answer, and I look forward, as will the House, to being updated. Minister, I am pleased that you have now visited Glenside and Harmony Lane in north Belfast. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Belfast City Council and DAERA have stepped up to the plate to assist the long-suffering residents in those areas in response to criminality, antisocial behaviour, dumping and so on. What is your Department going to do?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his supplementary and for another creative and tenuous link to the original question. I will give the DUP Benches 10 out of 10 for creativity today. I visited Harmony Lane and met residents, and I will say that their commitment and sense of community pride is truly remarkable. Of course, there are challenges because the lane is an unadopted laneway, but I gave a commitment to the residents that we would look at what we could do creatively. I have asked my officials to explore what legislative powers we have so that we can look to adopt the laneway. As you say, it is a blight because it has been subjected to antisocial behaviour. It is very important that we all do what we can to address the situation and to support the residents in their endeavours.

Suicide Prevention: Protective Infrastructure

T6. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the work of her

Department to implement protective infrastructure on our bridges, particularly to assist with suicide prevention. (AQT 1626/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As the Minister and as an MLA for North Belfast, mental health and suicide prevention are a priority for me. When I took up the post as Minister for Infrastructure, one of the first questions I asked myself was what could my Department do better to tackle the issue. We have been engaging in a piece of work called Relink Belfast, which is looking at the feasibility of having environmental measures at our bridges along the Westlink so that we can create softer, greener areas where, for example, people can feel safer. I hope to be able to make an announcement on that shortly.

Ms Flynn: Thank you for your response, Minister. You mentioned the work you are doing on suicide prevention in your Department. It is important to state that it is the responsibility of all the Executive parties and Departments to try to tackle this issue, which still impacts on our society. Could the Department look into expanding the scope of the pilot to include additional bridges?

2.45 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member. She is absolutely right. Individually, as Ministers, and, collectively, as an Executive and a society, we need to take ownership of the issue. I very much value my role on the Executive working group on mental well-being, resilience and suicide prevention. I can confirm that, in the feasibility study, we looked to identify which bridge was best-placed to initiate this. I have also asked my officials to look at whether, in the interim, they can do something along all of the bridges. I am very keen that we tackle this issue. That is a location of great concern. It is very important that we all come together and make small financial changes that can have a huge impact on vulnerable people.

MOT Centres: Walk-in Bookings

T7. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after thanking her for dealing with the recent problems with the online MOT booking system, which, from using it himself, he knows is now working fine, with dates available at short notice, when she intends to reintroduce walk-in bookings at all MOT centres — banks, post offices and shops are open — for those who wish to book over the counter, with a lot of people requiring that service, including those

members of the public who do not have access to computer systems and who depend on relatives or friends. (AQT 1627/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question and am glad that his particular issue was resolved. We closed over-the-counter services in line with public health advice. People can make applications online. If they have difficulties accessing the service digitally, they can contact the call centre.

I am very keen to deliver services that are closer to communities. My Department is progressing work with Libraries NI to agree a face-to-face booking enquiry service that they will deliver on behalf of the Driver and Vehicle Agency. Libraries across the North should be vital parts of our community network. We should put services into libraries and not place them under threat. We are working on this at pace. I would like to see us be able to provide that face-to-face service at people's doors and at the heart of their community in their local library.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That is it, Members. Time is up. Please take your ease while we move to the next item of business.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that there will be no questions for oral answer to the Minister of Justice as the Minister is unavailable.

Private Members' Business

Universal Credit Uplift

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased reliance on the welfare system; notes that the £20 universal credit uplift has provided a lifeline to many low-income families; registers serious concerns about the devastating impact that its proposed removal would have at this critical juncture in the recovery period; further recognises that the removal of £20 per week from thousands of families will push more people into poverty at a time when one in four children already lives in poverty, increase reliance on food banks and increase homelessness, as well as having dire consequences for our local economy; and calls on the Minister for Communities, in the absence of action from the Westminster Government, to liaise with her Executive colleagues to retain this uplift for the remainder of this financial year, and to commit to expediting a long-term strategy to tackle the shameful levels of poverty and social deprivation across Northern Ireland, which remain among the highest in Europe. — [Mr Durkan.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We return to the debate on universal credit (UC) uplift. I call the Minister for Communities to respond to the debate.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thank you to all the contributors to the debate on an important item that needs to be discussed and addressed.

I will start by reiterating what I said in previous debates and discussions on the issue. The actions planned by the British Government are outrageous and abhorrent. They will result in the biggest cut to the basic rate of social security to date. They will result in hardship and poverty for people across the North who are already struggling. The facts of the proposed cut are clear: it will cause enormous hardship for people immediately. At a time when Boris and his cronies are looking at tax breaks for the rich, this is totally unacceptable and immoral.

I made Members aware in previous discussions that I wrote to the British Secretary of State for Work and Pensions calling for the uplift to be made permanent. I highlighted the difficulties that the cut would create for ordinary people, workers and their families. I joined Ministers

from Scotland and Wales in a joint letter that, again, called for the uplift to be made permanent. That was followed by a joint letter last November. I wrote again to Thérèse Coffey over the weekend to insist that these concerns cannot be ignored and that the universal credit uplift should be retained as a matter of extreme urgency. Doing anything else would be a derogation of her responsibility and would be absolutely wrong on every level. I welcome the fact that our joint First Ministers have joined the Scottish and Welsh First Ministers in making the same call. It is time for the British Government to do the right thing. I urge the House to join the calls on the British Government to do the right thing.

I fully recognise the far-reaching impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, on people. It has increased reliance on our social security system. There was a dramatic increase in the number of households on universal credit, from 57,920 in February 2020 to 116,810 in May of this year. That is why I put in place a range of measures to mitigate, as much as possible, the social, economic and well-being effects of COVID-19 on our communities. That was done to help and protect vulnerable people and to safeguard the organisations that they depend on. I focused on measures that I could implement quickly. I introduced a package of additional assistance and funding to support people through this difficult time. I made sure that we were getting money to people when they needed it.

To Boris Johnson and the Tories, £20 a week may be small change, but I know how vital it is for people on the ground. I proudly live in a working-class inner-city community; something that Boris knows nothing about. I have been a community activist all my life. I know that this cut and all the other Tory cuts mean that people, families and workers are already struggling.

It is a disgrace that many Members have made comments around the thrust of the motion. Why is the SDLP not directing its efforts and criticisms at the British Government, who are responsible for the cut? This is the time for the British Government to reverse the cut. It is the time for the House to speak with one voice in calling on them to reinstate the universal credit uplift. Instead, the House, including, it seems, the SDLP, is giving up on that call on the British Government to do the right thing.

We have to be open and honest about our abilities to mitigate, yet again, another cut by the Tories. The Budget here in the North is not infinite. People know the circumstances of how

we get the money: it is through a block grant. Our fiscal powers and levers are also restricted. We need a further conversation about how we can transfer more powers from Westminster to the Assembly here.

In the interim, I would be interested in hearing from the SDLP, which has proposed the motion, and others how they propose to find the additional money. Which Minister's budget — is it their own Minister's — is going to give up the money in order to retain the uplift? Where will costs be reduced? Alternatively, will it come from Health, Education or housing? Do you think that we should reduce any of those, or other, vital services? Those are the areas that we would have to look at taking money from. Let us get real. I wholeheartedly agree that we need to find ways in which to do it, but those are the options that we are looking at. If you were to mitigate by looking at a cut in my Department, the whole housing development programme would be taken away. What would we look at in Infrastructure, Health or Education?

What services would be cut? It is easy to come to the Chamber and make a proposal. It is not as easy to bring forward one that is costed and that shows from where you take the money.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hargey: Yes, of course.

Ms Armstrong: Apologies. I should have said "Minister" instead of "Member". Minister, as yet, we on the Committee for Communities have not yet received the October monitoring round information from the Department. Perhaps there is underspend. We will not know until we see the monitoring round information. Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on whether there is any underspend. After all, in the past, we have seen discretionary support grants underspent by £2 million.

Ms Hargey: Again, the Member talks about a one-off cash injection. If you are serious about mitigating Tory cuts to our social security system, that is not sustainable. Let us get real. If you propose finding £110 million, plus the additional £7 million to build a system to extend the payments, because the DWP systems will stop them, from where will that money come? I am up for having that conversation and taking a proposal to the Executive. There are hard questions to be asked about where that money is to come from, however.

I will address the contributions of some Members. Some showed their anger. It is obvious that angry mist has clouded their judgement and offers further distraction as to from where the welfare changes and cuts will come. Make no mistake about it: this is ideologically driven by the Tory Government, and it has been for over a decade. They are ideologically wedded to eroding the welfare state and to privatising healthcare and other public services. That is what the focus of the debate needs to be on.

I heard many talk about the decision that was taken back in 2016. As was intimated earlier in the debate, the institutions were ready to collapse on that issue. When the British Government were initiating financial penalties, Members were saying in the Chamber that certain parties were going to allow the institutions to collapse over the issue. As a result of that decision, however, we got additional mitigations and protections from the benefit cap and the bedroom tax. We can see the devastating consequences that those have had in England, Scotland and Wales. Are the mitigations perfect? No, not by any stretch of the imagination, but at least they offer some protections that other citizens, living in Britain, do not have. They have said repeatedly how much they wish that they had had a mitigations system at the same time.

Other Members talked about the 'COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan'. I have read it, and I have engaged with and listened to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Trussell Trust, Advice NI, and the broader community and voluntary sector. Many of them are involved in the co-design groups on the social inclusion strategies on disability, gender, anti-poverty and LGBTQI+. Those strategies need to be delivered, but it is not down to just the Department for Communities to do that. Rather, all Departments have to play their role in delivering and implementing them. The expert panels delivered their reports, and I published them, but that is not the end of the strategies. They are being co-designed, and that work is ongoing. I said in the Chamber previously that I intend to bring forward those strategies before the end of this mandate, and that is something that I will do.

Other Members talked about having a social security system that finds innovative solutions. If we want to build a social security system that meets the needs of the people here, just to build it in order to make the payments, we will need over £1 billion of investment. I am up for having that conversation, but we need to find out from where that £1 billion-plus will come.

Some mention was made of the £500 million that the British Chancellor announced last week. I agree with Nicola Sturgeon, however, that that is a complete distraction ahead of the Tory party conference that kicked off today. It results in just £13 million to £14 million in Barnett consequential. When you set that against the nearly £110 million in UC that is being cut, it disappears. Moreover, it is only a one-off payment, so it is not built in on an ongoing basis.

3.00 pm

Others talked about my failure to deliver. It will be up to the electorate to decide on that next year. This is a political Chamber: people have their views, and I have no problem with that. Some former Ministers wanted to hit the ground running, but I do not think that they even hit the ground, let alone hit it running. That said, I have to correct some untruths that I have heard in the Chamber today.

I ask the party that is blocking mitigations from being put on to the Executive agenda to unblock them, and I urge the Member to speak to their colleagues on that matter.

Staffing levels for universal credit were mentioned. We were inundated. I spoke earlier about the number of people who came on to the UC system. We did everything in our power to make sure that the system stood up, and it was down to the dedication of our staff on the front line that it did. We were able to make payments, and we made sure that the payments reached those who needed them at the most difficult time of the pandemic.

An assertion was made that I have done nothing for people who are terminally ill. I am the only Minister to bring forward legislation to bin the six-month rule and to extend protections.

The PIP systems are not good enough, but, as Minister, I have made a policy decision to reverse privatisation and bring it in-house, and I ask Members who are giving out platitudes to support me in that endeavour. I will ask all parties to support me in that endeavour in the time ahead.

I also want to ask why people feel that it is OK for the uplift to be extended only until March 2022. It will be just as critical then as it is now. Therefore, why does the motion ask for an extension only to March 2022? Some cynics would say that, with an election looming, some parties, rather than trying to deliver for people, are setting up future criticism of me and taking

the spotlight away from the Tories who are making the cut. That is a cynical stunt, and it will bring people to yet another cliff edge.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hargey: As I have stated before, I am determined — you will get to sum up at the end, Mark — to protect the most vulnerable and to target resources at those most in need. So, of course, I will liaise with my Executive colleagues. I already have, and I will continue to do so. I will continue to explore and lobby for mitigations and opportunities to support people. I hope that political parties around the Chamber, rather than trying to make headlines from this debate, will support me.

I will continue to support the most vulnerable in our communities, particularly with the rising costs of fuel and electricity over the winter period. My Department provides a range of measures aimed at reducing the impact of fuel poverty, such as the affordable warmth scheme and the boiler replacement scheme.

I am committed to delivering long-term, sustainable solutions to poverty in all its forms. As I said, my Department leads the way on social inclusion strategies. Over the past 18 months, we have invested over £300 million in support that has gone into people's pockets, into communities and into council areas.

I came into post in January 2020; by February, I had a paper on welfare mitigations with the Executive. That was to extend the mitigations, to close the loopholes and to bin the bedroom tax once and for all. It is a disgrace that that paper has not made it on to the agenda despite repeated calls from me at the Executive that it should do so. It is a disgrace that the paper is being blocked by a party in the Executive Office. I call on all parties —

A Member: Name them.

Ms Hargey: The DUP.

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

Ms Hargey: I call on all parties to support my paper, which proposes closing the loopholes, extending the mitigations and binning the bedroom tax, coming forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Dolores Kelly to respond to the debate and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Members for taking part in the debate and for their universal support in opposing the Tories' plan to end the £20 universal credit uplift. At the outset, it is right to recount, as many Members did, what that means for individuals and their families. I do not know how many people came from a family for whom money, or the lack thereof, was an issue; who, when bills in brown envelopes tumbled through the letter box, worried about what to do with them and how they were going to be paid; and who, as a result, had sleepless nights and anxiety, which impacted on family relationships. It is therefore not just about whether to eat or heat but about people's physical and mental well-being, to which many Members referred in their contributions. It is also about the additional pressures that poverty puts on the health service, given that none of that is stand-alone. However, we cannot just blame the Tories, as much as I am up for that. The Minister talked about political stunts. I have been about here long enough to remember Sinn Féin members standing outside with posters and saying, "Stop the Tory cuts". That was a political stunt that did not age terribly well. As for our MPs, we take the fight to the Tories where it counts: in the Commons Chamber and the Lobbies. We not only stand against but vote against the Tories, rather than standing on the front lawn, as the current South Down MP, Chris Hazzard, did not so long ago. I therefore do not think that we will take much criticism about that.

The Minister was right to point out that there has been a 100% increase. She was also right to put on record her and our thanks to the staff in her Department, who stepped up to process those claims as best and as quickly as they could. Like, I am sure, many Members, I have seen many people in my constituency office who found themselves having to rely, for the first time, on welfare payments, because they had been put on furlough or lost their job and who did not know how to navigate the welfare system, which Mr Butler outlined in his contribution.

It is very easy to blame everybody else. Some Members said that we need to unite with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales against the Tory cuts. That is an important, key message. However, the fact is that Sinn Féin and the DUP have been in power for over 14 years here. We are not powerless, and we should not buy into the narrative that there is nothing that we can do about it.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Is she as concerned as I am about the argument that cutting the budgets of Health,

Education or Infrastructure is the only way in which we can have a decent and fair welfare system? Does the Member think that it is perverse that, in one of the richest societies in human history in which billionaire wealth has soared, the argument is about what we cut, rather than saying, "How do we make those who have more pay?". Is the Member concerned about that?

Mrs D Kelly: I am indeed. I saw recently that there is — believe it or not — an increasing number of millionaires in Belfast. Some Members referred to the increasingly unequal wealth distribution across society. Indeed, Mr Dunne talked about all the food banks and the volunteers who do such tremendous work. It is a sad reflection of what we value in society. It should never be about putting welfare up against health and education, because those are all linked and should form part of any poverty strategy as we work our way out of poverty. It should be about giving people access to good healthcare and good educational opportunities as well as giving them a decent standard of living. The point is well made.

There are things that the Executive can and must do. That is why I, like many people, am very frustrated that there does not appear to be the urgency in the Executive to meet. How often have we seen Executive meetings called in the last number of weeks? How often have we seen joint press conferences by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, be they on the COVID economic strategy or, indeed, welfare reform? The Minister for Communities has said very clearly that papers that she produced have been blocked by DUP members of the Executive. Mr Frew, quite rightly, pointed the finger of blame at the Executive.

The fact is that Sinn Féin and the DUP have been in power for more than 14 years. The time has long passed when the people we represent should have heard about the type of society that we want to build. Does tackling food and heat poverty mean more to them than identity politics? My colleague Colin McGrath quoted Gandhi. I quote no better man than John Hume. He said:

"you can't eat a flag."

Yet, today and most days, our headlines are filled with cultural identity sham fights between some parties to divert attention from the real bread-and-butter issues and the sad reality of life for far too many in our society. We can and must do better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased reliance on the welfare system; notes that the £20 universal credit uplift has provided a lifeline to many low-income families; registers serious concerns about the devastating impact that its proposed removal would have at this critical juncture in the recovery period; further recognises that the removal of £20 per week from thousands of families will push more people into poverty at a time when one in four children already lives in poverty, increase reliance on food banks and increase homelessness, as well as having dire consequences for our local economy; and calls on the Minister for Communities, in the absence of action from the Westminster Government, to liaise with her Executive colleagues to retain this uplift for the remainder of this financial year, and to commit to expediting a long-term strategy to tackle the shameful levels of poverty and social deprivation across Northern Ireland, which remain among the highest in Europe.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members should take their ease for a moment before we move on to the next item of business.

3.15 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards: Bespoke Agreement

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports a comprehensive and bespoke agreement between the European Union and the British Government to align sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards, with the aim of reducing checks and paperwork on goods being imported from Britain; recognises that this is the only realistic and practical way of reducing checks within the framework of existing international agreements; acknowledges that there is widespread support from businesses here for such an agreement; and calls on the European Union and the British Government to negotiate a bespoke agreement to align sanitary and phytosanitary standards.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee agreed to allow up to one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10

minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. As an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate. Please open the debate on the motion.

Dr Archibald: The motion calls for Members to support a comprehensive and bespoke agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary standards to be negotiated between the European Union and the British Government, with the aim of reducing checks and paperwork on goods that are being imported from Britain. Such an agreement has support from business representatives as a practical and realistic way in which to reduce the friction that has resulted from post-Brexit trading arrangements. Agreement on a minimum level of standards would reduce drastically the checks that are necessary on agri-food products at ports.

Of course, that is not a new point of debate. There was much discussion, throughout the entire Brexit negotiation process, on SPS and whether a veterinary agreement or alignment of regulations could, should or would be reached. Essentially, what transpired in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement was a bare-bones, minimalist approach, which has resulted in the checks that are now being applied not only between Britain and the North but between Britain and other EU states. It is a minimalist agreement that has resulted in the British food and drinks industry losing £2 billion in trade with the EU in the first six months of this year. That is the damage that is being inflicted by Brexit.

The lack of an agreement — one which could minimise significantly the checks on east-west trade — was a choice that was made by the British Government with their eyes wide open. Despite what some of their Ministers now assert, the protocol was also a choice that was made by the British Government with their eyes wide open. It was negotiated, agreed and put in place to, among other things, prevent a hard border on this island; a border that would see those same checks that are required at ports being performed on land. That is the entirely impractical and impossible to enforce alternative to the protocol.

Let us be abundantly clear: those checks are the result of a threadbare agreement on SPS and veterinary regulations between the British Government and the EU and are not due to the protocol. In fact, the protocol protects all-island supply chains that are vital to the agriculture and agri-food processing sectors. Absolutely not one in those sectors would want to see those

checks imposed on land. They want a practical solution that reduces the need for checks. An SPS agreement would deliver that.

SPS agreements are already in place with other countries, and models exist. New Zealand has an equivalence approach to regulations, but some checks are still required. Switzerland has an agreement where, essentially, EU regulations are applied, but checks are minimised. However, business organisations tell us that a bespoke agreement, rather than any of the approaches that other countries have, is what is required to take account of our unique circumstances and the level of trade that there is between Britain and the North.

The British Government have made much of the need to have control over their regulations, while also asserting that they do not intend to drop standards to give them the ability to make trade agreements with other countries. The country with which it is most important to make a trade agreement is the United States, but President Biden has made it clear that that will not come any time soon, and any SPS agreement that is designed to protect the North will not be a barrier to a trade agreement between Britain and the US.

Some discussion has focused on a time-limited arrangement on SPS while other options are considered. Given that any trade agreement, including with the US, is likely to be several years away, that arrangement is there to be explored. Genuine engagement to resolve the issues is vital. Finding a reasonable and practical solution requires pragmatic and flexible approaches. The much-threatened triggering of article 16 will not help that process in any way, shape or form. In fact, it will simply trigger the process that is already happening through the Joint Committee and will require that efforts continue until a solution is found. It will also require specificity in any remedies and will ask why they have been proposed.

Anyone peddling the notion that article 16 gets rid of the protocol or stops it applying is misleading the public, and, possibly, themselves. Unfortunately, at the Tory Party conference this week, the British Government will continue to dial up the rhetoric. We have already heard some of that from Brandon Lewis and David Frost, with unrealistic fantasy assertions, as if they had no part in agreeing what is currently in place. It would better befit them to pay attention to what is going on in the Chamber today, to pay attention to those of us who are actually listening to those whom we represent and setting out realistic and practical ways forward, and to listen to those who have

found opportunities and benefits in the protocol and support it.

It would better befit the DUP to do likewise. Getting rid of the protocol, as that party claims it wants to do, would be a disaster for many food businesses, our agri-food businesses in particular. Triggering article 16 would not solve anything. It would only add to the uncertainty and lack of stability and would damage businesses. The reality is that we all know the protocol is going nowhere. The only way forward is through continued constructive and pragmatic engagement in order to find practical solutions that provide certainty and clarity for businesses and everyone else.

It is time to dial down the rhetoric and for the DUP to put an end to the threats to our institutions that are only about its own opinion polling and deflection from a failed Brexit strategy that supported the most right-wing elements of the Tory party in order to deliver the hard Brexit and poor trade and cooperation agreement that has resulted in the current frictions in trade and necessitated the protocol in the first place.

I urge Members to support the motion. I gave consideration to the amendment, as you would expect, and I welcome the UUP's engagement, but my understanding is that the concept of "at risk" does not apply to SPS but rather to customs and tariffs, so I am unclear on the intent of the amendment; therefore, we cannot support it. I hope the UUP will support the motion, which is, of course, in line with its own protocol alternatives paper.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: I am finished.

Mr Beggs: Thank you for giving way. The —.

Dr Archibald: I have not given way.

Mr Speaker: The Member has not given way. She has finished her contribution [*Laughter.*] She might have had time; I do not know.

Dr Aiken: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "sanitary and phytosanitary standards" and insert:

"for goods at risk, with the aim of reducing checks and paperwork on goods being imported from Great Britain; recognises that this is a realistic and practical way of reducing

checks within the framework of existing international agreements; acknowledges that there is widespread support from businesses here for such an agreement; and calls on the European Union and British Government to negotiate a bespoke agreement to align sanitary and phytosanitary standards for goods at risk."

Mr Speaker: The Member has 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to wind up. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Dr Aiken: I urge the Assembly to accept our amendment and to send a strong message to Brussels, London, Manchester and other European capitals that Northern Ireland should not continue to be used as a bargaining chip. As we heard elsewhere today, time is rapidly running out. Some 10 months after the imposition of the protocol on the people of Northern Ireland, it is well beyond the point that action should be taken. As stated today in another place, the protocol is:

"not working and needs to change".

At the heart of the matter is a very simple premise. If Northern Ireland and the Belfast Agreement are truly the reason for the protocol, all the provisions of the 1998 agreement, North/South, and, particularly, east-west, must be met. The east-west dimension is not a "nice to have", an adjunct or an afterthought. For those of us who have been steadfast in our support of the Belfast Agreement and the institutions, it is the critical element that holds our support, and, above all, it is the core of the consent mechanism.

As Lord Trimble, architect of the peace agreement we now have, said today, there are times when Governments have to repudiate agreements that have been made — when they do not work. This is one of them. The fact that the protocol is not working should not be in any doubt to anyone.

The pernicious "best of both worlds" mantra that is used time and again does no one in Northern Ireland any good. The protocol is not sustainable and is not durable.

Our party has, time and time again, put forward practical solutions for how we deal with maintaining open borders across these islands. That, until recently, our proposals have been ignored and denigrated by the EU in general, and by Dublin in particular, has given us no pleasure. That many of our ideas have now

worked their way into the UK Government's Command Paper and mirror thinking such as that of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) should, again, come as no surprise to those who want to see Northern Ireland work. Our proposals are based on the size of the Northern Ireland economy in relation to the total size of EU and UK GDP. We achieve less than 0.02% of that combined GDP, which should show any unbiased or objective observer that the risk of goods, particularly agricultural goods, of any sort contaminating the single market was and is minute.

Furthermore, unlike food products coming from third countries such as in the Middle East and North Africa or Thailand or Kenya, these food products are coming from our own nation, a nation that has standards at the same level or, indeed, has better standards, especially in areas such as animal welfare and environmental standards, than much of the rest of the European Union. That is why we, as a party, urge that the principle of risk, rather than political ideology, be the foundation stone of whatever revised agreement comes after the protocol is confined to the very large dustbin of failed treaties. We propose that, based on risk, a bespoke SPS treaty between the UK and the European Union be created. A bespoke arrangement could eliminate much of the friction currently being experienced and include a labelling programme for goods coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, if the European Union is really so scared of cross-contamination. Quite simply, this would mean labelling products that are bound only for Northern Ireland and not for the EU single market as being, "For UK sale only".

We would create a specific criminal offence to knowingly export goods designed for the UK internal market into the EU single market. This would get us beyond the absurdity of the likes of Sainsbury's, which has no stores in the Irish Republic, having to apply rules and regulations as if Northern Ireland were a foreign country. It is not; it is part of the United Kingdom. To ease EU concerns, we would also like to see an indemnity for a breach of the single market, where the UK could undertake to indemnify the EU if it were found that Northern Ireland had been used to export non-compliant goods via the land border on the island of Ireland into the EU single market. These are sensible and limited measures that we should all be calling for. Are we really saying that cross-border shoppers from Sligo, Letterkenny and Dublin buying their groceries in Newry and Belfast threatens the very existence and integrity of the European Union? Of course not.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Not just at the moment.

Will Frontex, the EU frontier force, be stopping every Republic of Ireland-registered car at the border to check that their sausages and M&S fish pies are EU-compliant?

Yes, please.

Mr O'Toole: The Member is focusing on goods in supermarkets, which, obviously, is a particular issue regarding supply, but will he accept that if, as his amendment indicates, all SPS standards were based on what his party calls in the amendment a "goods at risk" test, that would also include dairy herds in Fermanagh and upland sheep herds in the Mourne and Sperrins? Out of interest, would they too be aligned to GB rules with there being an at-risk test?

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for his intervention. The question of "goods at risk" applies to all goods. This the issue: where is the risk now? Where is the risk to Northern Ireland sheep in Scotland? Where is the risk to pedigree cattle in Scotland going for market? Where is the risk of having multiple tags on ears or whatever it happens to be? Where is that risk? I see that the Agriculture Minister is here, and, no doubt, he will talk about this later. Where is the risk? Quite simply, there is not any.

Let me continue with my remarks. I was about to ask, "How absurd is that?". I say it again: how absurd, indeed, is the idea that there is any risk? It is as absurd as having to have Northern Ireland treated as a foreign country within our own nation by an external organisation that has demonstrated that it is more interested in restricting our access to medicines, controlling our state aid rules and making orders about machinery standards, all the while pontificating that it is, somehow, beneficial and supportive of the Belfast Agreement, when it clearly is not.

3.30 pm

As an Assembly, will you join us, support the amendment and call for a properly thought-out, risk-based SPS — one that is not designed to penalise Northern Ireland consumers, but which seeks to prevent further trade diversion — an agreement that is grounded in the practicalities of our existing markets and logistic systems, and which allows for no or, at best, minimal barriers, North/South as well as east-west? We have a choice today; let us make it.

Mr Irwin: In many ways, much could be made of Sinn Féin's motion and the amendment before the House and their recognition of the problems that the protocol presents to everyday life in Northern Ireland. They certainly represent a major change on behalf of parties in the House who have moved from a position of wishing for the rigorous implementation of the protocol to wanting comprehensive change. That is a welcome change of heart. It proves what the DUP has been saying consistently from the start: the protocol is not the solution but the problem.

The issue of phytosanitary checks is important. I have taken many calls from farmers, buyers, machinery salespeople and people in the construction sector who have been hugely inconvenienced, in both time and money, as a result of those most unnecessary checks in the United Kingdom. I have made many representations to DAERA officials on the issue. We must remember that we remain within what has been termed "a grace period". It is therefore vital that, in the near future, such checks are not stepped up or intensified, but rather, as we have been solidly making the case, binned completely. Efforts must be concentrated on processes and solutions that respect the constitutional and economic position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom.

It is also worth stating that the issues referred to in the motion are only one part of the problem. There are many other checks and regulations that do considerable harm to the passage of trade. We must remember that Northern Ireland is subject to more checks than the EU's largest port, Rotterdam. That is by no means a reasonable or practical arrangement, especially when we continue to be within grace periods. Even in this grace period, there are still some 2,500 common health entry documents being completed per week. Experts predict that that will rise to 25,000 per week, which will be simply unworkable. Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs officials have made representations to the Agriculture Committee on a number of occasions in which they have stated clearly that there is not the capacity to process that magnitude of paperwork. It is therefore, by any reasonable assessment, unrealistic and unworkable.

Regardless of any of the arguments, there are undeniable facts as to the importance of the mainland GB market to Northern Ireland. Figures from 2018 show the value of that trade to be £13.4 billion in goods and services. That is a vital trade corridor and one which, everyone will agree, must be protected. The fact that

consumers have reported to me that suppliers have ceased that trading partnership simply due to the paperwork is most concerning and, in pure economic terms, a backward and negative step. Of course, many suppliers have navigated the considerable paperchase, but the result of that has been drastically hiked prices to reflect the significant increase in administrative work. That has meant consumers paying more, which is another negative impact and further proves that the protocol must go, given its impact.

In recent days, there have been rumblings in the media of the potential for change. We await any outworkings. However, it is vital that any and all efforts remain focused on restoring unfettered access within the United Kingdom with measures that respect the economic and constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Toole: I and my party support today's motion. We have consistently been in favour of a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement between the EU and the UK as an essential and urgent means of smoothing out the issues related to the movement of goods, specifically agri-food products, across the Irish Sea. We have said that from early on, as have other parties in the House. I only wish that others, including the Ministers opposite, had been more vocal about supporting such an agreement earlier.

In the many millions, possibly billions, of words that have been written on Brexit, specifically on the Irish issues related to it, very few people, even the most hard-line Brexiteers, some of whom we have with us in the Chamber today, have ever realistically argued that a hard border for SPS standards could be put in on the island of Ireland. By "hard border", I mean a situation in which one jurisdiction on the island of Ireland diverges sharply in its sanitary and phytosanitary rules: for example, as part of the UK, which is seeking a trade deal with the US. It has rarely been stated that we could have divergence on the island of Ireland that would be manageable or logistically possible, yet that is the upshot of some of what has been said today.

That is also the upshot, as far as I understand it, of some of what is in the UUP amendment. Like the Member who moved the motion, I engaged in detail with the UUP amendment. I am keen to hear more from the UUP on the issue and welcome the fact that it is engaging on it, but I am unclear as to what the amendment does. The concept of goods at risk relates to customs movements rather than SPS

checks, so we cannot support the amendment for that reason.

As I said, no one has ever —.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am happy to give way, but very briefly, as I do not have much time.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member not realise that we are in danger of the EU and the UK continuing to butt heads and that there needs to be a bespoke arrangement that recognises the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, the Belfast Agreement and the stability of our politics, or else we are destined to have trade difficulties and political difficulties?

Mr O'Toole: I do not disagree with anything that the Member has just said, but that is not what is in the tabled amendment. For the purposes of plant and animal health, the island of Ireland has been a single epidemiological unit since there have been rules and controls on plant and animal health. There have never been two divergent sets of rules on the island of Ireland. For years, long before I was in this place, when I was flying home from London, one of the first things that I would hear when I landed at Belfast City Airport or Aldergrove was, "If you have got any plant or animal products, make sure that you report them". That was long before Brexit or the protocol was a twinkle in anyone's eye, so the principle that we have a single epidemiological unit on this island has long been there.

I will not rehearse ancient history, but I am sure that many Members, including those opposite, remember the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak of 2001 or the BSE crisis of the 1990s, both of which illustrated not just the need for SPS alignment on the island but the sectoral demand for solutions that reflect the uniquely intertwined nature of the island's agri-food sectors. I could, of course, quote the late Dr Paisley's famous remark about there being British people but Irish cattle here, but I will not, although I think that I just have.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will not give way, I am afraid, because I want to make progress and have given way once to a Member from his party.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the debate on the so-called Irish Sea border is the fact that we have tended to focus on the wrong things. As I said, no one has ever convincingly

argued that it would be logistically possible to have an SPS border on the island, never mind the political or economic consequences of having one. I could, for example, quote multiple UK policy statements on the subject that go right back to August 2017 and the first detailed position paper from the UK Government on SPS and the Irish border, which stated:

"The extent and complexity of third country SPS and related checks would clearly not be appropriate or consistent with the UK and the EU's shared objectives to avoid a hard border for the movement of goods".

I can even quote from a document from October 2019, back when Boris Johnson was the flavour of the month with Members opposite, although he now seems to be the flavour of today, at least, with them. In a letter to the then EU Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, Boris Johnson outlined proposals for revising the backstop, which led to the protocol about which Members opposite are now so furious. His proposal says:

"Third, it provides for the potential creation of an all-island regulatory zone on the island of Ireland, covering all goods including agrifood. For as long as it exists, this zone would eliminate all regulatory checks for trade in goods between Northern Ireland and Ireland"

— by which he means the Republic of Ireland

"by ensuring that goods regulations in Northern Ireland are the same as those in the rest of the EU."

There, we come to the point. I am afraid that it is not possible. If we accept that we need the same SPS rules on the island of Ireland to preserve our agri-food industry and the single epidemiological unit, we simply cannot pretend that the EU single market does not exist. We need a bespoke deal. Why not pull the existing Swiss deal off the shelf? If people do not like that, fine; let us negotiate a bespoke one.

The simplest and most straightforward way to remove 80% of the checks on the Irish Sea, which we should all want to do, is through an agreement on SPS. That is the most logical thing that should happen. Let us get around the table and agree it. Members opposite should stop engaging in histrionics over removing the protocol. Let us sit down, get the UK and the EU to negotiate that SPS agreement, and we might, instead of bringing down Stormont and

threatening political instability, remove some of those checks in time for Christmas. Would that not be a good idea?

Mr Blair: As a society that is, at least sometimes, still divided — I hardly need to remind the House of that — Northern Ireland works best through sharing and interdependence. It works best when people interact and when businesses have supply chains and sales both North/South and east-west. However, Brexit, particularly a hard Brexit, was always going to bring boundaries and create friction in trading arrangements.

Once the UK Government and Parliament determined that the UK would operate outside the single market and the customs union, sadly, the dividing line on the map between the UK and the European Union's economic zone was inevitable. The protocol, therefore, is the response to the choices made around Brexit and the prior rejection of earlier and better or, at least, less harsh alternatives. On a purely pragmatic basis, managing checks on the Irish Sea, which has several crossing points, is easier than on land, where there are over 250 crossing points, but any de facto border was always, to some degree at least, going to cut across some people's sense of identity and create friction in the movement of goods.

Brexit has profoundly altered the trading relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The Food and Drink Federation reported that British food and drink exports to the EU fell by £2 billion in the first three months of 2021, with dairy products alone plummeting by 90%. Thanks to the protocol, Northern Ireland has been able to trade freely with the European Union, and so it is not as impacted as the rest of the UK by the new trading environment. As such, in 2021, imports from Northern Ireland to Ireland have, it seems, increased by 77.6%, which equates to a value of £663 million. The protocol is not without its —

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Blair: I will, briefly.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member very much for raising the trading issues. When we look at the statistics on the diversion of trade that came from Wales to the Republic of Ireland and on the diversion of trade that now comes to Northern Ireland, we have to be very cautious about quoting those figures in the Assembly. We need to have more detail and a greater understanding of what is happening. The idea

of the diversion of trade, again, reads to the question of triggering article 16.

Mr Blair: I will come on to article 16 and to the actions taken and proposals made by my party in the previous months and years.

The protocol is not without its challenges. Sanitary and phytosanitary checks constitute the main challenge for the Northern Ireland protocol. Therefore, negotiating a bespoke UK-EU veterinary agreement must be a priority. Such an agreement would ease the pressures arising from the Northern Ireland protocol. Many independent countries, including Switzerland and New Zealand, for example, have bilateral veterinary agreements with the European Union and face lower, non-tariff barriers than the UK faces, despite the UK's high standards. The UK can negotiate a veterinary agreement with the EU as a supplementary agreement to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Negotiating a comprehensive UK-EU veterinary agreement would offer help to all the UK food exporters who are manifestly struggling to engage with European markets. For Northern Ireland, progress in that area would address SPS issues as well.

As I referred to moments ago in my response to the Member, the Alliance party has consistently called for a UK-EU veterinary agreement and has escalated that issue up the political agenda of both Westminster and the Assembly. Calls to invoke article 16 of the protocol or to suspend parts of its implementation will ultimately lead to a dead end and will not scrap the protocol. However, if that happens and that article 16 option is further pursued, there will be a further period of protracted negotiations and uncertainty.

3.45 pm

It is worth repeating that the protocol is merely a symptom of the problem, not the cause. Solutions are available if we think creatively and work together. With that in mind, my Alliance colleagues and I will support the motion.

Ms Sheerin: I obviously support the motion, which is effectively about Brexit. Brexit is a product of an ideology that is having real-life implications for us and the people whom we represent. Presumably, ideology is what got us all into politics, but your ideology must complement delivery for constituents. If it does not, you need to question what you are doing.

The EU was and is not perfect, but EU membership was good for the North. It was

good for our communities, local infrastructure, businesses and farmers. We all knew that Brexit would be bad for local businesses. We knew it in 2016, we knew it during the long nights of missed deadlines and drawn-out negotiations, and we know it now. However, we are where we are and the most sensible thing for us all to do is to set ideology aside and look for a resolution. We need to be responsible, dial down the rhetoric and support those whom we represent.

Today, we have more attempts by David Frost to appease unionists with talk of threats to trigger article 16. The British Government are talking about Brexit in the context of trade deals and doing business with the rest of the world, when we all know that, for the Tories and the other policy architects behind it, Brexit was about ego. It harks back to the good old days of empire when Britannia ruled the waves. Racism, xenophobia, scaremongering and hatred were at its very heart. Families who made their homes in the North, who worked here and contributed to our local communities, left en masse because of the rhetoric that surrounded the referendum.

Britain left the EU and all the benefits that it had brought in order to try to re-establish itself as a superpower. I do not have a problem with that; wail away. The issue is that it brought the North out with it. We did not vote for Brexit. Community groups contact me every week about the Community Renewal Fund, and our £1 billion PEACE PLUS funding has been jeopardised by the DUP's refusal to attend meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. It is not a mess of our making, but it affects us. We have to make the best of a bad situation, be innovative and creative and look for solutions for the people whom we all represent.

Aligning SPS checks makes sense for businesses in the North and in Britain. Our agri-food sector in the North makes up a massive proportion of our economy and employs 100,000 people. We know how badly our processing plants are struggling because of a lack of workforce, again as a result of Brexit and the fact that so many of our migrant worker population left our shores in its wake.

Unionism is unhappy that, in some instances, North/South trade has replaced east-west trade. When I speak to constituents, local businesses and producers, I find that trade is trade, and we can always do with more of it. That is why we in Sinn Féin tabled the motion. We want to see practical, workable resolutions to the issues that have beset our farm businesses since the onset of Brexit.

I have spoken before about the fact that I am from a farming background. Beef, lamb and dairy produce account for roughly half of the food that is produced in the North, and I am acutely aware of the specifics of one of those sectors in particular. In January, I received a number of calls from blackface sheep farmers across the North. They had bought yoe lambs in Scotland before Christmas, only to find that they could not take them home when they had reached the appropriate age in January because they were not scrapie-monitored. That is a costly and stressful exercise for local farmers. It takes seven years to get the scrapie monitoring qualification, which imposes another cost on Scottish farmers who are trying to sell their lambs to the North. That is one example of how different standards between our two islands can have a real impact on our producers in counties Derry, Tyrone and Down.

We have seen increased trade North and South, which is so beneficial and, in many instances, makes sense from an environmental and efficiency viewpoint.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: I will.

Mr Beggs: The Member says that North/South trade is beneficial. Some trade can be good, and I have no difficulty with that. Will the Member accept, however, that much of that trade is more expensive, that it costs customers more, that customers can no longer get products that they are used to getting and that they are dissatisfied?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Sheerin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for his intervention. I remind him that that is the result of Brexit. I will also say that the milk that I get from down the road is, in most instances, better than the milk that has air miles added to it. I have not had that complaint from constituents.

I was going on to say that aligned SPS checks might allow even more trade, which we should all welcome.

Mr Harvey: Today's motion shows the first signs of Sinn Féin's acceptance that the Northern Ireland protocol, a solution that it requested be fully implemented, is not working. As far as that is concerned, I welcome the fact that other parties in the Chamber seem to be waking up to the devastating realities of the

protocol for their constituents and particularly for their business communities.

Unfortunately, the problem goes far deeper and is far greater than the motion suggests. We have seen issues with livestock movement, medicines, pets, travel, supermarket produce, horticulture products and Amazon packages. We have seen damage to the Belfast Agreement and political tension in our communities. All parties and Governments involved must now accept that the problem does not need a sticking plaster but a proper solution — and fast.

The motion acknowledges that paperwork and checks on goods entering Northern Ireland from GB need to be reduced. On goods that will not enter the EU single market, checks and paperwork do not need to be reduced: they need to be removed. We need a bespoke agreement between our Government and the European Union, as the motion highlights, that will remove the Irish Sea border, remove the damage being done to our economy and future trading prospects and remove the prospect of an unaccountable foreign power having any say in the running of our nation. No other nation on earth would countenance such a situation, and neither should we.

We must look for solutions. One potential solution is the development of a system to ensure that UK products do not access the EU single market through Northern Ireland. There should be no difficulty in our committing to protecting the EU single market if the EU, in turn, permits the proper functioning of the UK single market. Both single markets should be protected. One does not need to be over the other, as is currently the case.

Solutions need to be found fast. In recent months, we have seen at first hand GB businesses stop trading with NI because there is too much hassle and additional cost. The protocol reduces choice for the NI consumer, which, in turn, increases prices and reduces NI's business competitiveness. The simple way to resolve the matter is for nationalist and republican Ministers to recognise that the Irish Sea border is contrary to the Belfast Agreement. It costs us and those who elect us to this place, unionist and nationalist, £850 million a year. I urge Sinn Féin, SDLP and Alliance Ministers to join us in calling not for rigorous implementation but for London and Brussels to remove the Irish Sea border.

Mr Poots: It is good to have the opportunity to speak on the issue, and it is good to see Sinn Féin moving its position. When we debated the

issue last year, there was a great call for the rigorous implementation of the protocol. Now, we have the recognition that rigorous implementation would be a complete and utter disaster for the people of Northern Ireland.

We have not had a rigorous implementation of it thus far. We have had all of the grace periods. Were they to end, there would be a shortage of food on our shelves, costs would go up for the lowest-paid people in Northern Ireland, and there would be devastating harm to all the people of Northern Ireland. It is good to see that recognition.

It is strange to see the SDLP and the Alliance Party still clinging to the rickety vessel of the protocol even though it is clearly a sinking ship. We need to have some realisation from Mr O'Toole, Mr Blair and others that this is not good for Northern Ireland.

The Member said that the amendment from the Ulster Unionists is looking for a hard border on the island of Ireland, as are others. I do not know anybody who is looking for a hard border on the island of Ireland. I do not see any need for a hard border on the island of Ireland. If we are talking about the protection of the European Union single market, that can be easily done without the protocol, which needs to be dismantled quickly. I call on David Frost to not talk any more about introducing article 16 but to get it introduced and then negotiate from there with the European Union to completely and utterly dismantle the protocol and the damage that it is doing to the Northern Ireland people.

We bring in some £13.4 billion of goods every year from the European Union, and we bring in £7.9 billion from everywhere else, so there is basically a 2:1 split in the import of goods. How is it good for the people of Northern Ireland to have checks on two thirds of the goods that are coming in? Clearly, it is not, and people need to reflect on that. That cannot be good. We have 419,000 HGVs coming into Northern Ireland every year. This year, thus far, we have had 25,000 common health entry documents (CHEDs) in six months, and those now involve 2,500 checks per week. That cannot be good for business in Northern Ireland. People need to reflect on that, because what is not good for business is not good for consumers. If you are serious about representing people who are in need and people who are on the breadline, you will stand with everybody else in seeking the removal of the protocol. Be honest with the European Union. Be honest that you got it wrong, that the European Union got it wrong and that we need to remove it.

Some people ask, "What do we do instead?". Well, what is placing the single market at risk? What are the goods that will cause danger to the single market? It is certainly not the food that ends up in our supermarkets and our corner shops in Northern Ireland. It is certainly not the 100,000 trees that were supposed to come into Northern Ireland but have been cancelled. They were to help us make our contribution towards reducing our carbon footprint. It is certainly not 97% of the sheep that are no longer able to enter Northern Ireland as a result of the protocol. Perhaps Ms Sheerin could have told the farmers who were in contact with her, "This is purely down to the Northern Ireland protocol, which we supported".

Ms Sheerin: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Poots: That is a fact of life. That is what is causing the problem. Yes, Ms Sheerin.

Ms Sheerin: What caused the protocol, Mr Poots?

Mr Poots: The protocol is a political manipulation that was brought in to punish the United Kingdom for leaving the European Union, and we need to recognise that. It was driven by Simon Coveney, Leo Varadkar and people like that, and it was done by them to damage people who live on the island of Ireland — the people who live in Northern Ireland — whom they claim to support.

Realistically, we need to ensure that we roll this back. We need to roll this back for the sheep farmers in the Sperrins, because 97% of the sheep that came in during the previous year could not come in last year because of the Northern Ireland protocol. It is no wonder that farmers in County Tyrone are contacting me and saying, "Will you please try to do something for us, because the people whom we voted in to do something for us are not doing it?". Perhaps Ms Sheerin needs to reflect on that.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: I have given way once already, Ms Sheerin. I was kind to you.

How do we fix this thing? There is absolutely no issue in checking goods going into the European Union — none whatever with goods that come through Northern Ireland to Great Britain. We will facilitate that. That does not need to happen on the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That can happen at our ports, but it is on goods that will enter the

European Union, not goods that are staying in Northern Ireland, because there is no risk whatever to the single market from those goods.

I apologise, Mr Speaker; I thought that I had an extra minute.

Mr Speaker: OK. You did have an extra minute. *[Laughter.]* If you want to take an extra minute to finish, you are free to do so.

Mr Poots: No, thank you.

Mr Speaker: All right then. We are very kind here, you know?

4.00 pm

Mr McGlone: As the debate winds on, you would nearly think that we would want to be in a place where you had free movement of goods, people, capital and services. Do you remember those? They used to be there before the Brexit that people voted for. Let us not dupe ourselves into thinking that people do not live with the consequences of their votes.

Even today, I heard yer man Frost over in England. He is coming off with nonsense about — what did he say? — the:

"long bad dream of our EU membership".

He should explain that to the people in England who cannot find goods on the shelves in the supermarkets, who cannot get petrol, who cannot get drivers, who cannot get butchers and who cannot get workers. The list is endless.

He, by his hand, and others signed up to and worked for the Brexit they are now delivering. They replaced what was there with Brexit and created their own living nightmare.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. Would he agree that one of the things that Brexit brought in, which we did not hear about from the Member who spoke previously, the Agriculture Minister, was the effect on Northern Ireland farmers of the potential loss of common agricultural policy rural payments and, secondly, the loss of EU labour, particularly in our agri-food industry, not least in his own constituency?

Mr Poots: It is up by 6% —

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McGlone: I am sure that the Minister will pop up after a while and say that he is going to deliver a whole lot of money to those farmers to supplement that. I take it that is a nod, Mr Poots.

Mr Speaker: There is no ministerial response to this.

Mr McGlone: Just to get back to the debate, I welcome the opportunity to debate the need to resolve the ongoing dispute over the level of sanitary and phytosanitary checks and the paperwork that are required for goods being imported from Britain. Those goods include products of animal origin, plants, plant products, food and feed of non-animal products and high-risk food of non-animal origin. We should be clear, however, that the new checks and paperwork that are required for those goods are a direct result of that Brexit. The majority of people in Northern Ireland did not vote for that Brexit, and the majority of people in the North recognise the fact that the protocol is the direct outcome of that Brexit.

The EU, and this is reality, has a duty and responsibility to protect the single market on behalf of its member states. The EU and the British Government also have a duty and responsibility to protect the Good Friday Agreement, as do we. The Brexit protocol is an integral part of the withdrawal agreement that was negotiated between the British Government and the EU. It attempts to meet those duties and responsibilities. In the unlikely event of Boris Johnson reaching for the nuclear option of triggering article 16, those duties and responsibilities will remain. They will still require agreement between the EU and the British Government on how to manage the situation.

The debate gives the Assembly an opportunity to demonstrate that the majority of elected representatives here do not support the position as articulated by the DUP, which, prompted by Mr Allister, is threatening the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement if the protocol is not abandoned. I suspect that that positioning has as much to do with its anxieties over its electoral prospects as it does a desire to resolve any outstanding issues on SPS checks.

That having been said, since the Brexit protocol was agreed, there have been ongoing disputes and delays over its implementation and the level of SPS checks and paperwork that are required. However, the SPS checks and

paperwork are there to protect that EU single market not just in the present but in the future. The cheerleaders for Brexit in the DUP may not like it, but the reality is that the prospect of a divergence in standards between what is allowed in the UK market and what is allowed in the EU single market requires checks to be made on those goods.

There is a mechanism for working through the difficulties. There is a Joint Committee.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I am sorry. I am running behind time, and I have a bit more to say.

That is why agreement between the EU and the British Government to align sanitary and phytosanitary standards for goods is a realistic and practical way to resolve concerns about the levels of checks and paperwork involved in importing goods from Britain.

The British Government's recent Command Paper from July leaves open the possibility of an appropriately designed SPS agreement, setting out where UK and EU SPS legislation provided for the same high standards. It allows for providing a means to identify areas of significant difference, where the level of risk-based controls might need to be higher. So, it is possible that agreement could be found between the British Government and the EU to align those standards. However, the British Government's unilateral declaration of an indefinite extension to the grace periods is certainly not a long-term solution. It can only allow time for further discussions, which, I hope, will take place. The EU is currently engaged in those discussions with the British Government, and that is the background against which we are having this debate.

The SDLP wants to see an agreement reached. We want to see positivity. Where there are difficulties and problems between the two sides, we want to see those ironed out. We want to move on in order to create what is needed for our entire community, which is stability and a positive way forward. The Assembly has an opportunity to indicate its preferred solution today. Sin an méid, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Beggs: The Northern Ireland protocol is not working. It is significantly disrupting trade east-west. A rethink is needed. It is costing our businesses and, increasingly, it will cost our constituents in their pockets as they buy the essential items in their daily lives. We all have to remember that we have had only a small

taster of the bureaucracy, disruption and cost that is likely to occur.

I am aware, for instance, that many hauliers have stopped using the port of Dublin because it is implementing the fuller level of protocol testing and paperwork and are coming in via Cairnryan instead. There is another level that is yet to be experienced by Northern Ireland customers. There are wider aspects that are yet to come. The regulations around the parcels industry will not work and will not be tolerated. The sooner everyone recognises that, the sooner we can get down to practical talking to get solutions before there is a huge impact on our economy and our politics.

I draw Members' attention to the Ulster Unionist amendment, which asks for:

"a bespoke agreement to align sanitary and phytosanitary standards for goods at risk."

At the moment, the level of bureaucracy and paperwork is ridiculous. I know of a small motor factor in Larne, who used to ring up his supplier in GB to ask them to post over an item. He cannot do that any more because items have to come as part of a pallet load in a minimum order of £1,000. By the way, the distribution costs have doubled as well. That is the outworking of the protocol. When our constituents go to buy items for their cars, they will all be paying for it. That is the reality of what is being delivered. What are the risks? Are container loads of car parts going across the border? Were that the case, I would fully understand why such levels of scrutiny might be required of customers who are abusing the system. Why can we not have an at-risk system, where goods that are clearly being traded locally do not get caught up in bureaucracy?

The Belfast Agreement has been used and abused. Clearly, the Irish Government, the EU and others have focused solely on North/South issues and ignored the east-west aspect, which is disrupting politics and will increasingly do so. As others have said, UK standards are frequently higher than those in the EU, particularly around animal welfare. I am curious as to why Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Alliance Party want the full implementation of the protocol, and why they chose that very dangerous language rather than looking for practical solutions that will address all the concerns. That is not what is being looked for. Too often, we have heard that they want the full implementation of the protocol. The protocol could be adapted and changed to cover at-risk

products if there were a willingness to do so. I only wish that that were the case.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I certainly will.

Mr O'Toole: First, I have heard the phrase "rigorous implementation" about 10,000 times from unionist politicians but it was mentioned once, in one letter. The protocol should be implemented in a way that works; that is what the UK and the EU should agree. When it comes to practical solutions, does he not agree with me and acknowledge that his proposal, which seems to be to reopen an entire international treaty between one departing member of what was a 28-member regulatory bloc and is now a 27-member regulatory bloc, is not entirely practical? That would involve going to the Finnish Government, the Danish Government, the Maltese Government, the French Government, the Polish Government, the Cypriot Government and every other Government in the EU and saying, "Lads, are you happy that we reopen this treaty?" That is not a practical solution. Does he recognise that?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Beggs: There is a mechanism to change and do away with the ridiculous parts of the protocol, but that is not the route that has been taken to date. You can stick to the full implementation of the protocol and end up having nothing, because there is a danger that you will simply cost your constituents, cost the economy and cost the body politic in Northern Ireland, while ignoring the particular special circumstances in Northern Ireland. I do not hear any regard being taken of that. The at-risk issue is not being taken into consideration.

If containerloads of TVs were being sneaked through the Republic and into Europe to create unfair competition, I could understand. We would need to stop that and control it; not a problem. Why, however, do we have to stop Marks and Spencer bringing their Christmas fare into their local supermarkets? That is what the protocol is doing. I would like someone from the Alliance Party, in particular, to answer that. That party may suffer that particular aspect more than others when many of its voters recognise the difficulties of getting some of their Christmas fare. Increasingly, some of its members are becoming more European and nationalist, rather than recognising what their constituents need.

I want to talk about medicines in particular. On 1 January 2022, 300 medicines will potentially be discontinued. What are we to do? We need a practical solution. It is not economic for businesses to supply cheap medicines made in the UK to Northern Ireland. Will we just pay for more expensive medicines from elsewhere, reduce the limited money for our health service and force people to change their medicines? They may already be taking medicines —.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Beggs: We need practical outworkings to deal with the situation. I support our amendment.

Mr Muir: I support the motion. We were told that the Prime Minister would "Get Brexit Done", but the reality is that it has just started. We are seeing the impact of leaving the world's largest trading bloc. Brexit did not have to be like this and, indeed, the proponents of Brexit were content to promote a single market approach. Instead, we have the hardest of Brexits and a rushed Trade and Cooperation Agreement, with a massive increase in red tape and friction for businesses across the UK. A recent YouGov poll found that only 18% of the public think that Brexit is going well. Indeed, it is difficult to define many silver linings. There are shortages of certain products on supermarket shelves, and the loss of freedom of movement is, as we have seen, causing real issues with skills shortages in numerous sectors across the UK.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member very much for giving way. In his remarks, will he address the fact that his deputy leader called for the full implementation of the protocol? Has his party's stance now changed?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. As one of the other Members said, he is a bit like a broken record in relation to that. I will come on to the implementation of the protocol.

Some food industries in the UK have been upended overnight due to delays and friction in exporting fresh food to the EU. In particular, the fish and shellfish sectors across Great Britain faced a massive drop in exports this year. On the movement of animal and food products, a UK-EU sanitary and phytosanitary agreement is a clear way forward. That would not only smooth the flow of goods across the Irish Sea but benefit consumers and businesses in other parts of the UK, and especially those fresh food

producers that previously had a major market in the EU.

We must also be conscious of the reasons for SPS checks and rules and of why we cannot simply cast them aside as irrelevant. The safety of our food and the security of our agriculture sector depend on that. It is not difficult to see why the EU is not keen to allow free and uncontrolled access into the single market. We need agreed rules to protect and ensure the quality of food products and to ensure animal and plant health. The story of citrus black spot fungus may not seem interesting to people here today, but it was reported on by RTE's Tony Connelly. The fact that, from 1 January 2022, there will be the import of citrus products into the UK from countries where this fungus exists is a case in point.

4.15 pm

Alliance did not support the protocol. It was clear that Remain was a much better solution or, failing that, the backstop, but the DUP famously sank that idea.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Beggs: The Member talked about a fungus, but can he explain why on earth the flow of medicines into Northern Ireland from our GB suppliers needs to be disrupted by the protocol and the bureaucracy involved?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. He will be aware that the EU has proposed a solution to that, and that is what we need to focus on.

We must be constructive and work towards agreed solutions to make the protocol as light-touch as possible. An SPS agreement is a clear way forward. Alliance's MP at Westminster, Dr Stephen Farry, has been pressing since practically the start of the year for such agreements to be progressed to ease frictions. I welcome the news that others are starting to come around to the concept of an SPS or veterinary agreement between the UK and the EU. We need to be clear with the UK Government and speak with one voice on the matter, so today's motion is constructive. Representatives at Westminster also need to make the case, as Stephen has been doing for months, however.

The cliff edges need to go. We need a long-term solution to issues with the protocol.

Repeating standstill agreements cannot go on for ever. We need to have long-term rules for businesses and consumers established. The UK and the EU need to work together as partners to build trust and a way forward that benefits us all. We need agreements, whether they be of a New Zealand or Swiss style, rather than political posturing to address issues with the protocol. Realistically, however, we also need to remember that what works for New Zealand, which is a country that is many thousands of miles away, may not work for us. We share a frontier with the single market. We need real, practical solutions that work with it. Alliance will continue to be constructive here and at Westminster to address those issues and to reduce the friction that Brexit has caused.

Ms Bailey: My goodness, from listening to some of the contributions, Mr Speaker, you might be fooled into thinking that Brexit has had no impact in GB and only on us in Northern Ireland. As others have said, Brexit has been a disaster for the UK: for GB and for Northern Ireland.

Mr Poots: Rubbish.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Ms Bailey: What about petrol stations? What about empty shelves? I could go on. *[Interruption.]* The UK Government had years to prepare for the mess that —

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Ms Bailey: — they made.

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry. Go ahead, Ms Bailey.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The UK Government had years to prepare for the mess that they made, but we all suffer their bluff and bluster as they continue to uphold their mess without our consent. They have repeatedly shown contempt for consent as a principle, so that should not surprise anybody.

For the duration of the Brexit process, we have been bombarded with legislation, statutory instruments and legislative consent motions (LCMs), all rushed through with little, if any, scrutiny time or ability for us to understand fully the impacts of what we were being asked to put through. We have had little or no power in the process. We had no inclusion in the formal negotiations, certainly not at a political level,

because we should also be reminded that we had no Executive. We had no Ministers at the table during those years.

Brexit and its fallout happened to Northern Ireland without our consent. It has been an EU and a UK Government process. The most that we can do is raise our concerns in the hope that somebody will listen. The current negotiated bespoke solution to differing SPS standards across the UK and the EU is the protocol. We know that the EU and the UK view it differently. For effectiveness and workability, its burden remains. It was never going to be problem-free, but that is unsurprising, given that there was never an agreement about what Brexit was.

The Green Party wants to see the protocol further developed to allow Northern Ireland to be best placed to take as much advantage for us as possible. We have seen benefits of the protocol for Northern Ireland already. I will repeat the word "petrol": the recent fuel crisis in GB that did not affect us is just one example.

Work needs to be done now to create the necessary infrastructure to implement customs and SPS checks under the protocol. The AERA Minister need not obstruct that work any further. More than anything, however, our businesses and retailers need clarity, and they are crying out for a workable way forward, not more political intransigence and mess.

The protocol is a bespoke agreement between the EU and the UK that aims to navigate the differing SPS standards, and, undoubtedly, further agreement is needed. It is a sad reflection on our power in this situation that the most that we can do is pass a motion, call out the decision-makers and ask the UK Government and the EU to listen to us. It is a sad reflection on the UK Government and Prime Minister Boris Johnson that they advise British businesses, cheesemakers in particular, to set up their businesses in Europe, rather than allowing and advising them to come to Northern Ireland to access European markets. Even the Prime Minister will not sell the benefits of our position in Northern Ireland, and that is disgraceful indeed. We urgently need to work towards solutions to the mess that is Brexit for us in Northern Ireland.

The Green Party supports the motion but not the amendment. Speaking to those at the grassroots, we found that they feel that the amendment brings further confusion rather than clarity.

Mr Speaker: I call Mike Nesbitt to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. He has five minutes.

Mr Nesbitt: I begin with an apology. I missed the start of the debate. I had a prior engagement elsewhere in the Building with some American students whom I was trying to persuade that our consociational system of government is near perfect and seldom leads to disputes or disagreement in the Chamber. I apologise for missing the opening speeches. However, I have had enough of a flavour of the debate to understand that positions on Brexit and associated issues have not changed much over the last number of years.

I understand that those issues run deep. Some time ago, perhaps a little mischievously, I suggested that, instead of a border down the Irish Sea, we could have one down the Celtic Sea and that checks could be made between Rosslare and the north-western seaports of continental Europe. The reaction on social media was deep and fierce. People were absolutely enraged at the thought that I was suggesting that there could be a check on goods within the single European market, and yet the same people tolerate checks within the internal United Kingdom market. There is a little hypocrisy in that.

It is 2021, five years after the referendum, so I encourage those who remind us that Northern Ireland voted to remain that it was a single, UK-wide referendum. We all took our positions in 2016, and it would not have mattered if the Remain vote in Northern Ireland had hit the sort of percentage that we recorded in 1998 in favour of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. If the UK, generally and overall, had voted to leave, we would still be in the position of having left the EU.

I noted that Mr Harvey talked about the protocol doing damage to the Belfast Agreement of 1998. I simply remind him that his party spent some eight years negotiating it away in what was to become the St Andrews Agreement in 2006 and the St Andrews Act. The DUP has certainly come a long way if it now uses the Belfast Agreement to justify its position and argues that the agreement's fundamentals are so good.

Our amendment is about goods at risk of going from here into the European Union. That, it seems to me, makes enormous sense. We cannot impose on the UK Government restrictions on new trade deals that they may wish to do with countries beyond the European Union.

They may want to do food deals with South America, for example. That has great implications, potentially very negative, for our agri-food business, but Mr Johnson may choose to do that. We are suggesting that we be a bit more focused. We talk about goods at risk. We are suggesting — it has now been accepted by some — that we can make legislative measures, such as saying that, if you deliberately send goods from GB through Northern Ireland into the European Union when you said that they were for consumption in Northern Ireland, you are committing a criminal offence and can be taken to court.

We propose that the UK Government will indemnify the European Union for any damage that may be caused from goods that are entering illegally, even though it is only 0.02% —

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: — of the goods in the European Union, as Mr Aiken pointed out. I will give way very briefly.

Mr O'Toole: I want to clarify a point, because we have not had it yet, on goods at risk. If I understand it correctly, that would apply to goods coming in from GB. If there were a UK-US trade deal that allowed hormone-fed cattle to graze happily on the fields of Scotland and England, under your proposal, would those cattle be allowed to graze happily on the fields of Fermanagh and Tyrone? They would not be allowed to do so on the fields of Cavan and Monaghan under SPS alignment.

Mr Nesbitt: The House would have to decide on that matter. We are giving you practical proposals to overcome that. Do I not get an extra minute, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: No.

Mr Nesbitt: OK. I support the amendment and congratulate Mr McGlone, who has reimagined the honours list. Now you can be a knight, a lord, a baronet, or you can be "yer man".
[Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: I call Declan McAleer to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr McAleer: This has been a very interesting debate with a lot of opinions across the Chamber. It kicked off with my colleague Caoimhe Archibald, who highlighted the need

for practical solutions to reduce checks. She said that the Trade and Cooperation Agreement was a minimalist, threadbare approach and stressed the importance of the protocol to protect the all-Ireland supply chain. She spoke about SPS models throughout the world and how we need a genuine bespoke agreement here to resolve the outstanding issues. She said that triggering article 16 would provoke a discussion phase.

Mr Aiken said that time is running out, that the protocol is not working and that it needs to change. He said that that is important because it is affecting east-west trade.

Mr Irwin said that the protocol is the problem and not the solution. He referenced the scale of checks, called for them to be binned and mentioned the importance of the British market.

Mr O'Toole referenced the importance of the EU-UK SPS agreement. He said that he has never heard any successful argument for SPS land border checks on the island of Ireland. He referred to the fact that, for decades, the island of Ireland has been a single epidemiological unit for animal plant and health, and he said that the Swiss deal could be taken off the shelf.

Mr Blair said that we have a supply chain North/South and east-west, that the protocol is a response to Brexit and that it is easier to have checks at the sea than across a land border of 250 miles. He said that a bespoke EU-UK SPS agreement must be a priority, that article 16 would not stop the protocol and that he supported the motion.

Emma Sheerin talked about EU membership being good for the North and that Brexit was bad. She said that we need a resolution to make the best of a bad situation. She talked about Brexit being driven by an ideology that was bad for here and that had the rhetoric of the old days of the British Empire. She said that an SPS agreement would make sense. She highlighted some of the issues that we face around blackface sheep. She said that alignment would create even more trade, and that would be good.

Harry Harvey talked about the damage done by the protocol and referred to livestock, medicines, food, horticulture, the Good Friday Agreement, the EU and the importance of removing the sea border.

4.30 pm

Minister Poots spoke again about the need to dismantle the protocol by triggering article 16.

He referred to the number of CHEDS coming in and the implications of checks on those for businesses. He said that businesses had not had any particular issues with checks at the ports for goods that were going into the single market but that was not the case for goods staying here.

Mr McGlone talked about the free movement of goods, capital, people and services. He also talked about the implications of Brexit in Britain. He referred to the fact that the majority of people here voted to remain, that the protocol was a product of Brexit and that we have a duty to protect the Good Friday Agreement. He said that, if article 16 were triggered, issues would still remain and that we instead need stability and a positive way forward.

Mr Beggs said that the protocol is not working and that we have only had a taste of its effects here. He said that there are challenges for small businesses, and he gave the example of a car business trying to access parts. He also said that his preference is for an at-risk system.

Mr Muir said that we have had the hardest Brexit here. He said that, in a recent survey, 18% of the public said that they thought it was going well. He highlighted the importance of an SPS veterinary agreement and said that that was the best way forward. He said that, in the referendum, Alliance supported the bid to remain. He also said that long-term rules for businesses need to be established and that the EU and the UK need to work together.

Ms Bailey talked about the Brexit disaster that was imposed on us without our consent and referenced the contempt that has been shown to us by the British Government in that regard. She referred to the huge number of statutory regulations and LCMs that have been rushed through. Indeed, the Committee was at the front of that over a number of months in order to get a functioning rule book ready for transition day. She also referred to the protocol benefits. She said that businesses need clarity and that the protocol, itself, is a bespoke agreement.

Mr Nesbitt, who wound on the amendment, said that positions had not changed much. He outlined his proposition for a Celtic sea border and his preference for an arrangement to deal with goods that are at risk.

That was a bit of a run-through of some of the main issues raised. From my perspective, as Sinn Féin's agriculture and rural affairs spokesperson, we want seamless trade east-west, because 50% of our agri-food product goes across the water to Britain, so we need

two-way trade. We also need North/South trade, because our processing lines are North/South. Some £1.3 billion in trade is done North/South. The figures are very startling. We import about half a million pigs from the South into the North, and we export about half a million sheep. Upwards of a billion litres of milk are exported into the South every year as well. We have seen the scrapie monitoring crisis and the pedigree issues, and those need to be resolved.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member on the Bench opposite would not let me back in after he asked what my constituents said to me when we talked about the scrapie monitoring issue. I did not have to tell any of my constituents what had caused the issue, because they were all able to identify Brexit as the problem. Furthermore, while it was a huge inconvenience last year for people who had bought sheep in Scotland to not be able to take them home, this year, trade has never been so good, and there is great demand for yoe lambs that are reared here.

Mr McAleer: I want to deal with the issue of leaving the EU, which was touched on as well. In my role as spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs, I deal with a lot of people in farming and rural communities. Certainly, Brexit has put all of us on the back foot. For example, the South of Ireland has negotiated a €10.7 billion chunk of the common agricultural policy to spend over the next seven years, whilst here in the North we do not know what will happen with funding beyond the lifetime of the current British Parliament. Also, we are looking at PEACE PLUS as a possible replacement for the rural development programme. However, that will be at risk if the DUP decides to pull down these institutions. The Finance Minister said the other day that, if that is the case, there is a possibility that it may not be signed off at the NSMC.

As for how all this came about, it absolutely is a product of Brexit. It is also a product of Britain setting the scene for divergence from EU regulations and rules. We saw that when the British Government steadfastly refused to include minimum standards in the Agriculture Act. That was the first sign of it: they refused to include in the Agriculture Act minimum standards for imports. They then put their face against a veterinary agreement. The British Government are setting the scene to diverge from EU regulations and to enter into trade agreements across the rest of the world. We saw that in the case of Australia, where the regulations differ from those of the EU. That is where the protocol is an important protection

against those imports coming into the North. The challenge is that the British market, which is so important to us, could be filled with products from other countries that the British Government have entered into arrangements with.

We have seen that the divergence in regulations can have a negative impact. Whilst we have left the EU and have the protocol to facilitate trade, we have different immigration rules on the island of Ireland. The British Home Office rules apply in the North, and that is causing mayhem in the agri-food and processing industry. We now have a situation in which 25,000 pigs are backed up on farms across the North because we have a shortage of butchers and processors in the meat plants. That is causing a crisis in the pork industry. We are heading into the harvest, but seasonal workers will not be able to come here this year because of the British immigration rules that apply in the North.

Minister Poots wrote to the Home Office about immigration. The Committee received the reply from the Home Office. It is contemptuous and shameful that the Home Office will not look at any relaxation of the visa rules, expedition of the tier 2 visas or including butchers and meat processors on the shortage occupation list.

I thank everybody for their contributions today. It was a good and wide-ranging debate. I agree with Mr Nesbitt that positions have not changed greatly, but it was very helpful to discuss the motion today.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 9; Noes 75.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Aiken and Mr Nesbitt

NOES

Mr Allister, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Catney, Mr Clarke, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn,

Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Ms Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Ms Hunter, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Archibald and Mr McAleer

Question accordingly negated.

5.00 pm

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 29.

AYES

Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Ms Sheerin

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Harvey and Mr Wells.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports a comprehensive and bespoke agreement between the European Union and the British Government to align sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards, with the aim of reducing checks and paperwork on goods being imported from Britain; recognises that this is the only realistic and practical way of reducing checks within the framework of existing international agreements; acknowledges that there is widespread support from businesses here for such an agreement; and calls on the European Union and the British Government to negotiate a bespoke agreement to align sanitary and phytosanitary standards.

Mr Speaker: Members should take their ease for a couple of minutes.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

Medical Abortions: Provision of an Early Access Point

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

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health, following Informing Choices' decision to cease its provision of a central access point for early medical abortions (EMA), to outline the actions that he will take to ensure that an interim service is in place.

Mr Speaker: Members will be aware that there are a number of legal proceedings related to the provision of abortion services in Northern Ireland, including one that is before the High Court today. I am sure that Members will show respect for the respective roles of the Assembly and the courts and will avoid any comments that could prejudice those proceedings. In accordance with the sub judice rule, Members should limit their comments strictly to the subject of the question, which is confined to the end of funding for Informing Choices NI and the interim provision of services. Members will wish to avoid discussing the lawfulness of the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021, which are the subject of today's legal challenge.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. As you highlighted, the House will be aware that, further to the direction brought forward by the Secretary of State in July, my Department had asked Informing Choices NI to submit a funding request for the cost of providing an interim telephone-based information and advice service. A funding request for £83,000 was received in August, and my officials have been pursuing it in line with departmental approval processes, with the intention of bringing a paper on the matter to the Executive for agreement in line with the legal advice received. That funding would have been in addition to the £137,000 that my Department and the Public Health Agency (PHA) already provided in grant funding each year to Informing Choices NI.

In the interim, Informing Choices NI signalled its intention to withdraw the current service from 1 October due to funding issues. In response, trusts established an alternative advice and referral service, and, as of today, they have put in place an interim advice and referral service that is being delivered by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) in place of Informing Choices. My Department has been advised by the trusts that BPAS will provide the service for Northern Ireland seven days per week at no cost. That will ensure continuity of advice and referral into the trusts' EMA services pending wider decisions on the commissioning of abortion services in Northern Ireland. Until then, women here can continue to access abortion services by contacting BPAS.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his answer. At the outset, I commend Informing Choices for the sterling work it has done over the past 18 months since abortion was legislated for. We have had 18 months of individual clinicians stepping up. In that time, three of our five trusts have had to pause services. In the Western Trust, the service has not been resumed since April this year. We have had individuals suffering without a local service, and we had Informing Choices providing the service over the phone for local women in crisis.

The Minister just outlined that BPAS will now provide that interim service, so there is no local service for women, many of whom will be in crisis situations with no support system around them. Will he advise what local service they will be able to avail themselves of in the interim?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for the point that she raises. BPAS is providing a telephone service, the same as Informing Choices NI was. It is the same provision of advice.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for making himself available to the House this afternoon. As is well-documented, the DUP has been a consistent and passionate pro-life voice. Women who find themselves in the most difficult circumstances should, of course, be able to avail themselves of independent and non-directive advice on the support that is available to them, but at the heart of the matter must be a balanced appreciation that there are alternative routes for pregnancy, including adoption and fostering. In light of that, will the Minister outline how the British Pregnancy Advisory Service will operate differently, if at all, from the Informing Choices NI model? Will he confirm whether an equivalent central access point has been established for pregnant women

who are seeking to give advance consent to adoption?

Mr Swann: On the last point, I will cover that in comments tomorrow during the Second Stage of the Adoption and Children Bill. On the other point, there should be no differential in advice given by Informing Choices and BPAS.

Ms Hunter: Minister, my colleagues and I met Informing Choices months ago. It is evident that this is a much-needed and valued service that offers women unbiased information on the choices available to them. I believe that women in crisis deserve support and impartial information on the options available to them. Therefore, will the Minister's Department reassess how information on abortion services is advertised on trust websites so that women know what options of compassionate modern healthcare are available to them and where they are available?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for the points that she raised. I will ask that the information on the trusts' websites be reviewed to reflect any changes from the transfer from Informing Choices to BPAS, so that the women who seek it have access to the necessary guidance and information, and there is easy pathway to where they should contact.

Mr Chambers: Whilst I note that some Members, and even some Ministers, still occasionally call on the Health Minister to unilaterally introduce a new service specification without an Executive decision, to date, none has been able to produce a credible argument that, by doing so, he would not be in clear breach of his own legal requirement, according to the Executive's definitive legal advice, as well as the ministerial code. Will the Minister confirm that that is still the case?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. However, taking the Speaker's direction at the start, as legal proceedings are ongoing today, I will not answer it at this point.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister for that sensitivity.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for coming to the Chamber. As you referenced in your opening remarks, Informing Choices NI submitted a funding application on 20 August. Why has it taken so long for it to get an answer on that? Also, you mentioned that it is really a referral point. Are you aware of the full extent of the support that Informing Choices provides to women? It is not just a telephone service. There

is also counselling and non-directive care, which directs women to adoption services, for example.

Mr Swann: Bringing a paper to the Executive is in line with the legal direction that we received, which is the subject of the legal proceedings today. We had approached Informing Choices about the funding bid for the additional advice work that it was doing when it provided the business case. That was being taken through and processed by departmental officials so that we could bring a paper to the Executive, as is required under the Secretary of State's direction. When Informing Choices signalled that it intended to withdraw its service, trusts engaged and worked with BPAS for it to provide the same service at no additional cost.

Informing Choices is still funded by my Department to deliver a level of service to the women of Northern Ireland and those who seek support and guidance. I will check to make sure that there is no disparity between what advice and provision it continues to provide for those women, what BPAS is providing, and what both organisations are now delivering.

Ms Bailey: Minister, I, first, declare an interest as a board member of Informing Choices NI. I do not want to go into the specifics, but you mentioned that it put in a funding request of £83,000. You commented that BPAS will now provide the service at no cost, which is a wee bit misleading because it is a cost. Although it may not be at a cost to your Department, it is at a cost to BPAS, which is a charity. That, of course, is on top of the cost to the Women and Equalities Committee at Westminster, which is covering the costs for women from Northern Ireland who continue to be forced to travel to access treatment and care in England. Have you or your Department made any assessment of the costs that others are picking up for services that the Northern Ireland Executive are failing to deliver?

Mr Swann: In response to the initial question on the provision of support that Informing Choices was giving and that BPAS is now providing, Informing Choices had put in a provisional bid for £83,000 in a business case in order to provide that. BPAS, as the Member indicated, is providing that at no additional cost to the Department of Health in what is a challenging funding position.

The Member has indicated before in the House that she is a director of Informing Choices NI. I note the vital role that it has provided in Northern Ireland. That is why my Department

and the Public Health Agency provide roughly £137,000 per year to fund Informing Choices. That funding supports the provision of free sexual health advice and the counselling service and literature on a range of issues for people who are often young, vulnerable or in crisis. It includes advice on contraception and STIs as well as sexual health and relationships education for people with learning disabilities.

5.30 pm

Mr Carroll: When you google "abortion services NI", one of the first organisations that comes up is a discredited, biased and anti-choice organisation. In light of his decision in relation to Informing Choices, what steps will he take to ensure that women here are aware of abortion services that are currently available locally and that they are able to access information that is safe, accurate and reliable?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. That goes back to Ms Hunter's question about the information and direction that is available from trust websites. Google search engines are not within my scope, but it is important that our trusts are providing signposting for what are crucial services and advice lines.

Mr O'Toole: Just to clarify, Minister, is it your position that women should be able to easily access legally provided abortion services in Northern Ireland and that that information should be as easy for them to access as possible? Secondly, would it have been your preference that Informing Choices, which, in my view and that of lots of other people, has done an extremely professional job in providing that service over the last period, should have continued doing it?

Mr Swann: Regardless of my preference, when Informing Choices signalled its intention to withdraw its services as of 1 August because of funding pressures, my officials were working up a bid into a paper to present to the Executive, as the direction requires us to do. The trusts engaged with BPAS to provide services and advice to women that meet what Informing Choices was doing, so there is a continuation of advice and services in that regard.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: As Members know, the Minister of Justice was unable to attend Question Time in the Assembly today. The Business Committee has agreed a revised Order Paper that will allow Question Time for the Minister of Justice to take place tomorrow at 2.45 pm.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.

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