



# Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 5 March 2024  
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# Contents

## Members' Statements

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Classroom Assistants .....  | 1 |
| Job Losses: Enniskillen .....                                       | 1 |
| Facial Palsy Awareness Week .....                                   | 2 |
| Criminal Justice System: Victims and Witnesses.....                 | 2 |
| Women's Aid Armagh Down: Be the Change .....                        | 3 |
| Mental Health Support: Emergency Departments.....                   | 4 |
| Council Meetings: Hybrid Arrangements.....                          | 4 |
| Endometriosis Awareness Month .....                                 | 5 |
| Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023..... | 5 |
| Strule Shared Education Campus .....                                | 5 |
| A1: Safety Improvements .....                                       | 6 |

## Assembly Business

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Public Petition: Children's Hospice..... | 7 |
| Committee Membership .....               | 7 |

## Ministerial Statement

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| XL Bully Dogs ..... | 8 |
|---------------------|---|

## Private Members' Business

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| School Uniforms: Affordability ..... | 15 |
|--------------------------------------|----|

## Oral Answers to Questions

|                     |    |
|---------------------|----|
| Infrastructure..... | 30 |
|---------------------|----|

## Speaker's Business

### Private Members' Business

|   |    |
|---|----|
| School Uniforms: Affordability ( <i>Continued</i> ) ..... | 40 |
| Apprenticeships .....                                     | 43 |

## Adjournment

|                    |    |
|--------------------|----|
| A5: Delivery ..... | 60 |
|--------------------|----|

# Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)  
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)  
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)  
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)  
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)  
Baker, Danny (West Belfast)  
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)  
Blair, John (South Antrim)  
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)  
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)  
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)  
Brett, Phillip (North Belfast)  
Brogan, Miss Nicola (West Tyrone)  
Brooks, David (East Belfast)  
Brownlee, Ms Cheryl (East Antrim)  
Brown, Patrick (South Down)  
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)  
Buchanan, Tom (West Tyrone)  
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)  
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)  
Chambers, Alan (North Down)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Delargy, Pádraig (Foyle)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
Dillon, Mrs Linda (Mid Ulster)  
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)  
Dolan, Miss Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Donnelly, Danny (East Antrim)  
Dunne, Stephen (North Down)  
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)  
Easton, Alex (North Down)  
Eastwood, Ms SORCHA (Lagan Valley)  
Egan, Ms Connie (North Down)  
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Ennis, Mrs Sinéad (South Down)  
Erskine, Mrs Deborah (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Ferguson, Mrs Ciara (Foyle)  
Flynn, Miss Órlaithí (West Belfast)  
Forsythe, Ms Diane (South Down)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)  
Hargey, Miss Deirdre (South Belfast)  
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)  
Honeyford, David (Lagan Valley)  
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)  
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)  
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)  
Kingston, Brian (North Belfast)  
Little-Pengelly, Mrs Emma (Lagan Valley)  
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)  
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)  
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)  
McAllister, Miss Nuala (North Belfast)  
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)  
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)  
McGrath, Colin (South Down)  
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)  
McHugh, Maolíosa (West Tyrone)  
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)  
McLaughlin, Ms Sinéad (Foyle)  
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)  
McReynolds, Peter (East Belfast)  
Mason, Mrs Cathy (South Down)  
Mathison, Nick (Strangford)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Muir, Andrew (North Down)  
Mulholland, Ms Sian (North Antrim)  
Murphy, Miss Áine (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)  
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)  
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)  
Nicholl, Ms Kate (South Belfast)  
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)  
O'Neill, Ms Michelle (Mid Ulster)  
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)  
Poots, Edwin (Speaker)  
Reilly, Ms Aisling (West Belfast)  
Robinson, Alan (East Londonderry)  
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)  
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)  
Stewart, John (East Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Tennyson, Eóin (Upper Bann)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 5 March 2024

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (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 rising in their place. Members will have three minutes in which to make their statement. There will be no interventions, nor will any points of order be taken until the item of business has finished.

### Classroom Assistants

**Mr Delargy:** I am speaking on behalf of classroom assistants. I have met many classroom assistants across my constituency. I have now met over 1,000 classroom assistants in Derry and across the board. We are hearing repeatedly about the need for fair pay and conditions and fair contracts. I want classroom assistants to know that Sinn Féin have their back on the issue and that we will continue to fight for their pay and to stand up for fair contracts and conditions in their job.

We have heard from classroom assistants that many are leaving the job because their wages do not reflect the demands of the job and the responsibilities that they have. Of the classroom assistants whom we spoke to, over 20% had a part-time job just to try to make ends meet. That is not acceptable for people who are the backbone of our schools and who play such a vital role in our children's education.

It is imperative that conditions and contracts are looked at, and I implore the Education Minister to do that immediately. We are seeing each and every year that classroom assistants are leaving the profession because the wages do not keep up with what they are doing and their conditions mean that they are not treated fairly. It is not acceptable for anyone to find out in August whether they have a job in September. That touches on the broader piece around special educational needs and the provisions that we need to put in place for our children.

Classroom assistants are having their contracts changed and moved from 27 hours down to

maybe 10 or 15 hours. That would not be acceptable in any other workplace. We would not be sitting here in the Assembly accepting that. We need to give the matter the proper priority that it deserves and look at that immediately. Where their conditions are concerned, we want classroom assistants to be treated properly in their school and by the Education Authority and the Department of Education. I am looking forward to working with the Minister of Education and the Education Committee to do that.

### Job Losses: Enniskillen

**Mrs Erskine:** I want to bring the Chamber's attention again to the significant job losses that are facing people in Enniskillen in my constituency. Nearly a month ago, BT Group announced that it was considering the closure of its Enniskillen site. To say that there was mixed messaging from BT is an understatement.

On the one hand, it advised BT/EE employees contracted to its site that it was considering closing the site, yet it was at pains to say that no decision had been made. Which is it? Quite rightly, employees are asking such questions today. This bombshell left 300 employees worried sick. Around many kitchen tables in my constituency, big decisions on their daily lives are being made, and they are considering whether to accept the package that BT is offering or to wait it out.

BT's reputation in my constituency has been damaged, and I am disappointed that, to date, BT has failed to meet local MLAs to discuss the issue. Instead, last week, it issued another extension to the package and said that it would meet MLAs on 19 April. That is some 70 days since the initial announcement was made.

I have hundreds of emails and calls from concerned local hard-working people who are employees of BT and are not sure where to turn. A few weeks ago, there was a public meeting, and, last night, there was a second

meeting, organised by the Communication Workers Union. Unfortunately, because of business in the Chamber and meetings at Stormont, I was unable to make it. However, I know the strength of feeling that there is in Fermanagh right now. These are not just 300 people and 300 jobs. This will have a knock-on impact on our coffee shops, our clothes shops and our restaurants in Enniskillen and across Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Our local economy will be decimated as one of our biggest employers has its eyes set on its own profits. Unlike urban centres, we do not have the luxury of global competitors coming in like a knight on a white horse to provide employment for those workers, so today I repeat my call for everybody in this Chamber and the Executive, including the Economy Minister, to prioritise this issue and work together to apply pressure and ensure that these jobs are saved and kept in Enniskillen.

## Facial Palsy Awareness Week

**Mr Mathison:** This week is Facial Palsy Awareness Week. Facial palsy is a poorly understood condition, sadly characterised by misdiagnosis and delay in accessing treatment. It has wide-ranging impacts on those living with it, both physical and, at times, profoundly psychological. Facial paralysis is, sadly, often assumed to be only a temporary problem that will pass. Patients — disproportionately, that applies to women — are left, at times for months, without even referrals being made, let alone treatment being received. A recent Facial Palsy UK survey found that only one in 10 facial palsy patients felt that their GP understood the impact of their condition. In Northern Ireland, we have no facial palsy service. We have no pathway for these patients, and I have no doubt that if a similar survey were carried out just here, we would not be achieving even close to that one in 10 figure.

It has been a privilege for me over the past number of years to work with patient activist Janet Robb on this issue. She has been campaigning since 2017 to deliver a pathway for patients living with facial palsy. By June 2019, I was privileged to be in a meeting with Janet and Health and Social Care Board officials, who gave assurances that a pathway would be delivered for Northern Ireland and, crucially, that an interim in-reach service would be provided to ensure that these patients received treatment while they waited for a proper service here in Northern Ireland. Here, in 2024, work has stopped and started, and those promises have not been delivered upon. We urgently need a pathway leading to a

multidisciplinary team across physiotherapy, neurology, ear, nose and throat, psychology and surgery when required. The Health Minister must deliver on assurances previously given. I know that work is ongoing in the Department and that there is a small team of officials who are working hard on this, but this must be expedited and it must be properly resourced. It is no longer acceptable for facial palsy patients to sit on waiting lists across multiple clinical disciplines and then, when eventually seen, to be dealt with by a doctor who is not an expert on their condition.

Each one of us in the Chamber will have constituents who are impacted by this little-understood condition. For some, the facial palsy will be temporary and will pass, but, for many, it will be lifelong and debilitating.

I urge every Member in the Chamber to learn more during Facial Palsy Awareness Week about the condition and its impacts, and to act on behalf of their constituents to help deliver progress. I call again on the Health Minister to prioritise delivery of a pathway for patients and an in-reach service with clinical experts while that is developed.

## Criminal Justice System: Victims and Witnesses

**Mr Beattie:** I have been watching with interest the campaign on our TV screens in regard to the Victim Charter and the Witness Charter. That brought me back to an incident with one of my staff, who witnessed the attempted abduction of a young woman and had the courage to go to the police about it. Her experience after giving that evidence has not been as good as it should have been, so I want to delve into the figures on what happens to our victims and witnesses once a crime takes place.

While it is encouraging that 77% of victims and witnesses report being provided with the name and address of the officer in charge of their case, just one third — 41% of victims and 24% of witnesses — are officially informed about the progress of their case within one month of giving a statement to the police. Almost one fifth of victims and witnesses wait over six months for an official update. Shockingly, 11% report receiving no official communication whatsoever. There has been a serious decline in the proportion of witnesses reporting that they were kept informed by the criminal justice system, plummeting from 68% to 58%. Equally troubling is the revelation that a significant number of witnesses are unaware of the sentences that

are handed out to the perpetrators in their cases. In 2022-23, only 73% of victims, overall, knew the sentence, and the corresponding percentage for witnesses was lower.

While satisfaction rates for the adult witness service and the young witness service are relatively high at 60% overall, it is crucial to recognise that those figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) on the victim and witness experience of the Northern Ireland criminal justice system, do not, for some unexplained reason, include the victims and witnesses of domestic abuse and sexual crimes. That is incredible, and it is a glaring omission, considering the unique challenges faced by those individuals and their heightened vulnerability. It is time to confront that glaring disparity head-on. Victims and witnesses, regardless of the nature of the crime, deserve to be heard and supported throughout the legal process.

## Women's Aid Armagh Down: Be the Change

**Mr McNulty:** Last week, I attended a remarkable event in Newry: Women's Aid Armagh Down's Be the Change conference. Some of the contributions and testimonies at that important conference were harrowing, stomach-churning, informative, frightening and inspirational. I have reflected almost continuously on that conference since I attended, and my feelings of angst have ebbed into feelings of inspiration and a belief that those people and families who have endured trauma and come out the other side are not victims but survivors, and, in many cases, champions who have moved through pain to positivity. I think particularly of a number of families in my constituency and beyond when I say that.

Collie and Eithne Bell are parents who tragically lost their son Kevin in a hit-and-run accident in New York when he was just 26 years old. Did Collie and Eithne go to pieces? Probably, but who amongst us would not? However, they also set their minds to honouring their son's memory. They founded the Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust, which has repatriated the remains of around 2,000 people to their families. Collie and Eithne Bell have focused all their hurt and heartbreak on lifting weight off the shoulders of families who are enduring the same trauma that they endured.

I think of Noel and Bernadette McNally and their sons Brendan, Declan and Niall. After the brutal murder of their daughter and sister, Natalie, and

their unborn grandchild, Noel, Bernadette and their family stand as advocates and champions for the protection of women and girls. They travel the length and breadth of this country to share their story and spark inspiration in others, fighting to end men's violence against women. I heard them speak at the Women's Aid conference in Newry last week, and I was mesmerised at the power of Noel's speech to hundreds of delegates. Noel said at the conference:

*"Some people say you learn to live with the pain, but the pain never gets any easier".*

I think of the McAnallen family: Brendan RIP, Bridget, Donal and Fergus. After tragically losing their son and brother to sudden adult death syndrome, the McAnallen family set up the Cormac Trust. The mission of the trust was to raise awareness of sudden cardiac deaths in young people, promote cardiac screening for young people and provide automated external defibrillators to all sports clubs for the entire community to use. Again, they channelled their hurt and heartbreak into saving other families from going through the same trauma that they went through.

### 10.45 am

I also think of Seamus McCabe, who, following the death of his son Séamas, who tragically died aged 20, established PIPS Hope and Support. Since that time, PIPS has evolved, and it has emerged as the leading suicide prevention and counselling service in the Southern Trust. Seamus was also instrumental in the development of the crisis cafe. A place for people who need help to cope with their mental or emotional distress, the cafe is the first of its kind in the North.

Moving from trauma to post-traumatic growth has been extraordinary for those families, and I commend them.

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

**Mr McNulty:** When the moment is at its darkest —.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up.

**Mr McNulty:** When things seem darkest, cometh the dawn, and then comes the light.

## Mental Health Support: Emergency Departments

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I wish to raise the issue of mental health support in our emergency departments. The community navigators, who are probably better known as the "Pink T-shirts", provide a service that is based in the Royal Victoria Hospital emergency department. They have been working there since December 2021. It is a service that is provided by the Ashton Community Trust and Start360 in Belfast. They work in conjunction with accident and emergency nurses, doctors, consultants and the mental health liaison team to support individuals. They really are the de-escalation service for people in crisis. When those people are assessed, they are referred on for either a medical intervention or additional mental health and support.

Yesterday, during Question Time, the Health Minister was asked about a lot of community and voluntary groups, including those that are based in different health and social care trusts, and about what happens after 31 March. From speaking to the staff in accident in emergency, as well as to the families and individuals who have been supported through the service, I know that it will be much more difficult if that funding and that partnership are not just continued but expanded after 31 March. Ideally, I would like to see the service being extended to the Mater Hospital in north Belfast.

In the context of the Protect Life 2 suicide prevention strategy, the "card before you leave" scheme and all the other services that are there to protect people at their most vulnerable, there are partnerships. I also recognise that the funding for our health and social care staff and workforce planning is not where it should be. In fact, it is quite poor. We have heard about the impact of COVID, but these challenges were there prior to COVID and have been exacerbated by it. It is imperative that Ashton Community Trust, Start360, the mental health navigators and the Belfast Trust get the additional funding to continue the service. I appeal to the Minister and the strategic planning and performance group to make sure that not only that project but others are continued after 31 March.

## **Council Meetings: Hybrid Arrangements**

**Ms Mulholland:** I am dismayed at the decision that has been made by the Communities Minister not to put forward an extension to the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Local Authority Meetings) (No 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022, which allowed hybrid meetings in our councils, while

simultaneously not putting forward a proposal, thereby pre-empting the consultation, to lay any stand-alone legislation.

At the Communities Committee on 22 February, we agreed to approve the recommendation of extensions to the Assembly while the Minister was considering going forward with stand-alone legislation, only to have that extension pulled with no notice. Before I came to this place, I benefited many times from that legislation as a local councillor. My second son was born in 2019 and was five months old when the pandemic hit. I found it much easier to balance my full engagement in council meetings while juggling a young baby and a toddler. When my father was ill, I was able to dial into meetings from his home, and, on one occasion, with headphones from his hospital room while he slept. As someone living in a rural community, when there were weather warnings, I was able to choose to stay at home and dial into committee meetings. At no point was I a less effective councillor because I was engaging online. I spoke to councillors last night who have caring responsibilities, and they are really worried about the lack of consultation on this. I spoke to a councillor with a neurodivergent condition who knows that, when an urgent oral update is on the agenda, it is better for them to stay at home with their noise-cancelling headphones on so that they can concentrate on what is being said without any written papers in front of them and without any distractions.

At a time when we should be encouraging more people from disenfranchised communities to engage in our political system, we are effectively putting a barrier in the way of those with caring responsibilities, young families, conditions or illnesses and those who live in rural communities.

The decision was communicated to council chief executives on Friday. Some councillors were told on Monday, getting less than 48 hours to put in place alternative arrangements to be present in the chamber for all meetings in March. That shows little consideration for those who have caring responsibilities or legitimate reasons for requesting a hybrid alternative. I have great respect for the Minister for Communities, and I look forward to working with him and seeing what he can achieve in this mandate. However, with due respect, that is the wrong decision, and it will only further alienate those whose voices we need to hear more of in local government.

## **Endometriosis Awareness Month**

**Mrs Dillon:** I associate myself with Sian Mulholland's remarks.

I am speaking, in Endometriosis Awareness Month, on behalf of all women and girls in the North who suffer from endometriosis. In the words of Anne Donnelly from Donaghmore, what is happening is unforgivable, and she is right, because she has been left completely debilitated at 43 years of age. She had to retire from her teaching job. She may well end up in a wheelchair, because she has waited so long on treatment. She waited many years for a diagnosis, like so many other young women and girls. That was all down to the fact that there are not services, there is not the understanding, there is late diagnosis and there is extremely delayed treatment. The waiting lists for women and girls with endometriosis are among some of the longest in the North. That is yet another indication of the neglect of women here and their health needs. It is also an indication of the neglect to trust women to know their own bodies and what is wrong with them.

People think that endometriosis is only a gynaecological problem, but it is also neurological, which is what affects people's mobility. That can result in women and girls ending up in a wheelchair and not living the full life that they could live if they were diagnosed and treated on time. That would not be acceptable if someone had cancer. If someone went to the doctor and said, "I think I might have cancer", late diagnosis and treatment would not be acceptable. It would limit their life and their chances in life, as does endometriosis. We cannot continue in that vein.

There needs to be serious focus on it. We need the Minister to take it seriously. We need the Department to take it seriously. I know that some work is ongoing, but it needs to be sped up. We need to have focused teams. We need to have protected services for not only diagnosis but surgical procedures, because they are happening much too late, which makes them much less effective. It affects people's kidneys and bowels, as well as causing all the gynaecological issues. However, people do not know about the other issues. They do not know about the impact on your bowels, kidneys or mobility.

I ask that the Department, the Minister and the trusts look at the issue and do some more work on awareness raising, for a start. Again, that is not just for the Health Minister; it is cross-departmental. We need to see something in our education system that teaches young women and girls about their bodies and about the fact that extremely painful periods are not normal.

That is not normal, and you should not have to suffer it every month. If something is not right, it needs to be looked at, diagnosed and treated.

## **Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023**

**Mr Allister:** Last week, in our High Court, we had a very significant judgement. I refer to the striking down of a key part of the legacy Act.

Where the constitutional significance of that arises is in the reasons why the High Court took that decision. It took it because of the court's acknowledgement of the supremacy of the protocol in our law. This was not the striking down of some statutory instrument or even some Act of this House; it was the striking down of an Act of Parliament.

The fact that it was struck down because of the primacy of the protocol is of immense constitutional significance and brings home to those of us who care the subservience of the United Kingdom in respect of Northern Ireland to EU law.

It also, of course, dramatically debunked the fake news of Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, who told us when he did his dud deal that Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom had been wholly restored and that he accepted what was in the Command Paper when it affirmed that the Windsor framework applied only to trade. The High Court has clearly demonstrated that, far from applying only to trade, it applies to all these constitutional issues. Why? Because, under article 2 of the protocol or Windsor framework, Northern Ireland, alone in the United Kingdom, is retained under the control of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. In consequence of that, rights that were offended within that by the Legacy Act are incompatible with it. Therefore, those portions of the Act were struck down. That is a colossal constitutional assault on the integrity and independence of the United Kingdom and, of course, more particularly — we will see it again in the Rwanda Bill — evidence of the special and diminished place that Northern Ireland has been put in in the United Kingdom by virtue of the fact that it is the supremacy of EU law, not British law, that rules in these matters.

## **Strule Shared Education Campus**

**Miss Brogan:** I want to record my continued support for the Strule shared education campus in Omagh and my thanks to the principals of the six local schools that are connected to the



campus for their ongoing work and determination in ensuring that the project is completed.

Party colleagues and I, along with a wide range of other representatives, attended a useful information night last Thursday regarding the Strule project. We heard from the principals and pupil representatives of Sacred Heart College, Omagh; Omagh High School; Omagh CBS; Omagh Academy; Loreto Grammar School, Omagh; and Arvalee special school, Omagh. The event was particularly interesting because it focused on the educational benefits of the shared campus for the children and young people of Omagh and for the education workforce in the town. We heard directly from young people who form part of the Strule school council. They shared with us their experiences of being part of that shared council, how much they had learned from each other and how beneficial the Strule campus will be for young people in the area. Unfortunately, most of the pupils with whom we spoke will have left school before the Strule campus is complete. However, they are still enthusiastic about the good that can come from shared education.

The event was kindly hosted by the principal of Arvalee special school, Mr Jonathan Gray. Arvalee is the only school on the Strule campus site at present. It is also the only special needs school that is part of a shared education project. Mr Gray is passionate about the opportunity of equity that shared education can bring for all our children and young people. It is vital that children with additional needs are part of that.

The coming together of schools, including those for special learners, gives children and young people who are at risk of being excluded by society a rightful presence and a voice in education. Strule is unique, and the value of its potential is beyond money. I have invited the Education Minister to Omagh to visit the Strule campus and Arvalee. I hope that he will join us and support the campus.

## **A1: Safety Improvements**

**Mr Brown:** In light of the positive news received recently from the Irish Government that they plan to contribute €600 million to the A5 north-west corridor through the Shared Island initiative, I want to make clear the continued need for investment in road safety improvements for the A1.

Like the A5, the A1 is a vital North/South transport route, carrying around 40,000 vehicles

per day on the economic corridor between Belfast and Dublin. Yet, it remains one of the most dangerous roads in the country, with 41 people losing their lives on it in the last 17 years. I pay particular tribute to Monica Heaney of campaign group A1: How Many Must Die?, who has tirelessly campaigned for improvements since her son was tragically killed in a collision near Banbridge in May 2018.

### **11.00 am**

While phase 2 of the A1 junction scheme will improve travel time on that key route, its primary benefit, much like that of the A5, will be to enhance road safety and prevent further loss of life. It should rightly be prioritised in the Department for Infrastructure's major roads programme. The investment secured for the A5 is a reminder to the House, now that it is restored, to redouble our efforts to secure adequate funding for the A1 junction scheme, which, having been estimated to cost £70 million in 2020, pales in comparison with more substantial schemes.

Every day, the road represents an unacceptable risk to life. Given its clear importance for road safety, I call on the Minister for Infrastructure to prioritise the scheme in his Department's capital budget and to explore ways of working with our partners in the South to secure funding for it.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes Members' statements.

## Assembly Business

### Public Petition: Children's Hospice

**Mr Speaker:** Phillip Brett 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 Brett:** I rise on behalf of the people not only of North Belfast but across Northern Ireland to highlight the deep concern about the proposed reduction in the vital services at the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice. Although I am extremely proud that the Children's Hospice is in my constituency of North Belfast, its work and impact and the fondness for it are felt far beyond those confines. I know that the House and, indeed, the whole community across Northern Ireland felt deep shock at the proposed reduction in its vital services.

The petition that I launched 10 days ago afforded the public — many of whom share my concern that government currently provides only 30% of the direct costs incurred by the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice — an opportunity to express their clear rejection of the proposals. I have been blown away by the support and solidarity that the people of Northern Ireland have shown in the petition. It has secured over 1,500 names in the space of just 10 days.

I thank the Finance Minister, who said in the House last week that she would welcome a bid from the Health Minister to fund the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice. I also thank the deputy First Minister for her leadership on the issue. I know that her presence today will make an important contribution as we move forward.

I can think of no cause more worthy than the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, and I thank every person in every community and section of our country who signed the petition. I thank the families and campaigners who brought the issue to the fore, and I thank the staff in our hospices for their daily professionalism as they continue to deliver an amazing service.

Just three weeks ago, I made my maiden speech, in which I said that the test for the House would not be simply our return but our ability to deliver for the most vulnerable in our society. I think that I can speak for the whole House when I say that the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice perfectly encapsulates that. This is our opportunity for the House to prove its worth and to stand together to deliver for

Northern Ireland. I trust that the petition will be the catalyst that ensures that we deliver the funding model that we all want to see. I call on the Health Minister to bring forward that bid urgently so that the House can deliver for the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice.

*Mr Brett moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.*

**Mr Speaker:** I will forward the petition to the Minister of Health and send a copy to the Committee for Health.

### Committee Membership

*Resolved:*

*That Mr Robbie Butler replace Mr John Stewart as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Mr John Stewart replace Mr Robbie Butler as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. — [Mr Stewart.]*

## Ministerial Statement

### XL Bully Dogs

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement. I remind the Assembly of the convention that Members wishing to ask a question should be in the Chamber to hear the Minister's statement in its entirety. Before I call the Minister, I also remind Members to be concise in asking their question. This is not an opportunity to debate, and long introductions will not be allowed.

**Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on my decision on how Northern Ireland will deal with XL bully breed-type dogs.

Like all Members, I am acutely aware of the devastating impact that can arise when dogs become out of control. Sadly, as we have seen across the UK and Ireland in recent months, the devastation is multiplied when the dogs involved are large and powerful. Only last month, we learned of another tragic death, in Essex, attributed to an XL bully breed-type dog. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recently highlighted that actions taken in England and Wales against the breed were done following a concerning rise in fatal dog attacks involving the XL bully breed type. The Department indicated that, until 2021, there had been around three fatalities a year; that there were 23 fatalities from 2021 to 1 February 2024; and that the XL bully breed type was involved in many of those tragic attacks. In response to the measures against the breed introduced in England, the Scottish Government has now also felt it necessary to take action for the purposes of public safety.

There are countless genuine bully breed enthusiasts who look after their dog with boundless love and dedication, but, unfortunately, the development of the dogs has sometimes suffered at the hands of the wrong types of owners. Dogs have been bred to have exaggerated features or to be overtly aggressive. Their sheer size, strength and aggression can, in some instances, make them inherently more dangerous. Breeds of this size and nature require careful, experienced and dedicated training by owners who understand their characteristics and temperament.

Unfortunately, in some instances, XL bully breed-type dogs are seen as status dogs. Their size and stature can be heralded and sought

after by entirely the wrong sort of dog owner. They can be used to intimidate, enforce and project an image for the person holding the lead. No responsible dog owner would let their dog be the subject of a range of ear mutilations such as we have seen with several XL bully breed-type dogs. Such dogs have also been a high-price commodity, fetching tens of thousands of pounds, leaving the breed more vulnerable to improper breeding as well as being bred for illegal fighting. In short, in the wrong hands, the dogs are abused as a commodity, a tool or even a weapon.

Let me repeat that I acknowledge that there are many genuine XL bully breed enthusiasts who look after their dog with boundless love and dedication. I want to be crystal clear on that point. However, I am also conscious of the public safety risk and that Northern Ireland is the only place across the UK and Ireland that still permits unrestricted XL bully ownership. I have to determine rapidly whether that remains a sustainable position. As Minister, I have to juggle competing priorities and work out how best to protect the public, the interests of dog owners and the welfare of the dogs and how to make a decision that is proportionate and based on the best possible evidence. It has quickly become clear that there is no perfect solution to the problem.

My officials and I have met animal welfare organisations to hear their views on the matter and the approach taken elsewhere to deal with dangerous dogs. I appreciate the "Deed, not breed" approach that is advocated. Welfare groups and umbrella bodies such as the Dog Control Coalition have made their case passionately. I have nothing but admiration for the dedication and commitment that such organisations demonstrate to safeguarding animals. I too have made it clear that I want to protect animals and enhance animal welfare. Let no one be in any doubt that I am on the same page as those valued stakeholders. The action taken now to safeguard the public against the risks that the XL Bully breed-type pose should be viewed as complementary and additional to our dog control policies rather than as being instead of or at odds with them. When it comes to dog control, however, there is an onus on me to ensure public safety and act when there is a need.

As the Minister with responsibility for the area, I must balance the needs and concerns of all our citizens. I have read the letters that have come across my desk and responded to questions that Members raised. It is evident that there is public worry about XL Bully dogs in Northern Ireland and the harm that they could do. When I

assumed this role, I knew that I would have difficult or potentially unpopular decisions to make. I will not shirk that responsibility. Therefore, I tasked my officials with keeping track of the number of XL bully breed-type dogs that are licensed in Northern Ireland on a weekly basis. In the five months since the announcement of measures in England and Wales to restrict ownership — measures that were then replicated in Scotland — there has been a greater than 50% increase in the number of XL bully breed-type dogs licensed by our councils. I should make it clear that, when dog owners license their dog with the council, the breed is self-declared and not subject to further scrutiny.

I know just how much people here love and value their dogs, and I am in no doubt that the overwhelming majority of owners license their dogs properly and record the breed to the best of their ability. It has not escaped me, however, that the number of XL bully breed-type dogs in Northern Ireland could very well be under-reported. Unfortunately, I cannot rule out the possibility that the significant uplift in the number of XL bully dogs finding a home here is due to their displacement from England, Scotland and Wales. I understand that well-intentioned individuals and organisations have expressed a desire to rehome the dogs, which, they feel, might otherwise be abandoned. However, there is no way of determining whether those dogs have been appropriately trained and socialised or have demonstrated aggressive behaviours in the past.

I do not wish to scaremonger. I will remain grounded in the facts. The overall population of such dogs remains low, especially in comparison with other parts of the UK. However, I am conscious of our capacity in Northern Ireland to receive unwanted dogs, and I do not want to expose the public to an exacerbated level of risk. I have been advised that 140 XL bully dogs are licensed right now, which is up from around 90 last October. Therefore, it is time to act while numbers remain manageable and we can, in the main, track where the dogs are.

I reassure Members and the people of Northern Ireland that I have not rushed into a decision. I have carefully considered all aspects of the matter, and I have not taken it lightly. I am also aware that I cannot delay action any further. Northern Ireland has, sadly, not been immune to attacks by XL bully breed-type dogs. Many Members will be aware of the public case in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area in which a man suffered life-changing injuries at the hands of one such

dog. None of us wants to hear about another attack like that.

The public safety of the people of Northern Ireland is my utmost concern, so today I am announcing the introduction of new safeguards surrounding XL bully breed-type dogs in Northern Ireland. I will lay legislation before the House that will require the owners of XL bully breed-type dogs to take measures when their dog is in public. I will introduce a scheme that will require owners to appropriately record and account for their dog with the relevant authorities. Owners will be required to keep their dog on the lead at all times in a public place and ensure that the dog is muzzled. Their XL bully breed-type dog will also be neutered, and breeding from the dog will be prohibited.

I also advise that, once the legislation is made, it will no longer be permissible to sell, abandon or give away an XL bully breed-type dog. My Department will provide further detail on those safeguards and the dates when they will come into effect in due course.

#### **11.15 am**

Following my announcement today, I will write to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, with my officials writing to all local councils to inform them of my decision. I recognise that this decision will have a definitive impact on the dog warden service. I would like to use the expertise and experience of our councils and their dog wardens in particular, who are well versed in the right and proper ways to deal with dangerous dogs and dog control measures, so, with that in mind, I intend to establish a working group containing representatives from my Department and key council staff to design and implement an exemption scheme that is as straightforward as the legislation can permit.

Let me reassure the owners and advocates of the XL bully breed-type dogs: I am committed to providing you with the right information and the necessary space to make informed decisions about your dog ownership. However, if the owner of an XL bully breed-type dog does not wish to adhere to these measures and no longer wishes to keep their dog, provision will be made for them to surrender that dog, and their dog will be euthanised. No owner will be forced to give their dog up or made to hand over their dog. I am giving the owners of XL bully breed-type dogs the ability to be responsible and compassionate owners, which, I know, many are. I am offering them a pathway to enduring and lasting ownership of their

valued dog. Only the owners of the dogs will determine what happens. My officials will now work at pace on the necessary legislation, as well as the scheme to register and record XL bully breed-type dogs.

Given my announcement today, I urge prospective owners of XL bully breed-type dogs to seriously bear in mind the need to adhere to the new safeguards. This is an appeal to those people: if you are minded to acquire an XL bully breed-type dog and currently do not own one, you need to know that the laws and your obligations will change. I appreciate that there will be a thirst for more information. My Department will develop guidance and practical support to allow owners to understand the impending legislative changes, including how to identify an XL bully breed-type dog using the standard developed by the UK Government.

I realise that there will be dog owners and stakeholders in our community who feel that I have valued their views less than the views of others: that is not the case. In the longer term, I have a desire to explore the possibility of meaningful reform to our dog control laws in close cooperation with key stakeholders in the sector. I am acutely aware of the calls to deal with the deed, not the breed, and criticism of breed-specific legislation, but, as Minister, I am left with the situation as it presents itself and the legislation as currently available in the context of public safety risks. I say to those listening to me today who wish to shape the future: please work with me to enhance our legislation and put in place initiatives that eradicate the irresponsible practices and ownership that have created the conditions that I am now trying to put right. I am, however, faced with the situation and the reality of today. Safeguarding measures must be implemented for the safety and protection of the public.

**Mr McGlone:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement. The general theme of what the Minister has proposed requires quite a bit of supervision and monitoring, and I see that the Minister mentioned the role and function of dog wardens in councils. Inevitably, that will be an increased role and function for those dog wardens in enforcement, monitoring and the likes. Will additional resources be provided to those councils in order to effect that monitoring and enforcement?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his question. In the weeks ahead, my officials will engage with councils to plan for the operational delivery of what I have proposed. I acknowledge that that will involve additional work for councils. In

the weeks ahead, my Department will engage with them through the working group so that we can advance the development of the scheme. I am conscious of the financial pressures that are associated with district councils. The budget settlement that I receive for the next financial year will be key to what my Department can achieve when it comes to working with councils and what they can do and general animal welfare issues. It is critical that I outline that, because the budget that I receive next year will be instrumental in determining what more we can do as a House and a Government on animal welfare.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for his statement [*Inaudible.*] Picking up on the theme of Mr McGlone's question, last year, the Department ceased the £1.2 million funding to councils for animal welfare. Is that something that the Minister will review?

**Mr Muir:** On inheriting the Department, I was made aware of that issue and the budget challenges that the permanent secretary was managing in-year. I am keen to look at how we can invest in animal welfare and work with district councils to support them. The most fundamental issue will be how much money my Department is awarded for the next financial year. That will determine the way forward. I recognise that the decision will provide challenges for many. Taking the decision has provided challenges for me, but, most importantly, it will provide challenges for rehoming centres, stakeholders and district councils. I am keen to do whatever I can to support them within the budget that I have for next year.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Generally, I am not in favour of a blanket ban on breeds. It is too easy to blame the dog rather than the owner, and I have sympathy for responsible dog owners.

What discussions have the Minister or his officials had with the Housing Executive and other social landlords on the proposed legislation and how it may impact on tenants who are XL bully owners?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for her question. As part of the work in the time ahead, we will engage with relevant stakeholders, including the ones that she mentioned, because I am aware that, on the road to implementation, we will need to engage with different stakeholders in society. I look forward to continuing our engagement with the people whom she mentioned.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I have no doubt that he will have given the matter the most serious consideration. Is he willing to come to a meeting of the Assembly all-party group on animal welfare to discuss the proposals that he has outlined today, as well as related animal welfare matters?

**Mr Muir:** I would be delighted to attend a meeting of the all-party group. It is important that, as Minister, I engage with the relevant all-party groups, as well as the stakeholders and statutory bodies, as outlined by Member McIlveen. It is important to state — I will put it on the record again — that I am not taking the decision in isolation. It is my strong desire that we do not just bring animal welfare legislation up to speed — we have fallen behind compared with the rest of the UK and Ireland — but become an exemplar to others. Realistically, it will take around 18 months to enact primary legislation. I am dealing with the situation that presents itself now. It is my desire, during this mandate, that we bring animal welfare legislation up to speed and become a role model for others across the UK and Ireland. I look forward to engaging with the all-party group to see how we can achieve that, because converting policy proposals into legislation can be a challenge. I look forward to the discussion on that.

**Mr Chambers:** I commend the Minister for his prompt response and for bringing forward his thoughts on legislation. I acknowledge that he says that there is no perfect solution, but the legislation talks about measures that will be taken when the dogs are in a public setting. We have to acknowledge that the death in Essex was in a living room. Has the Minister given any consideration to how he might protect the families of the owners of such dogs in the home?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his question. He is right that there is no perfect solution and that the measures will largely deal with public settings rather than the home. That speaks to the point that I made about the legislation that we have at the moment. I am sitting here as Minister in week five of the job. The tools presented to me in terms of legislation are all that I have access to, so I am working with what I have. I have a desire to look at legislation in the longer term to see how we can make the situation on the issue here fit for purpose.

We are all aware of the stories, not just the fatalities but people who have had life-changing injuries as a result of this. That causes me real apprehension and concern. As Minister, I

honestly did not feel that I could take no decision on this or take no action. I could not live with myself if I did that.

**Miss Brogan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. Thank you, Minister, for your statement. This breed of XL bully-type dog is not specifically banned in the South of Ireland; instead, it falls under a list of restricted breeds. Will the Minister tell me whether he has liaised with his colleague Heather Humphreys on the matter? What is his assessment of the approach of the Southern Government on this, le do thoil [*Translation: please?*]

**Mr Muir:** I engaged with Minister Humphreys this morning. This is an example of where we need to get the North/South institutions up and running and to work North/South and east-west on these matters. The fact that the institutions did not sit for two years has set us back in relation to that.

The legislation in the South differs from that in the North. The South has provision for a restricted dogs list, and, as part of that, restricted dogs must be muzzled, on a:

*"strong chain or leash, not exceeding two metres in length"*

and must be handled by a competent person over 16 years of age. Ms Humphreys announced at the end of last year that she would undertake a review of that and of an increase in fines, so this is under active consideration as part of that. This issue is not unique to Northern Ireland. The research that I have done in recent days shows that this is a global issue that challenges Governments across Europe and beyond.

**Mr Irwin:** I welcome the statement from the Minister. In England and Wales, third-party liability insurance is required, along with an age restriction, to own or walk an XL bully dog. Does the Minister plan to introduce those measures as part of the legislation?

**Mr Muir:** The requirements will include a requirement to obtain public liability insurance. From the figures on the roll-out of the scheme in England and Wales, I understand that 56,000 exemption certificates have been applied for but only 300 people have given up their animals. That gives the context of how that scheme is going. I reiterate the point that Alan Chambers outlined: no perfect solution to this is available to me. All that I am doing is using what is available to me now.

**Mr Brown:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He has clearly articulated the need to balance public safety with animal welfare. How does his statement relate to his wider agenda for updating animal welfare legislation and policy in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his question. I have been engaging with officials over the last four weeks on a range of areas, including animal welfare and this matter. I will engage with officials again later this week on priorities for policy and legislation in this area. I desire to use secondary and primary legislation to update animal welfare provisions in Northern Ireland. It is important that I set that out as a key priority. The statement does not distract from that.

As Minister, in making this decision, I have, I believe, balanced and put at the forefront the issues of public safety and animal welfare. There are many responsible owners of XL bully breed-type dogs, and it is important that I state that. However, it is not lost on me that I have seen examples of people who have acquired a dog and, frankly, abused it for their own gratification and as a reflection of power. It is a disgrace that anyone would use an animal for their own gratification and desire for control in their community. We need to call time on that.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Of course, the issue is not just about attacks on people: in rural areas such as my constituency, we have seen attacks on livestock, which destroy farmers' livelihoods. Those attacks do not solely involve XL bully dogs. Will the Minister commit to dealing with the issue overall? Will he create more powers for councils to deal with it and protect farmers' livelihoods?

**11.30 am**

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for her question. She is right in stating that issue. There are probably two aspects to her question. One is the attacks on other dogs. A Member brought concerns to me about another dog that was killed by an XL bully breed-type dog while the person was out walking the dog. It caused real trauma for the family associated with that dog. The other issue relates to livestock worrying. BBC Radio Ulster's 'Countryside' programme at the weekend highlighted concerns around livestock worrying and the impact that that can have on farming businesses and livestock. I am quite keen to explore with officials what more we can do to deal with that issue. There are enforcement powers, but there are issues with education as well. When it comes to farms that

are closer to urban areas, people may not understand the need to ensure that their dog is kept under control. It is something that I am concerned about, and I thank those behind the programme on the radio at the weekend for highlighting those issues.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister will also understand that many responsible owners will be quite concerned this morning. Will the Minister give a clearer definition of what will constitute an XL bully dog? There will be owners of bulldogs that are not XL bullies who will be seriously concerned this morning.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his question. As I outlined in the statement, we will seek to use the definition that was adopted by the UK Government. A working group was set up by DEFRA on that matter.

I acknowledge that the fact that I am making an announcement and bringing in enhanced restrictions will cause concern for people. I ask people to give us time to publish guidance and to give clarification on that, because our desire is to do so. It is not a decision that I have rushed into, and I am conscious that, as you said, there are very many responsible owners. Let us be clear: for the overwhelming majority of owners, it will not cause a problem because there will be a road to applying for an exemption certificate. We will be able to ensure that those dogs will continue to be loved and cared for while we safeguard the public.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you, Minister, for coming to the House today to give your statement. You have clearly outlined how you have balanced public safety and animal welfare in your decision. I was very concerned when I learned about the recent XL bully attack in Northern Ireland, in which someone sustained life-changing injuries. Will you outline whether you considered any other options before announcing this decision?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for her question. I looked through many different options, particularly in relation to the legislation that was presented to me. I looked at what flexibilities would be associated with that, at what options other than euthanasia may exist if the owner decided that they did not wish to apply for an exemption certificate and at whether we could give assistance in rehoming dogs. That was not possible. I honestly and genuinely feel that I can say to the House that I fully explored all options that were available to me in relation to the issue. The decision that I have announced

is, to me, the only viable option with which I can proceed.

I know that it will cause apprehension and concern for not only owners of the dogs concerned but stakeholders. I get that, and I fully appreciate that. All that I ask for is recognition that I have made the decision in full cognisance of the facts and of the need to take a decision on the matter. Frankly, I took this job not because I thought that it was easy but because I knew that it was hard.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you talk about how you are going to design and implement an exemption scheme. What will the exemption scheme be designed to do? What is the difference between a register and a licence?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his question. Under the exemption scheme, the individual owner will apply for a certificate of exemption. A number of conditions will be associated with that. The animal will need to be neutered. It will need to be kept on a leash and muzzled in public. There will also need to be public liability insurance. The animal will need to be kept in secure conditions. The owner must also inform authorities of any change in address, and there will be wider requirements about not selling, exchanging or giving away the animal.

I will outline the licensing scheme that we have in Northern Ireland. We are unique in that we continue to have that scheme for dogs in Northern Ireland. I think that that is a good thing. Other parts of the UK do not have that. However, there is a risk that not everyone licenses their dog. Hopefully, today is an opportunity to remind people of the requirement to license their dog.

Some queries may arise as to the cost of the certificate of exemption. We will have to set a price, but we do not intend to generate a profit from the cost of that certificate. The fee that is charged in England is £92.40. We want to work genuinely with district councils on the roll-out of the certificate, because it is primarily district councils that will administer the scheme. I hope that that answers the Member's question.

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I agree with him that the overwhelming majority of dog owners are responsible. Minister, do you foresee a significant increase in the number of XL bully dogs coming to Northern Ireland from GB before legislation is put in place? What engagement have you had with the Royal

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA), which are opposed to the ban, to alleviate their concerns and to further understand the message that they are putting out?

**Mr Muir:** On the question of engagement with the RSPCA and the USPCA, I spoke to the USPCA before I made the statement. I am conscious that it does not agree with my position on the ban. However, as Minister, I have to take decisions in the round and to be conscious of public safety. I have made clear my genuine desire to continue to engage with the USPCA and other organisations so that we can shape much better, fit-for-purpose legislation around animal welfare. I understand and have a lot of respect for the genuinely held position that the USPCA takes and what it advocates for.

On the issue of more XL bully-type dogs coming to Northern Ireland, the decision that I have announced today sends out a clear message that restrictions will be put in place in Northern Ireland. It is important that I do that. If I left it any longer, the risk of more animals coming into Northern Ireland would increase greatly. The decision that I have announced today will, hopefully, provide a clear message and deterrent to anyone who is thinking of coming to Northern Ireland with a dog: enhanced restrictions will be in place to safeguard the welfare of the animal but also the public.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister will be aware that, in England, there is a live judicial review of the measures that were taken there. How far has what has emerged in that review informed the Minister's approach? When he refers to "legislation" in his statement, I take it that he is referring to secondary legislation. Will that be by negative or affirmative resolution, and what is the timeline?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his questions. I am conscious of the judicial review in England and the issues associated with it. I am also cognisant of the public safety risk and the need to act swiftly. There will be two negative statutory rules. The desire is that we will lay the first one in April or May; that the second one, which will cover the compensation scheme, will be laid thereafter; and that we will have the scheme operational this summer.

**Mr Buckley:** I apologise to the Minister for not being here for the start of his statement. He will be aware that the majority of domestic animals



have the potential to be dangerous if they get into the hands of the wrong owners. What efforts can the Department make to ensure that we do not gaslight particular breeds but, rather, run out of town dangerous and irresponsible owners of this breed and others?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his question. I do not seek to gaslight any breed; I seek to be driven by the evidence to safeguard the public. There is a wider message, which applies to people's responsibility as dog owners, to ensure that their dogs are kept under control so that the public remain safe. The message that I send today is that this is not unique to just one breed; there is a wider issue here. I will say, however, that the overwhelming majority of dog owners are responsible, caring and considerate of other people. That is the message that we need to send very clearly.

Whatever funding my Department receives will allow us to do education work on the responsible ownership that the Member alluded to. It is key that we focus on that, because anything that we do, as a Government, should always be focused on raising awareness around issues like this.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I am mindful that it may lead to the need for additional resource for councils and dog wardens. In my council area, dog wardens finish at 4.00 pm throughout the week and are not available on weekends. Does that concern the Minister, and will he discuss it with local councils in the coming weeks?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for her question. I will continue to engage with district councils on that. I am aware of the financial challenges that they and my Department face. It is key that we find a way forward on the matter.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his brave statement, which not only goes against the recommendation of the USPCA but goes against his own party's stated policy. I recognise that that is not an easy position to take. Has he given any thought at this early stage to what penalties those in breach of his proposed legislation might face?

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for his question and for his detailed understanding of Alliance Party policy. I do not agree that it is in contravention of Alliance Party policy. When one takes up ministerial office, one's duty, first and foremost, is to safeguard the public and not to play party politics with such things. Penalties

are laid out in the proposed legislation, and, hopefully, we will not have to resort to them.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease before we move on to the next item of business.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Dr Aiken] in the Chair)

## Private Members' Business

### School Uniforms: Affordability

**Mr Sheehan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the findings of the 2023 Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) school costs survey, which shows that 41% of parents in this jurisdiction go into debt due to back-to-school costs, with the largest expense for parents being school uniforms; is deeply concerned that the high cost of school uniforms is a source of financial stress for many families; recognises that the support provided locally through the uniform grant is the lowest on these islands; believes that the benefits of school uniforms are at risk of being undermined by unaffordable costs; calls on the Minister of Education to make school uniforms more affordable by introducing statutory guidance requiring schools to have competitive tendering processes, to remove the use of unnecessary branded items and to permit the use of cheaper high-street alternatives; and further calls on the Minister to conclude the review into the eligibility criteria for, and consider an increase in, the school uniform grant.*

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

**Mr Sheehan:** In the last few weeks of every summer, hard-pressed parents, already struggling with a cost-of-living crisis, face further financial hardship trying to afford back-to-school costs. In its annual school costs survey, the Irish League of Credit Unions found that 20% of parents say that they sacrifice spending on food to cover the costs of their children going back to school.

The survey also found that uniforms are the single biggest expense for parents during the school year, followed by lunches and then transport.

11.45 am

Research from the parent engagement group in summer 2022 found that the average cost of a post-primary-school uniform in the North was £378, and that is probably quite a conservative estimate. Save the Children would say that it is much more expensive than that. With inflation over the past 18 months or so, parents will face a significant increase in the cost of a uniform that will have a considerable impact on household budgets and family life. In fact, I listened to a single parent on the radio this morning, who has two children in post-primary education, and she said that it costs around £1,000 each year to put uniforms on their backs.

The means-tested uniform grant available from the Education Authority amounts to £87.60 for under-15s, and £93.60 for over-15s — a fraction of the average cost for post-primary uniforms. That falls well below the uniform grants that are available to parents of post-primary-school children in other jurisdictions on these islands. The upshot is that families who are already suffering the most as a consequence of the cost-of-living crisis will be most impacted by back-to-school costs.

Currently, schools' boards of governors set their school's uniform policy. However, in many instances, they choose to ignore guidance from the Education Department about uniforms. Indeed, in some cases, boards of governors have included items on their uniform lists that are totally unnecessary. Some boards of governors direct parents to use a single supplier of uniforms, which means that parents do not have the opportunity to take advantage of competitive pricing and purchase cheaper alternatives on the high street. Moreover, some schools — particularly, but not exclusively, in the grammar sector — insist on branded PE clothing, and that not only adds additional expense but acts as a barrier to some young people attending particular schools because parents know that the cost of uniforms and PE gear would be beyond their reach.

Schools should adopt a uniform policy that aims to make uniforms as affordable as possible and avoids expensive add-ons. In Spain, for example, the default position is that schools are discouraged from having uniforms at all, and the vast majority of schools go along with that. However, others do prefer to have a uniform policy, and that is acceptable. Importantly, though, where schools opt to have uniforms, those uniforms must be generic and available on the high street.

Some schools are also very inflexible on the issue of uniforms. We hear often of children

being sent home because they did not have a particular item of uniform or they were wearing the wrong type of clothing. When my son was at post-primary school, he walked to school every day, there and back; probably a journey of about 1-5 miles. I bought him a pair of pure black trainers. They were not from a big brand name, but they were more comfortable for walking. In my view, they did not in any way contradict what I saw as the uniform policy, but he was sent home one day because he did not have what the school referred to as "a proper pair of shoes". Of course, a proper pair of shoes would have been much more uncomfortable for him on his journey to and from school. However, at the end of the day, I had to buy a pair of dress shoes for him.

The most concerning aspect is that it is those families who can least afford the cost of school uniforms who are most disproportionately affected by the expense. It affects not just families who are on benefits. Often, when we have discussions about the affordability of uniforms, school meals or anything like that, it is presumed that we are talking about people who are on benefits. It actually affects the people who are on low incomes and just above the threshold of the eligibility criteria who really feel the pressure, especially if they have more than one child in post-primary school. It is time to stop placing a financial burden on those who can least afford it. It is time that the barriers that prevent some children accessing certain schools are removed. No child should ever be denied access to a school because his or her parents cannot afford the uniform. It is time for the Minister to take action.

I commend the motion to the House, and we will also support the Alliance amendment.

**Mr Mathison:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*After "make school uniforms more affordable by" and insert;*

*"implementing an annual price cap on total school uniform costs and"*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** You have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

**Mr Mathison:** Alliance is pleased to support the motion. We hope that the House will also accept our amendment, which, as I will set out,

will help to further tackle extortionate uniform costs.

I am delighted to see the motion being debated. I think that we all know just how many families in our constituencies are suffering as a result of the ever-rising cost of school uniforms. Every August, the media cover the issue and we hear genuinely heartbreaking stories of families getting into debt and sometimes having to skip meals to meet the cost of their child's school uniform, which, for many post-primaries, can run into the hundreds of pounds. Therefore, I welcome that we are having the debate now in March. We are not having it as we look at a cliff edge in September. The issue really cannot be allowed to make another appearance in the summer and then go away for another year. We have been in that cycle for too long. We need to listen to parents and guardians and act as soon as possible to get the issue under control.

I thank, in particular, Naomi McBurney from Save the Children for all the hard work that she has undertaken on the issue. The round-table event in the Long Gallery that many Members here attended back in November provided a very stark insight into the harm that is caused by uncapped school uniform costs and that is visited on families every year. I also note the previous work that Pat Sheehan referenced through the parental engagement group and the research that it carried out on the issue. Data from the Save the Children survey across Northern Ireland tells us that, in 2023, six in 10 families struggled to cover the cost of school uniforms and PE kits. An astonishing 73% of low-income families that were surveyed said that they found purchasing school uniforms and PE kits financially challenging, with 49% of middle-income families reporting the same issues. Another worrying figure that emerged from the survey was that one in 10 parents said that their child had missed out on school due to issues relating to school uniform or PE kits. The cost of school uniforms and PE kits is preventing children accessing their right to education. That cannot be allowed to continue.

In that same survey, respondents told us about having to use credit cards, incur debt or borrow money from family or having to rely on grandparents on an annual basis to cover the costs of uniforms and PE kits, with spending on food, energy and fuel often being reduced to meet the cost. That is done to meet the cost of something for a child when that child has a right to attend school and that parent has a legal duty to send them. That cannot be acceptable. Many of those who were polled spoke personally about the dread, stress and worry that they feel each year as they think about

buying new uniforms and their children starting school in September. Those are not words that should be associated with your child's journey through the education system. For many, the impact is felt over several months as they deal with mounting debt, which they then have to bear the burden of over the year.

After PE kits, which have been raised as a particular problem, with branded items being insisted on in uniform policies, blazers and shoes are cited as the next most challenging items to purchase. Those who were polled felt that, across the board, school boards of governors are not doing enough in their policies to keep the costs down. We know that the school uniform grant here is significantly less than what is available in other parts of the UK. The parents polled who are eligible for the grant said that it is never enough, due to the uncapped costs of uniforms being so high.

Save the Children shared a particularly heartbreaking story about a single parent who had always struggled with paying for the cost of uniforms. She received a grant, but it did not cover the cost of the uniform, so she ended up in a scenario where she was borrowing money and incurring further debt. She eventually had to request that her parents step in to clear the debt in order for her to get her finances back on a stable footing. That is somebody who received the grant that is meant to support parents with the cost.

The Parentkind national parent survey 2023 found that nearly one in three parents in Northern Ireland struggles with the overall cost of sending their child to school. Parents in Northern Ireland, in particular, have higher levels of concern about those costs compared with those in any other jurisdiction in the UK. The parents here who were surveyed cited the cost of school uniforms as their primary concern.

In thinking about this issue, I have been lucky enough to meet a number of children and young people over the past year or so to discuss their ideas and concerns when it comes to school uniforms. I thank the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's youth panel and the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland for their engagement with me on the issue. While, almost without exception, the children agreed that the concept of wearing a uniform has some merit as an equalising force in schools, concerns were repeatedly raised that it further embedded socio-economic divides that they were already highly conscious of in their schools. Older students remarked that they were acutely

aware of the impact of the high cost of uniforms and PE kits on their parents and on family life. Students should not be bearing the stress of the financial strain that their parents face just to enable them to attend school. Again, it is not acceptable.

The expense of starting secondary school has been repeatedly highlighted to me by students, with tighter uniform requirements and the branded items really coming to the fore. Pupils highlighted the fact that, in some sixth-form settings, costs rise again. There are specialised blazers for sixth form and specialised blazers if you are appointed a prefect. Again, that is a further uniform cost when you might have a blazer that fits perfectly well available from the previous year. It has been noted that uniforms help to promote equality among pupils and take away the pressure to fit in based on how you dress every day, but it is disappointing that that pressure, which might be passed to a pupil if they had to wear something other than a uniform every day, is now passed on as a financial pressure to the parent.

Our amendment seeks to implement a price cap on total school uniform costs. Ideally, we would like to see that set independently and a body established to be responsible for setting the affordable cap each year. The cap would be the maximum amount that any board of governors could require a parent or guardian to pay for their child's school uniform. We hope that, as soon as possible, possibly on a phased basis, the school uniform grant can align with and be fixed at the same amount as the school uniform cap, meaning that those most in need would receive financial assistance that covers the actual cost of the uniform, not a gesture towards it. That measure would ensure that meaningful steps are taken to drive down costs. We do not believe that words and aspirations are enough any longer, because, regrettably, boards of governors have not complied with the guidance in many instances, and learning from England suggests that the statutory guidance that was introduced in that jurisdiction, unfortunately, has not been complied with either and that students and families face the same costs and pressures.

I welcome the motion's call on the Minister of Education to conclude the review of eligibility for the school uniform grant. I urge the Minister to act as soon as possible to publish the review's results to ensure that as many families as possible can benefit from an enhanced grant this September. While we support the motion and its call to introduce statutory guidance, I hope that this debate will draw out some of the

failures around the system in England to deliver.

The cost of school uniforms has been an issue for years. It is only going to get worse as the cost-of-living crisis continues to impact on family finances. I therefore urge all Members across the House to support our amendment to demonstrate that we are serious about tackling the issue, which is having a harmful impact on families across Northern Ireland every year.

## 12.00 noon

**Mr Brooks:** A school uniform will have formed a key part of the childhood of most if not all of us here and been part of our earliest and, I hope, for most, our fondest and happiest days. School uniforms are symbolic of a shared experience between ourselves, our friends and our classmates in our formative years, who are often people from different backgrounds and types of family and from homes with varying incomes.

For many of us, any other child was a friend to talk to and play with. I do not say that naively, and I do not presume that it is the experience of all, but, for the most part, children at our schools do not analyse their classmates through a lens of social class or parental income as immediately or as instinctively as many of us who are older do. That is a good thing, and it is, at least in part, down to a uniform. On that basis, I am glad that the motion implicitly recognises the value of a school uniform as a leveller and as something that should promote togetherness, unity and pride in a child's school and shared experience. School uniforms are a positive part of our school days, yet there is clearly and increasingly an issue with their cost. That is why, I suspect, every party had something to say on it during the previous election campaign, and it is why the issue has come to the Floor so soon after the Assembly's re-establishment.

The motion is right to warn that the very reasons why we support the use of uniforms risk being undermined when the cost of those uniforms become exorbitant. If, through excessive use of branding or exclusive trader arrangements, a uniform itself becomes an indication of who has and who has not, it accentuates rather than curbs elitism and social hierarchy and becomes a source of anxiety rather than pride. That is not only unacceptable to us; it violates the fundamental reason for having them.

I do not think that any school wants to add significantly to the financial burden or anxiety of

parents, nor would they seek to make a child feel excluded. The vast majority adhere to guidance that is already out there, are sensitive to such barriers and rightly seek to minimise them. They want to see pupils thrive; indeed, few, if any, elements of the public sector have as much engagement with young families as our school staff at all levels. They are often the first to recognise and assist when a pupil is facing difficulty. In that vein, most schools have been proactive in meeting the needs of their wider school community and awake to the challenges of the cost-of-living crisis, limiting branded items and facilitating pre-loved uniform shops. However, we know that, disappointingly, a minority have been less sensitive and reactive.

Many of our communities, as we will have heard, have been supported by charities and community organisations. I am aware of a number of excellent schemes in east Belfast. The EastSide Partnership's Scaffolding Project and the Cregagh's TeamDot provide free pre-loved school uniforms. I am aware of many voluntary, community and faith-based organisations that help in that way. We should thank those individuals and organisations, yet we should not be relying on them. In many ways, their existence demonstrates the need for all levels of government to do more. That is something that the DUP has argued for. We urged the Westminster Government to act to extend the zero rate and consider a cap. The Minister, early in his tenure, is looking at ways to protect parents from financial stress and enhance pupil experience that are not overburdensome on schools. A pre-consultation exercise is taking place, and I look forward to promoting school, parental and wider community engagement with a fuller consultation later in the year. That will doubtless address some of the key issues that we have already heard about today.

An uplift in uniform grants is a sensible and desirable option. However, last week, the House debated SEN provision. We are all aware of the need for more funding to meet the challenges there. It is a familiar retort, but such initiatives all require resource. Nobody is opposed to supporting families and children in this way, least of all the Education Minister, but the decisions to deliver or not deliver such support are often not made at his desk; they are made when the budget is allocated, which, as ever, is something for all parties and all Ministers to consider.

Parents in Northern Ireland should be able to consider a school on the basis of educational outcomes and pastoral care and not of whether

they can afford its uniform. However, ensuring that that fundamental principle is reality is not just a role for the Minister: we all have a role to play.

**Mr Butler:** I support the motion and believe that we will support the amendment, although we probably have a couple of things to tease out on that. I declare an interest as a member of a board of governors, as a parent who will be involved in the process of purchasing uniforms over the next few years and as someone who, a long time ago, was a young person who felt the effects of this. The effects are not new. They have been there for over 40 years, unfortunately, probably longer. It is possible that even Mr Sheehan felt the impacts of this when he was a young person.

The truth is that every young person and child in Northern Ireland has the right to a free education, but the evidence is clear that the lack of accountability for the cost of school uniforms and PE kits is building a barrier to many children getting that right to free education and the school of their choice, simply because their family cannot afford some of the mandatory kit. Sadly, the Assembly has failed thousands of children over the years by not acting sooner to tackle the rising costs of school uniforms and PE kits. Those young people deserve better from all of us.

We have known for many years that this is a problem, but we have been ineffective and allowed the status quo to remain. We cannot do that any more. The public want us to act, and families cannot afford for us not to act. Growing numbers of families experience a building dread — I felt it when I was growing up and again when my children were growing up — when the summer holidays are coming to an end and the school bills start to stack up. For many families, that has become an eye-watering moment every summer. For many of those families, the return to school after the summer means a deep financial struggle that stretches them to the brink, and, as Mr Sheehan rightly pointed out, it is often the low-paid families who struggle most. We have allowed the situation to get out of control: sadly, uniform has become dominated by expensive branded and crested items that are, in many instances, unnecessary and, as we have read in many reports, seem to cost more than the monthly grocery shop.

The motion states that families are getting into debt. Recent research from Save the Children revealed that around one in 10 children has had to miss school due to issues with school uniforms and PE kits. That is not right, and the Assembly should not be comfortable with any

child experiencing that. I have met the Department of Education about this, and I know that the Minister has outlined concerns about the attendance figures of many of our children. The Assembly, along with schools, should do all that we can to address the barriers and ensure that financial worries around uniforms are not one of the problems.

The motion calls on the Minister of Education to:

*"make school uniforms more affordable by introducing statutory guidance requiring schools to have competitive tendering processes, to remove the use of unnecessary branded items and to permit the use of cheaper high street alternatives".*

Evidence from England and Wales, where that action has been taken, shows that statutory guidance alone is simply not enough. We need to grasp the nettle and consider the value and efficacy of embedding a price cap that could be decided by an independent panel. I want to see that teased out more in the debate. That would not only protect families from unreasonable demands on their finances but ensure that we do not end up with a two-tiered system of those who can and those who cannot afford expensive, branded kits. There are some great examples that the Minister may well point to of schools that have shown that it is possible to reduce costs while maintaining quality. I urge the Minister to showcase those schools as models that could be followed.

Children have one childhood. Let us not burden them with the issue of how they dress for school, and let us allow their parents the dignity of being able to afford a school uniform and a PE kit without having to sacrifice basic items such as food and energy or, indeed, get into debt. We have a real chance to make a tangible difference and to put money back into the pockets of families. We need to act quickly. The first steps of tackling the issue do not come with a huge price tag. Yes, under the current arrangements, the grant is much too low and schools remain unaccountable, to some extent, for their decision making, but the delivery of statutory guidance with an embedded price cap will not cost millions or create budget pressures, so there is no excuse for stalling.

I will end on a point that is not in my notes. The Chair of the Education Committee raised a good point. There are pressures on families — I talked about summer coming to an end and having to finance school uniforms — but the vicarious passing on of that trauma to our children exacerbates mental ill health and well-

being issues for pupils. This is an easy win that we can secure before September, and I hope to hear the Minister respond in a positive way.

**Ms Hunter:** The SDLP supports the motion and amendment today, and we thank Members for tabling them. I am grateful that this issue is being discussed, as it has come up a significant number of times while canvassing for a number of elections

We support the motion and the amendment. I recognise that we in the North continually lag behind on grant support for uniforms. When we look at our neighbours in Scotland, England and Wales, it is clear that they are on a better course on the issue than we are. In Scotland, there is a uniform grant of £124 at primary-school level, which rises to £150 at post-primary. In England, there is a flat rate of £150 per student at primary and post-primary level. In Wales, the grant stands at £125 for primary level, and there is a significant increase in year eight to £200 for years nine to 11, which, for any parent, is arguably the most expensive time, when they have to buy blazers, an entire new uniform, PE kits and more.

**Mr McGrath:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Hunter:** Yes.

**Mr McGrath:** Those examples are from places where assistance is provided. Does the Member agree that, while the debate is welcome, it is just a debate and that we need to see the Minister committing, in his remarks, to coming back quickly with detailed recommendations so that we can help families?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The Member has another minute.

**Ms Hunter:** Thank you.

I thank the Member for his comment. The debate is an opportunity for the Minister, hopefully, to commit to ensuring that families who struggle so intensely with financial pressures will have a sense of relief. Hopefully, the Minister will action that today. At the end of the day, motions are well intentioned and well meaning, but, without backing and commitment from Departments, there is little that we can do.

In the South, parents get €150 for primary-school students, which increases by 80% to €275 at post-primary level. In the North, the grant is, frankly, pathetic. We furnish our primary-school students with just £25.75, which, given inflation, will maybe buy a couple

of polo shirts. That is embarrassing. We can do much better. It really is not enough.

I, too, thank Save the Children, Action for Children and Barnardo's for continually pushing the impact of poverty experienced by children in the North. One in 10 children — I always push that figure — in the North of Ireland experiences poverty. When children go to the classroom, a place that should be exciting and dynamic and where they should have a hunger for learning, they should not be experiencing food poverty with nothing in their stomach. They certainly do not need the burden and fear of the cost of a uniform as well.

That is why it is so good that we are here today to reflect on the survey outcomes from parents. It does not take long for us to realise why the issue is so significant and such urgency is needed. The fact that the survey reported that two fifths of parents in Northern Ireland have found themselves going into debt is truly shocking and deeply concerning. I hope that the Minister will agree that it should be a priority for the Department to alleviate the stress facing working families and all families. I reiterate that action is needed as soon as possible.

The Assembly's Education Service does a fantastic job. One of the debates that it runs all the time is on 'School Uniforms or No School Uniforms?'. I welcome the Chair of the Education Committee's comments about listening to our young people. Every time I have been at one of those debates, the issue has been raised — from the mouths of children — that the negative is the cost. That is interesting: children in P3 and P4 are intelligent and aware of the burden that buying uniforms can put on their family. It is important to mention that.

Through our policies, the SDLP wants to increase the school uniform grant; make the guidance in our schools statutory, as in other parts of these islands; allow more flexibility so that, as was mentioned by Members, off-brand items of clothing can be used, as they are often more affordable; make that statutory guidance include affordability and the practicality of uniforms from several suppliers; and regularly review cost and suppliers. The cost is just incredible. I remember the dread that you would feel as a teenager when you asked your mum or dad for new clothes. As a child, you know the pressure that that puts on your family.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Hunter:** Yes.

**Mr McNulty:** Does the Member agree that having branded uniforms places additional pressure on young children, especially from impoverished backgrounds, who do not feel that they measure up, if their families cannot afford uniforms? There is also a bullying aspect to the problem. Young kids feel that they are not measuring up. Does the Member agree how unfair it is to put that pressure on young children?

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Member for his comment and wholeheartedly agree. That is where communities across Northern Ireland have stepped up by providing places where people can get recycled clothes and recycled school uniforms. That is really positive, but they should not have to do that.

Every child in the North wears a uniform, so we need to ensure that we provide the necessary grant support to support each and every child. I take the Member's point; he is spot on.

### 12.15 pm

In conclusion, poverty impacts on families in each and every one of our communities. We are now at a stage at which families with two working incomes cannot afford school uniforms because they are struggling with bills. A cheaper alternative should be allowed so that children can focus on education and more money is kept in the pockets of families here.

**Mr Baker:** Education is our children's passport to the future, and we have to open the door for them to walk through rather than create barriers. A survey for Save the Children NI highlighted the fact that one in 10 children has missed out on school because of a uniform issue. That potentially means that 35,000 children and young people are missing school days because of uniform. Our children deserve better. Every child and young person has the right to an education, and, if cost becomes a barrier, the system is broken.

The cost of some school uniforms could easily match that of a designer outfit. School uniform is supposed to be the great equaliser, levelling the playing field for children and young people in our classrooms and promoting a shared identity and equality. It seems, however, that those ideas have been lost somewhere along the way. Year-on-year, parents are putting themselves into debt just to afford uniforms for their children. That cycle of debt is hard to escape. Families rely on credit union loans and credit cards to buy school uniforms, with the worry and stress of repaying that debt

throughout the year, only for the cycle to repeat itself in the new school year.

To fully understand the challenges that parents face, it is important that real-life stories be heard in the Chamber. I will share a story from one of my constituents. Rachel, a mother of three, one of whom has additional needs, told me of the stress, financial pressure and outright worry that she and her husband face every year in getting their kids ready to go back to school and supporting them throughout the year. For her two daughters, who are in secondary school, the cost is frightening. The two blazers that the school requires cost £270. Then come the jumpers with the logo, shoes, skirts, shirts, ties and PE kits. All in, for the girls, the cost is nearly £800. Rachel's son, who is in primary school, not only needs his uniform but has additional requirements, such as ear defenders and sensory issue-friendly shoes, to make him more comfortable in the classroom, which total £230. All in, before a pen or pencil is bought, before transport and lunch costs, that family has spent £1,000. That is not sustainable, and something has to give.

Sinn Féin wants to deliver real change for our children and families. It is clear that the uniform grant needs to be increased and expanded. It is unfair that the area with the highest level of deprivation in Britain and Ireland has the lowest uniform grant. We want the grant to be available to more families, and it should be increased to cover more costs. School uniforms need to be more generic and easier to access from more suppliers. Despite guidance from the Department that that should be the case, school uniforms are still unaffordable. We have to work with schools, teachers and boards of governors to make sure that the change that families, children and young people want to see is not only felt but delivered at every level of the education system. There needs to be a legal obligation along with support and guidance for schools from the Department.

The motion today is a step in the right direction. Let us work together to ensure that the voices of Rachel's family and the many parents who are out there are heard loud and clear and, most importantly, that we deliver real change to ensure that every child has free and accessible education and that their uniforms are affordable. Our children and our families deserve better.

**Ms Brownlee:** As a parent whose daughter started secondary school in September, I know all too well the significant costs that are associated with purchasing school uniforms. I am delighted to see the motion and the



amendment, as we should address this burden as soon as possible.

The cost of uniforms can be extortionate to the point of being simply unaffordable. That is only compounded for families with multiple children. No parent should be excluded owing to the cost of a school uniform. I agree, of course, that financial support for those in low-income households should be supported, continued and protected, but I will also highlight the plight of working families. Owing to the strict criteria and threshold, working families are continually excluded from government support. They, too, have been hit extremely hard by the cost-of-living crisis. They continue to receive no support with childcare, housing, rates, the cost of living, uniforms or lunches, yet they are seeing their costs continually rise, leaving them literally on the breadline. We need to ensure that everyone across society is supported. We have previously urged Westminster to recognise the extortionate price of uniforms and to extend the zero rate or else introduce a price cap to support families and children in Northern Ireland. We will continue to do that.

Significant work has been done by local councils and the community, voluntary and faith sectors to tackle the issue head-on. In my constituency, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council's community planning partnership has teamed up with community advice services to help provide parents with good-quality, clean, pre-worn school uniforms at no cost. A uniform pop-up shop was opened in Carrickfergus town centre during the summer, and a number of community groups and charities offered support and assistance.

We must, however, be realistic and recognise the societal pressures on young people and the demand that those place on their parents. Children are under pressure to have the top brands and to keep up to date with the latest trends, and the unfortunate truth is that parents are forced into financial stress, taking out loans and using moneylenders as a result of that constant demand. There needs to be societal change in order to reduce the stigma associated with second-hand clothes or clothes swaps. Achieving that will not only reduce the financial burden but be far better for our environment. I believe that societal views on the subject are changing significantly. I have to confess that I am a lover of Vinted, where one can buy and sell second-hand clothes. Doing that is becoming more and more popular, and the stigma that was once there is no longer as prevalent.

That needs to continue, and we all have a part to play, but it is by no means a solution. The real issue is that, in Northern Ireland, there is no legislation to address school uniform costs and the associated criteria. It falls to our schools to manage that day-to-day. At the moment, guidance to boards of governors encourages them to take account of affordability, but that guidance is not enshrined in law and therefore leads to inconsistencies across the board. The permanent secretary wrote to all schools in June 2023, encouraging them to take account of the guidance and of the impact on families of expensive uniform requirements, but, again, it is merely guidance. I also acknowledge that schools and their boards of governors wish to present their school to the highest possible visual standard and that flexibility around uniforms can mean a degree of uncertainty, but the reality is that the strict demands placed on parents are driving them to breaking point, placing wholly unnecessary stipulations on them and putting looks over education.

There are small changes that can be made to help address the issues presented today. It is critical that schools do not instruct parents to buy from one specific supplier or buy a certain brand, thereby giving those suppliers a monopoly of the market, given the sky-high costs that come with that. We should ensure that items are available off the peg from a number of retail outlets so that a school uniform does not become a barrier to children from low-income families. We should also reduce the number of compulsory items. Pupils should not feel stigmatised because they cannot afford the sometimes huge array of uniform and sportswear items demanded by some schools, and cost should not be a prohibitive factor in deciding which school a child attends. The aims of a school uniform are to bring the school community together and to help create a sense of belonging and cohesion for pupils. When accessibility to that uniform starts to create a barrier and exclude pupils, we need to make that change.

**Ms Egan:** I support the motion and thank those who brought this important issue to the House. I hope that the Alliance amendment about a cap on costs will receive support from across the House.

Since my election nearly two years ago, I have been contacted by parents right across my constituency who are concerned about the substantial and rising cost of school uniforms. The price of school uniforms places significant and unavoidable pressures on families each year. We need to ensure that children and

young people right across Northern Ireland can go to school in a uniform that is affordable for all families.

As the motion rightly points out, the uniform grant often does not cover the cost of the bare essentials, and, with many families struggling with the rising cost of living, support is not reaching all those who need it. Figures from the national parent survey 2023 support that and demonstrate that 48% of parents are concerned about the cost of sending their child to school, with 71% ranking uniforms as being among their top costs. In 2022, legislation came into effect in England that gave the Secretary of State for Education powers to set statutory guidance on the cost of school uniforms. That requires schools to keep prices down wherever possible. While I hope that we will go further than that, it is yet another example of Northern Ireland's falling behind, with no legislation having been introduced here during that time due to the collapse of the Assembly.

In 2021, the Secondary Students' Union partnered with the parent engagement group to conduct research into young people's views on uniform. Of the young people who were surveyed, 71% were concerned or very concerned about being disciplined for wearing incorrect uniform, while 60% were concerned or very concerned about their family's being able to afford a uniform. Those are young people who are worried that they will be disciplined because of the financial circumstances of their families. That must change.

As well as addressing costs, I would like to see a further review of school uniforms, which would look into issues including accessibility for pupils with disabilities, inclusivity and guidance on the disciplinary actions that pupils face when not adhering to school uniform rules. Pupils with disabilities or special educational needs may require additional sets of clothes due to medical needs, bespoke alterations to uniform — adding Velcro to trousers, for example — or specific items due to sensory issues. It is vital that uniform is accessible to every child who is attending a school without exceptions being necessary.

I think that women across the Chamber would agree that it would be completely unacceptable for guidance to be in place requiring us all to wear skirts when conducting Assembly business. I see no reason why girls and young women in schools should be treated any differently. I am sure that many of us questioned the practicality of our own uniforms when we were in school. Girls' uniforms are often available from a limited number of

stockists and are more restrictive in practical classes like drama. Girls and young women should be allowed to choose whether to wear a skirt or trousers. That reflects the reality of the society that we live in, and, for many, trousers would be a more practical and comfortable option. All pupils should have the option to wear whatever uniform is most suitable for them, as would be the case in a workplace or further and higher education setting.

**Mr Carroll:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Egan:** Yes.

**Mr Carroll:** I totally agree with the Member's point. Does she agree that, for people who are gender-fluid or transitioning, schools and boards of governors should reflect in their policies their choice of uniform and whatever it is that they feel most comfortable in as regards their gender or transition process?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The Member has an extra minute.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you. Absolutely: the choice should be there for a pupil to wear a skirt or trousers — whatever they feel most comfortable in. I will just reiterate that pupils should have the option to wear whatever uniform is most suitable for them, as would be the case in a workplace or further and higher education setting. If the purpose of a uniform is practicality, equality and to foster a sense of belonging, it needs to be inclusive and suitable for every single pupil in a school community.

**Mr Mathison:** I thank the Member for taking another intervention. I just wanted to refer to PE —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Will the Member sit down when the intervention is being made? That is it. There you go.

**Mr Mathison:** — particularly how it impacts on girls. We receive reports that the uniform that is required for a lot of girls to access PE means that they do not participate or, indeed, leads to their being excluded from PE. A review should factor in that issue.

**Ms Egan:** Absolutely. I am sure that the issue of PE kits is raised with all Members. As well as the cost of branded PE kits, which have been increasing throughout the years, accessibility for girls and encouraging girls and young women to participate in sport in the school setting are extremely important.

Every year, we have the same conversations about the price and practicalities of uniforms. I hope that this is the start of a more substantive conversation, enabling us to deliver affordable, practical and fit-for-purpose uniforms for all children and young people that meet their needs without continuing to place an undue financial burden on families.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I did not intend to participate in the debate, but I am enjoying it. I thank Mr Sheehan for proposing the motion. I have no doubt that his new hirsute look is just to disguise his extreme youth.

I am happy to support the motion. I have just one thought regarding branded sports gear. I imagine that we would all agree that we want children to experience as many different sports as possible. Think about the high-level outcomes of the previous draft Programme for Government.

In that, we had young people enjoying the best start in life and everybody living longer, healthier and more active lives. The only time when it is reasonable to expect a pupil to wear branded sports gear is when they are representing the school in an external event, be it a match, a tournament or whatever. Therefore, would it not be reasonable to place the burden on the school to keep a wardrobe of branded gear for that sport?

### 12.30 pm

I should have declared an interest as a governor of Movilla High School. I also declare my membership of the Policing Board. When the new police uniforms were introduced around the end of 2021 and the start of 2022, the police said that they were going to do away with the regulation that every officer needed to have a dress outfit — the formal kit for a police officer — on the basis that some of them might wear it only once or twice over the course of a long career: for example, if they were awarded a Queen's, now King's, police medal. Rather than put the onus on the officer, they were going to keep a wardrobe of dress uniforms that could be lent to officers for an occasion. That would be a sensible policy for schools to adopt on branded sportswear.

**Mr Durkan:** The worry that comes with being a parent never ends. Yet, for over 70% of parents, school uniform costs are an added anxiety and burden. School costs do not stop there: there are meals, school trips and extracurricular activities. The cost of schooling goes up and up. I am sure that many Members

have seen the escalating and shameful child poverty statistics, and the economic forecast is not good. For many parents, those hardships will deepen ahead of the next academic year.

Families struggling to make ends meet have always been forced to cut costs, even when Sinn Féin held the Education Ministry for three terms. After more than a decade of austerity, a pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis and five years of no Government, there is nothing left to cut. It is shameful that, in our society, kitting children out for school is fast becoming a luxury. Costs are forcing low-income families into debt and further into poverty.

The purpose of uniforms was to remove peer pressure, create a sense of belonging and equality and level the playing field. Branded items negate that aim. In making a distinction, they single out and stress children from disadvantaged backgrounds and create an unnecessary burden for parents. The option of purchasing high-street alternatives is a no-brainer and it is vital that schools get on board or are made to get on board. Schools should also offer and be supported to offer uniform recycling schemes to reduce costs and help the environment. Many of those schemes exist in the community. One that comes to my mind immediately is the Focus project, which operates in the heart of Creggan, an area of huge disadvantage. That really has provided a lifeline to many families in recent years.

Capping costs is one thing, but tackling the unaffordability and the greatly diminished support will require buy-in from multiple Departments. We should increase the uniform grants, and the eligibility criteria for those grants and for free school meals must also be addressed urgently. Figures that I recently obtained from the Minister show a reduction of almost 4,000 in eligible applications for free school meals and a drop of over 3,500 in the number eligible for uniform grants for the 2023-24 financial year. That reduction is deeply concerning and is largely attributable to the universal credit managed migration, which has seen the eligibility income threshold drop from around £16,000 to under £14,000. It is ludicrous to reduce support when the need continues to grow. Without intervention, it will only get worse from here.

We in the SDLP warned of the devastating impact of welfare reform, and I take no satisfaction in saying that much of what we said and warned about has, sadly, come to pass. The welfare safety net has been eroded, and thousands of people and families are now falling through it and beyond the breadline, as

its impact is fully realised. This move will strip some of the poorest families of vital support, come September 2024. As Ms Brownlee said, the working poor are being pummelled.

Addressing inequalities and providing sustained support will improve children's educational experience and attainment well into the future, but action is needed now, before the situation spirals completely out of control. The Minister of Education, the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance have six months to address the escalating situation by creating bespoke legislation or, at least, making meaningful interventions on uniforms and free school meals.

**Mr Mathison:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that one of the ways that the Minister of Education and the Minister for Communities can work together on that is by looking at how data sharing could bring in auto-enrolment for free school meals? Around 20% of parents whose children are eligible for free school meals do not access them. If those Departments could work together, work could be done in that area.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that intervention. I cited figures that showed a reduction: they related to unsuccessful applications. I am fully aware that there are people out there who do not apply. Sadly, there is still a stigma around applying for assistance, no matter how desperately it is needed. I concur entirely that data sharing should be the norm rather than the exception.

Action on this issue should be a priority for our Executive. I look forward to the Minister's response in that regard.

**Mr Carroll:** Members have spoken about the importance of the motion and the issue, and one Member mentioned last year's LucidTalk polling, commissioned by Save the Children, which found that parents are cutting back to afford uniforms. A clear majority of parents — six in 10 — struggle to meet school uniform costs. That is an unacceptable situation. It is appalling that families have to choose between feeding and clothing their children. That really sums up the state of our society.

It is an obvious point, but no parent should have to worry about how they will afford to send their children to school. Working-class households, which have been hammered by years of Tory

and Stormont austerity, including the two-child benefit cap, cannot keep forking out extortionate sums for school uniforms, particularly during a cost-of-living or cost-of-profiteering crisis. We have heard reports of kids missing school due to uniform issues, and Members mentioned that today. In my view, the costs absolutely infringe on children's right to an education. The stress that every family goes through at the start of a new school year is almost unimaginable. I come from a big family, and I remember that, every August, my parents were stressed out. They did not say anything, but you could tell by the looks on their faces that having to pay the extra uniform costs put a massive pressure on them. That was many years ago; you can only imagine the pressure faced by families now, with costs going up and wages, in real terms, going down.

It is also important to note that most education workers, including teachers, realise the pressures that parents face. Many of them, of course, face those pressures themselves as parents and as underpaid workers. Recently, I was at a community event in west Belfast, and I was told by somebody that the people who used to donate presents and food parcels at Christmas are now the people who are going into those centres and seeking food parcels, because their wages are not keeping up with inflation. It is a really unacceptable state of play.

School leaders and boards of governors need to change and to take action. Schools can and should take action. We need legislation, of course, but they should take action to implement a more generic uniform. There is no need for expensive blazers or branded PE kits. It is a choice that serves nothing and nobody except the companies involved and the outdated sense of prestige that comes with a fancy uniform. A basic school uniform — two pairs of trousers and some shirts and jumpers — can be bought for in and around £20. Some *bunscoileanna* [*Translation: Irish-medium primary schools*] have uniforms with branded school jumpers that cost around £20 or so. It can be done. The state can and should intervene to curtail uniform costs. Schools should be mandated to source more affordable uniforms. People mentioned the Tories bringing in legislation in England a number of years ago.

It is our view that families should not have to pay any core costs for education. Uniforms, like books and other necessities, should be free in all schools. There are just over 300,000 pupils in the North: if we were to give every one of them £100 for a generic uniform, that would cost over £33 million. I know that the Minister and others may say that that is unrealistic and

that the money is not there, but by comparison, during COVID, £145 million was spent on the high street voucher scheme. Are we to say that pupils' education is less important than that scheme? I hope not.

We would pay for it by taxing the rich and by taxing companies and corporations that are making and boasting of record profits. Pre-tax profits among the North's biggest firms rose by 46% to £1.367 billion last year. Corporate sales are up to £31 billion, and UK wealth is up at £15 trillion, an overwhelming majority of which is in the hands of the ultra-rich 1%. There is a lot of wealth around these islands, but it is in the hands of the wrong people. We need to have that conversation about taking from the wealthy and putting it into the hands of ordinary people, including those who struggle to pay uniform costs.

Finally, we also need to have a conversation, which is connected to the debate, about abolishing the grammar-school system if we are to truly have a fair and equitable education system. The grammar-school system reinforces the class division in our society and leads to young people feeling that they are inadequate and that they are failures, when they absolutely are not. Let us tackle uniform costs, but let us also tackle that unfair categorisation of our young people.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I thank Mr Carroll. I take the opportunity to welcome pupils from Ballyclare High School to the Assembly. I apologise for missing them a bit earlier. The Minister has 15 minutes.

**Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is apt to have some young people come in at this stage, when we are debating school uniform policies. My daughter was playing hockey against Ballyclare High School yesterday. They managed to get a draw out of us this time. The last time we played them, we were successful, but they played well yesterday.

The issues that we are speaking about are hugely important. On day 1, when I came into office, I raised this as being, for me, a priority area that we need to address. I welcome the commitment to the issue from other parties in tabling the motion and the amendment. It is one that I share and have been leading on. Like others, I have an interest, as I have three daughters, of whom two are in post-primary education and the third will go into post-primary education next September. The cost of uniforms and PE kits and so on is real to me, albeit I doubt that many in the public will have a

lot of sympathy for politicians in meeting the costs.

I know from growing up in a family of five children that, when it came to June, July and August — Dad was working, and Mum was a full-time housewife — we would have been saving up the child benefit stamps and those would have to be collected in order to get us all ready to get out to school. I was the second child in the family. I had an older brother, which was always convenient as I got a hand-me-down from him. My next brother in line got the third hand-me-down, so he was not always particularly keen on getting another hand-me-down. That is a reality for a lot of families. Much as my parents wanted to turn us out in the best uniform when we were growing up — I, as a parent, want that — with brand-new shoes every term, that was often not the reality for a lot of people. There were second-hand uniforms and hand-me-downs within a family, and that has been a reality for a lot of people.

When I went to school at Laurelhill Community College, I was proud of my uniform. I was proud to walk into Lisburn and have the emblem emblazoned on my blazer. I identified with the school and had a commonality with everybody in the school, because we all wore the same uniform and were proud of it. That is why I think that uniforms are important. I support uniforms being worn, and I do not believe that we should get rid of them in our schools. That would be a retrograde step and would create a huge inequality, as those who could afford to dress themselves in the best gear would do so, and others would not. You would really see a difference in our school communities if that was the case, so uniforms are important.

Uniforms play a valuable role in setting the tone in a school, and they support positive behaviour and discipline. They encourage pupils to identify with and support the ethos of their school, ensuring that pupils of all backgrounds, including different socio-economic backgrounds, are welcome in the school. School uniforms also help to create a level playing field for families where they do not have to try to ensure that their children are dressed in line with the latest fashions. That helps to protect children from social pressures to dress in a particular way.

## 12.45 pm

However, it is clear that there are significant challenges in this area that potentially undermine the basis for the policy. We are all aware of the increasing costs of school

uniforms, particularly with the use of branded items or parents only being able to buy uniforms from a single supplier. That undermines the intention of school uniforms to remove barriers to education. Instead, expensive uniform requirements place an unnecessary burden on parents and children, particularly those from a low-income household.

School governing bodies are responsible for setting their own school uniform policy, and my Department has issued guidance to support schools in setting that policy. However, that guidance is only of assistance if it is followed by schools. The current guidance makes it clear that, in setting their uniform requirements, schools should ensure that they represent value for money. It recommends that schools enable uniform costs to be as low as possible through minimising branded items and ensuring that items are available from a number of retailers. It is important to put on record the fact that many schools have followed this guidance, and I welcome that. However, it also has to be said that there are other schools that have not. That is not a situation that I am going to permit to continue.

Pending any longer-term decisions, my overarching aim in this area is to ensure that all school governing bodies put affordability, comfort, sustainability and best value at the core of their decision-making when they set their school uniform requirements. I want to ensure that uniform policies are transparent and have been developed with the input and support of parents and children. That has the potential to make lives easier for children and parents by reducing the burden of the costs of attending school. We must ensure that the cost of uniform is not a barrier to children accessing education.

The credit union report referenced in the motion provides figures for the cost of going back to school. Unsurprisingly, according to the report, school uniforms are the top expense for primary- and post-primary-school parents, followed by school lunches, extra-curricular activities, transport costs and books. While the cost breakdown is not given for each of those, my officials have completed a pre-consultation on uniform costs, and it is clear, albeit from only a sample of schools, that there is a wide variation in uniform policies both between sectors and within sectors. For example, across post-primary schools, the cost of a girl's blazer can range from £50 to over £120.

I am aware that no standard list of uniform items applies across schools. The number of items of clothing required at the beginning of

the school year also varies. We should aim to ensure that schools itemise the essential school uniform items as far as possible and that second-hand uniforms are available. Uniforms should be affordable, comfortable and sustainable, with the uniform policy being developed with parents and children and published on the school website. Uniform policy should also be open to changes, subject, again, to the agreement of parents and children.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Minister, you mentioned issuing guidance. It is concerning that your Department, from what I have understood, is not issuing legislation to compel and put in law that schools be mandated to decrease costs and look at a cheaper uniform. Why is your Department not considering that measure?

**Mr Givan:** The Member raises a point that I will come to. I will speak to that issue shortly.

During the pre-consultation, officials engaged with a wide range of stakeholders. Officials are completing a consultation document setting out a number of proposals for public consultation. Those include putting our current guidance on a statutory basis, which Mr Carroll just referred to, to strengthen measures such as avoiding single suppliers and expensive branded items; ensuring that schools develop policies with the agreement of parents and children; and issues relating specifically to the uniform, for example avoiding or limiting the number of branded items required, avoiding variation in colour and style for different year groups and avoiding dry-clean-only items, which make it more expensive for parents.

The proposals will also include how the guidance will be enforced. I am keen to ensure that school governing bodies engage with parents and children when setting their school uniform policy. That is vital for establishing a uniform that is affordable, comfortable and sustainable but that still maintains the values of the school. The proposed amendment to the motion references the introduction of an annual price cap on the total cost of uniforms. In considering a cap, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved, and I will seek the views of all stakeholders as part of the consultation. It will be important that, whatever changes we make to the current guidance, we ensure that school governing bodies are required to adhere to them. The best outcome for all is that the Department, schools, parents and children work together to ensure that uniform policies are developed with the best interests of the child and young person at heart. I will wish to hear the views of parents, children

and other interested parties on the proposals as they are more fully developed. I am advised by officials that we will be in a position to consult in late spring of this year, and I am keen for us to be in a position to take decisions later in the year.

Work is ongoing on the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals and uniform grants. My officials continue to examine a range of options for increasing the number of children and young people who are able to access free school meals and uniform grants. Options being considered include raising the income threshold that applies to some of the means-tested criteria and the introduction of universal free school meal provision to pupils in some school years, and options that are a combination of the two. I will consider the next steps of the review in the time ahead. In doing so, I will take account of the potential budgetary implications of any change to the eligibility criteria.

The motion references the rates of uniform grant that are available to low-income families in Northern Ireland. My predecessor as Minister of Education increased the rates by 20% ahead of the 2022-23 academic year. It should be noted that the uniform grant had not increased from 2010 until the DUP Minister acted. That was for how long the uniform grant had stayed at the level at which it was set. It was the DUP that increased the rates. I recognise, however, that there are other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom where higher rates of uniform grant are available. Those rates of uniform grant are being considered as part of the ongoing review that seeks to make school uniforms more affordable, and, although increasing the rates of grant is one way in which to reduce the impact on families, I believe that schools seeking to minimise the cost of their uniform will potentially be of even greater benefit. I therefore again urge schools to align their uniform requirements with the Department's guidance circular that encourages them to keep school uniform costs to a minimum.

I will briefly pick up on a couple of points that Members raised. Ms Hunter mentioned the level of the uniform grant. I am not sure whether her figure was accurate, but, to put it on the record, for primary schools it is £42-90, while for post-primary schools it is £93-60, of which £26-40 is for PE costs, and the total cost of grants is £6 million. Do I want to do more? Yes, I do. That is something that will form part of my bid during the budgetary process.

Colleagues highlighted the issue of statutory guidance. Yes, there is guidance in England and Wales, but Scotland does not have

statutory guidance in this area, although it is something that it wishes to have in place by August of this year. The Republic of Ireland has no legislation on the issue, and there is no statutory guidance.

There is no price cap in place anywhere in these islands. That does not mean that we should not have one. It is something that we need to look at, and that is why the introduction of a price cap will be part of the consultation that I am undertaking. The current guidance, as I have highlighted, is there for schools to follow. I will now move to a consultation process to place that guidance on a statutory footing, and that will include looking at a price cap. Doing that will allow me to take decisions later this year. Where there is to be legislative provision, I will need to take that to the Executive. I have no doubt that the Education Committee will work with me to expedite the issue as efficiently as possible to try to get that legislative provision in place.

**Mr Butler:** I appreciate the Minister's giving way. Given the eyes that you were giving me, I did not think that you were going to. The Minister will know that I spent 20 years in uniformed services: four in the Prison Service and 16 in the fire service. In all that time, the uniform was provided for you because it was mandatory, whether it was a matter of fair wear and tear in the operational sense, or dress uniform. What about not being too restrictive with schools and trying to work with them on the price gap? When it comes to the remit of the discussions in that regard, if schools say adamantly that they need a certain piece of clothing, they should cover the cost of it. That would mean that things would not be prescriptive and would allow pupils and schools to come to some sort of arrangement.

**Mr Givan:** I understand the point that the Member is making. I suspect that, if that were the case, a number of schools would say, "Give us the budget for us to be able to provide". I know that this is an issue that he, as a member of the Education Committee, will want to explore with me. I want to work with the Committee to come forward with the right approach in all of this. I believe that we can do that, because we are coming from a shared objective across the different parties. It is about how best we do it and how effective we can make it. That is the objective that I want to achieve. The costs that are associated with uniforms should never be a barrier to what school you go to. Sadly, for some parents, it is a consideration that they are having to take into account. That is wrong. We need to make sure that there is not any barrier in place when it

comes to what school you go to, as well as the other issues that I have mentioned.

I look forward to supporting the motion and the amendment, and to working with Executive colleagues and the Committee in taking forward this matter.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Thank you very much, Minister, for bringing your remarks to a close at spot on 15 minutes.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1:00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2:00 pm. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Nuala McAllister, who will wind on the amendment. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Infrastructure**

#### **TrafficWatchNI: South Down**

1. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline why the TrafficWatchNI website does not display roadworks for the South Down area. (AQO 119/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):** I thank the Member for her question. Not all roadworks are shown on the TrafficWatchNI website. There is a considerable number of road restrictions across the North, and those that are considered to cause significant disruption are shown on the website. I am assured that significant road restrictions in the south Down area are being shown on the TrafficWatchNI website. However, I have asked my officials to review the process to ensure that a consistent approach is being taken, one that maximises the benefit of the website to the public.

**Ms Forsythe:** Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that. I have specific examples from haulage firms that have experienced difficulties in the area. Does the Minister accept that there is regional disparity and that the roads in some areas, such as south Down, have fallen behind others in Northern Ireland?

**Mr O'Dowd:** On the issue of roads being closed for repairs, I have asked my officials to review that to make sure that there is consistency of approach.

I think that the Member asks a broader question about the quality of the road network, if I am correct. It could be argued that rural roads have fallen behind. I intend to look at my budget as we move forward to see whether we can direct more funding towards our rural road network to bring it up to the standard that businesses and rural dwellers deserve.

**Mr McGrath:** During the recent flooding in Downpatrick, we found it incredibly difficult to get through to Roads Service. NI Water has a direct helpline for flooding: if you ring the flood line, you get through to a centre somewhere that can at least take the information. However, it is difficult to get through to Roads Service,



and, out of hours, it is almost impossible. Does the Minister have any intention of developing an out-of-hours number for elected representatives to contact Roads Service?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I understand that, in a flood scenario, there is a centralised number to contact and that all the agencies are coordinated into that. I expect that any messages left with that service are then forwarded to DFI Roads.

As for formulating an out-of-hours service for elected representatives, I simply do not have the resources to do that. Somebody would have to staff that, and it would have to be backed up with resources etc. That is not possible at the moment, but I will double-check that my Department and Roads Service are fully involved in the flood line to which you are able to report incidents.

## Water Infrastructure

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his plans to address issues with the water infrastructure. (AQO 120/22-27)

11. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what plans he has to upgrade the water and sewerage infrastructure. (AQO 129/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his question.

Sorry, Mr Speaker. I am trying out a new device today.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 11 together.

The Utility Regulator's price control final determination, known as PC21, recommends a capital investment of £2.1 billion in water and waste-water services in the period spanning 2021-22 to 2026-27. That figure includes over £1 billion being invested in waste-water assets. My Department has fully funded NI Water for the first three years of the price control and has provided circa £90 million of additional capital funding over and above the funding level recommended in PC21 during that period.

NI Water recently submitted to the Department its 2024-25 operating plan and budget. The Department is currently assessing that plan. At present, the Utility Regulator is undertaking a mid-term review to determine the investment levels required for the remaining three years of

the price control period. The Department awaits the outcome of that mid-term review. However, funding the investment requirement identified by the Utility Regulator will be subject to the challenging, constrained financial situation going forward.

**Mr McGlone:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his response.

Does the Minister agree that underinvestment in sewerage and water infrastructure is the biggest contributory factor in almost rendering local development plans as wish lists and, as well as that, contributing to the major environmental crisis that we had last year in Lough Neagh?

**Mr O'Dowd:** On your second point, I await an evidence base to support that claim. NI Water gave evidence to the Infrastructure Committee, at which it said that it would take responsibility for 20% of the effluent. However, my colleague the AERA Minister is taking forward a programme of work on that, so we want to make sure that we are working on an evidence base in relation to what is happening in Lough Neagh.

Certainly, I would like to be able to invest more in NI Water, but I am competing with other priorities in my Department and with other priorities in the Executive, so we will face difficult budgetary decisions as we move forward. However, I will do everything in my power to ensure that NI Water is supported as best as it can be.

On developments, we have to broaden the conversation around how we deliver waste-water treatment works for certain developments. I do not like the term "economically constrained". It almost sends out a negative right away that leads developers to say, "I can't develop there". The reality is that NI Water — it is very clear on this — is asking developers to engage with it at an early stage to see what can be done both by NI Water and the developer.

**Ms Bunting:** The Minister will be aware that the limitations on capacity are having a significant impact on planning and, therefore, growth and the provision of much-needed housing. For example, in my constituency, in Dundonald, all infrastructure, including roads, is at capacity, and there are subsequent problems with drainage and flooding. Will the Minister commit to the Living with Water scheme in Belfast in this financial year?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I understand that there are particular constraints in the Belfast area. I had a meeting with my officials this morning about the Belfast Living with Water scheme. The cost of that scheme has risen significantly. It is under review. I have asked my officials to report on that review to me as soon as possible. I will have to match that review against my budget settlement, and then, as I said to Mr McGlone, I will have to prioritise things in my Department against things in the Executive.

This goes back to the point that I made, and it should be delivered loud and clear to everyone: early engagement with NI Water is essential, particularly by developers. That brand of "economically constrained" sends out too negative a message. It is too definitive, too rigid. There are opportunities to develop in those areas. It may not be funded directly by NI Water; it may have to be for developers. I understand that there might be financial concerns around the developers, but we will have to do things slightly differently from the way in which we did them before, and we will have to be imaginative about it.

I encourage developers to engage with NI Water at an early stage. NI Water has now built up a good relationship with social housing providers, ensuring that each knows the other's priorities and plans. It is like many things in life: engagement is key.

**Mr Stewart:** In 2008, the Larne waste treatment works were opened, and it was envisaged that they would be effective until at least 2030. Six years later, they were at capacity. As a result, developments, economic and residential, have been significantly limited. Will you agree to meet representatives of NI Water and me on that site and look at what we can do to expand the capacity of those treatment works?

**Mr O'Dowd:** This could probably become a theme during Question Time: if Members wish to meet me, I am happy for them to contact my private office, and I will attempt to facilitate as many meeting requests as possible. It is difficult when I am on my feet in the Chamber to agree to various meetings.

My response to your question is the same as the one that I gave to your two colleagues: early engagement and discussions between developers and NI Water are crucial to how we move forward. As Minister, I assure you that I will do everything in my power to move matters forward, but we will have to do things differently.

The Living with Water scheme for Belfast is an example of how we can do things differently. It will take significant investment in certain areas — in other areas, not so much — but we can do things differently in certain areas, and early engagement is key.

## **A5 Upgrade: Road Safety**

3. **Miss Brogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment of how the A5 upgrade will impact on road safety. (AQO 121/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for her question. The A5 western transport corridor has been a flagship project for the Executive since it was announced in 2007. Improving road safety has always been and remains one of the key scheme objectives of the new road. My Department has therefore been focused throughout on developing plans that will greatly improve safety for all road users and benefit many communities living close to the existing A5 route by removing strategic traffic from that busy road.

The collision history on the existing road speaks for itself, in that there have been over 50 fatalities since 2006. Clearly, with a new dual carriageway on which all travelling vehicles are separated from opposing traffic and strategic traffic is separated from local traffic and local communities, there is significant potential to reduce collisions and fatalities. A clear example at local level is the provision of the new dual carriageway on the A4 between Dungannon and Ballygawley. There were 37 fatalities on that notorious road in the 10 years before the dual carriageway was opened in 2010. While every fatality is, of course, regrettable, there have been just two since the year of its opening.

**Miss Brogan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister. The Minister will understand how important the delivery of the A5 is for the people of West Tyrone, and I appreciate his continued commitment to the project. Can he outline whether he expects there to be any further legal challenges to the scheme?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Given the history of legal challenges to the scheme, I expect that there will be more, unfortunately. My Department received the report of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) on 31 October. It is a complex and detailed report that deserves to be carefully studied and responded to. When I am in a position to do so, I will respond to that

report and outline what I plan to do in the time ahead.

I appeal to those who are behind the legal challenges to the project to look at and listen to the statistics that I read out today. People are dying on the road. The road needs to be upgraded — there is no argument about that — so I ask those people to set aside their legal challenges. The PAC has produced a detailed report on how the project can be delivered, taking into account all factors, including environmental factors and people's rights. It includes all those details. I give a commitment to the House that I will faithfully respond to that report in due course.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for his answer. The Irish Government have recommitted their allocation to the A5. Can the Minister outline the current projected cost of the A5? Will funding be in place for the A5, or is the Minister making a case for that funding?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As with all major projects, particularly when there is a one-year budget, you can only confirm the budget for the following year. The Irish Government's contribution has given us headroom, and I am engaging with the Finance Minister about a contribution from the Executive.

I am also engaging and plan to engage with the UK Government. The A5 is mentioned in the UK connectivity report, and the British Government and the Treasury therefore have a responsibility to contribute to that major piece of infrastructure, which both gives road safety to the people who use it and opens the entire western side of the country up economically. We can therefore allow economic development to take place. The A5 also connects our ports and our airports. It is connectivity in every meaning of the word, and I therefore hope and expect that the British Government will contribute towards it.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for his remarks so far. In view of the funding that has been made available by the Republic of Ireland Government and the money that may be available through things such as financial transactions capital (FTC), has the Minister given any thoughts to fast-tracking at least part of the A5 and getting construction started early? One thing that has slowed it down in the past, as Members have mentioned, is judicial reviews (JRs). Can we get a start made?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I cannot give you a start date until I have concluded my deliberations on the

Planning Appeals Commission's report. It is a detailed and comprehensive report that deserves careful study. If I were to move ahead without giving that report due cognisance, I would leave myself open to another JR, further delay, rising costs and the potential of more deaths on that road. I would love to be able to come to the House and make an announcement about my decision, but I have to and intend to do this the right way.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Minister, to what extent do you attribute progress on the A5 to campaigning by the A5 pressure group and the families of the 50 people whose lives have, sadly, been lost there since 2006? Is it acceptable that there would be any further delays?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The sound was not good, Mr McNulty, but I think that you asked to what extent I blame the lack of progress on the legal challenges. Sorry, Mr Speaker, the sound is not good.

**Mr Speaker:** Yes, I did not pick it up that well either. Justin McNulty again.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, to what extent do you attribute progress on the A5 to the pressure group that has been campaigning vociferously for years, including the families of many people whose lives were lost? Fifty lives have been lost on that road since 2006. How can any further delays be explained?

2.15 pm

**Mr O'Dowd:** I welcome the fact that the local community made their voices heard, particularly during the previous Planning Appeals Commission's public hearings. Daily attendance by local people and local representatives at those events was significant. Groups such as A5 Enough is Enough have continued to make their voice heard. I am listening to them and am due to meet them in the coming weeks. They are important stakeholders in the decision-making process. As I said, I intend to study the Planning Appeals Commission's report faithfully and will respond to it in due course.

## A1 Junctions Phase 2: Funding

4. **Mr Brown** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will seek a funding contribution from the Shared Island initiative towards the A1 junctions phase 2 scheme. (AQO 122/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Shared Island initiative aims to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding across the island and engage with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future. I welcome the Irish Government's commitment to Shared Island schemes, particularly with the announcement of €600 million for the A5 western transport corridor. Officials will continue to engage with counterparts on the funding opportunities that could be secured through that initiative for projects such as the A1 junction.

**Mr Brown:** I thank the Minister for his response. Will he commit to meeting local campaigners, including the A1: How Many Must Die? group?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I have agreed to meet Monica Heaney to discuss her campaign and the tragedy of her son's death. I met her previously in my role as an MLA. I am more than happy to meet campaign groups, as is the case with groups campaigning on the A5. Local voices and those who have lost loved ones are vital to this. The A1 scheme has progressed to a point where I am unable to progress it any further, due to budgetary constraints. I constantly review my budget, however. The nature of major schemes in which my Department is involved is that some can fall behind, for a variety of reasons. That means that I can move others forward. I am spinning many plates — let us put it that way — to see how we can move projects forward.

**Mr Durkan:** Minister, I ask that any future cross-border conversations that you have on road infrastructure include the A2 Buncrana Road in my constituency. The project has been on people's radar and looming large over residents in that area for over 50 years, with no progress despite various attempts.

**Mr Speaker:** That question was pretty unconnected to the A1, but nonetheless.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am happy to do so and to engage with the British Government on their responsibility to fund some of the major infrastructure projects that we have here. I refer back to the UK connectivity report. It is an important document, and we cannot let the British Government off from living up to their responsibilities. I assure you that I make bids to whoever I talk to who, I think, has money.

**Ms Kimmins:** We have been campaigning on the A1 for some time. I, too, have met Monica Heaney over a number of years, so I appreciate

the Minister's update. Minister, how does your Department plan to address some of the safety concerns? It has been a long-standing issue, and I appreciate that you can go only so far at this stage.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for her question. Sections of the A1 were built around 40 years ago. There has been an upgrade since then, but the sections were built to the standard at the time. They do not meet current safety standards, so we have to make sure that the safety improvements, as outlined in the junction work, and the installation of the flyovers are delivered. As I said, I am looking at ways to finance and deliver those, and at whether we can do the work in phases. I am acutely aware of the project, both from my time as a constituency MLA, which I still am, of course, and from my previous role as Minister. I am carefully deliberating on it.

## Public Transport: Accessibility

5. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment of the accessibility of public transport. (AQO 123/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Department funds Translink, which works to ensure that services and facilities are accessible to all. That means creating a consistent customer experience for everyone, thus ensuring accessible public transport for people with all levels of abilities.

The public transport fleet is fully compliant with accessibility regulations. I recognise, however, that higher standards of accessibility are needed, and, where possible, Translink continues to improve the accessibility of its vehicles and stations. For example, it has agreed specifications for future bus designs with the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), with the intention that all vehicles that are used on local stage carriage services be low-floor. Translink is evaluating a low-floor, single-decker Goldliner and hopes to develop an agreed specification on that vehicle type with its stakeholders, including IMTAC.

My Department and Translink are also committed to introducing Changing Places facilities and are among the first public bodies to do so. Changing Places facilities have already been provided at Portrush station, the north-west transport hub and Lanyon Place station and are included in the plans for Belfast Grand Central station and for Botanic, Lurgan and Yorkgate stations.

My Department funds other programmes that are designed to remove the barriers to travel faced by older and disabled people, thus reducing social isolation and improving access to goods and services. Community transport services in urban and rural areas provide an affordable and accessible alternative transport option for those who have difficulties accessing the main public transport network. Finally, the concessionary fares scheme provides free or discounted access to public transport for older and disabled people, thus removing or reducing financial barriers to travel.

**Ms Sheerin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as an fhreagra sin. *[Translation: Thank you, Minister, for that answer.]* What plans does the Minister have to address accessibility problems on the existing fleet? He referred to replacing some vehicles with low-floor vehicles. Are there things such as access steps that could be added to the existing high-floor vehicles?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for her question. As I said in my response, Translink is working closely with IMTAC, a key stakeholder in the design and provision of new fleets for the service. There are always lessons to be learned. During my previous time as Minister here, I had engagement with IMTAC, and, through that, it was clear that there were areas on which we were falling down and on which we had to improve. Yes, new equipment that we purchase has to be of the highest standard and meet the needs of people of all abilities. We should also have the most up-to-date specifications in our stations, and, where we have older stations, we should look at how we will introduce designs to ensure that everyone has access to our public transport services and to the proper facilities that they require.

**Mr Dunne:** As the Minister said, it is vital that our public transport network be accessible and affordable. The consultation on the concessionary fares scheme closed over six months ago, in August 2023. Will the Minister provide an update on the future of free travel for the over-60s?

**Mr O'Dowd:** There were over 20,000 responses to the consultation, and, unsurprisingly, the majority of them were opposed to the scheme's removal, for a variety of reasons. My officials are still giving those documents careful consideration. It is my intention to retain the scheme as it is. I have to balance that against the budget that is available to me, and I will therefore have to engage with my Executive colleagues on how we maintain the current scheme. As has been proven by the

consultation responses, the scheme is important to a significant section of our society, who would be left isolated without it. I hope to be in a position to make an announcement to the Assembly in the near future, in which I will set out a definitive pathway, but there is still some more work to be done.

**Mr Speaker:** I note that you did not declare a relevant interest, Minister. *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr McReynolds:** In other parts of these islands, some people who live with disabilities can travel for free on some public transport. In Northern Ireland, doing so is a lot more limited. Will the Minister consider extending the concessionary fares scheme from half fare to free travel for those who live with disabilities and mobility issues?

**Mr O'Dowd:** That question was raised in the consultation process, and I am giving careful consideration to it. It would carry a significant financial tie if I were to increase it, but it is one of the questions that I am deliberating on and will respond to in due course.

#### **A4 Enniskillen Bypass: Active Travel**

6. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment of the impact that the A4 Enniskillen bypass will have on the provision of active travel in the town. (AQO 124/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for the question. I also take the opportunity to thank my Executive colleagues again for the funding announcement for this important scheme.

The proposed new bypass will provide a new 3.5 kilometre active travel route adjacent to the bypass, connecting into the existing footway/cycleway network. The new route will provide significant active travel benefits to the town and promote more people to walk and cycle.

The new bypass will also alleviate significant traffic congestion in Enniskillen, and it will reduce delays and improve average journey times by approximately 50% while bringing much-needed improvement to road safety in the area. The removal of through traffic will also bring enhancements to the town centre environment by improving air quality and reducing noise levels. The bypass, when open, will also create significant opportunities to enhance active travel and placemaking measures in the town centre with reduced levels of through traffic.

My Department is developing an active travel delivery plan for the North. That includes an update of the design guidance for active travel infrastructure and active travel network plans for over 40 of our largest towns and cities, including Enniskillen.

**Mr Gildernew:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for the answer.*] Minister, what are the climate impacts resulting from the Enniskillen southern bypass?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The construction of major road projects can significantly impact on climate, particularly during the construction phase. However, I am pleased to advise that the scheme shows an overall reduction in carbon emissions in the long term and has a beneficial impact on climate. In fact, the environmental impact assessment shows that, when the bypass is open, the combined emissions along the adjacent road network will have an overall reduction when compared against not having the scheme. Consequently, the scheme has a carbon payback period for its construction carbon emissions of 28.8 years.

**Mrs Erskine:** I really welcome the A4, and I hope that progress will now ensue. My question is about the Northern Ireland Audit Office report and the issues that it raised around procurement and the delivery of key infrastructure projects. Can the Minister ensure that the A4 southern bypass will be delivered on time so that there will be no further delay to the scheme?

**Mr O'Dowd:** In the absence of a legal challenge, I cannot see any further delays to the A4 scheme, but you never know where a legal challenge might pop out from. Thus far, there have been no murmurings about significant opposition to the scheme, so I hope that that remains the case.

We will have to study the Audit Office report, and the Public Accounts Committee will have to deliberate on that. However, I will say this: as a former Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, I often found that it was not that you needed new governance but that the old governance arrangements should have been used properly. The more layers of bureaucracy we put on top of our officials, the more time it takes to deliver projects. There is a balance to be found in all these things.

## Rural Roads: Upgrade Plans

7. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his plans to improve the quality of rural roads. (AQO 125/22-27)

**Mr Boylan:** I take this opportunity to apologise for missing Question Time last week.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I recognise that there has been historic underinvestment in our road network for a significant number of years and that many rural roads are in need of repairs. That is why I recently announced an additional investment of £1 million to begin to address that issue. Since 2016, my Department has targeted funds towards a road improvement package to stop deterioration and to repair severe defects on the local road network. A significant proportion of that funding has historically been targeted to the rural road network. In 2023-24, some £10 million was initially allocated to the roads recovery fund, of which £8 million was directed towards rural roads. The rural road network makes up 75% of the total road network, and therefore a significant proportion of the overall budget allocated for structural maintenance will be targeted towards the rural road network. I have also allocated a further £1 million to be spent on the fixing of potholes this year, and, in addition, I recently announced the allocation of £8.1 million for my Department's structural maintenance programme.

**Mr Speaker:** Very quickly, Mr Boylan.

**Mr Boylan:** How much has been invested in structural maintenance in 2023-24?

**Mr Speaker:** Quickly, Minister.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Including the £8.1 million capital investment in the structural road maintenance programme this year, the amount allocated for structural maintenance in 2023-24 is at a current estimate of £99 million.

That is a significant investment, but, unfortunately, it is not enough to maintain the roads to the standard that we would like.

## 2.30 pm

**Mr Speaker:** We will now move to topical questions.

## Caw Roundabout

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the fact that Caw roundabout in his constituency is, according to PSNI figures, the busiest accident black spot in

the North, to ensure that his Department works closely with the developers to deliver comprehensive and required safety improvements at this key piece of infrastructure, which will become even busier with the construction of about 900 homes in close proximity. (AQT 81/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member has corresponded with me on the Caw roundabout, as have others. My officials will engage with developers on that issue to ensure, first, that the road network is capable of taking any increased traffic on it, and, secondly, what contributions, if any, developers will have to make towards that.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. It is my understanding that the developers have already committed to a significant financial contribution as a condition of their planning but that the Department is not in a position to match that funding at the current time. It seems illogical that the developers would now proceed with work on part of the roundabout while the whole roundabout remains a problem and a danger. I implore the Minister to work with his Department to find the funding to do that now and reduce costs, maximise value and minimise disruption to motorists.

**Mr Speaker:** I did not recognise a question there, so we will move on to Órlaithí Flynn.

### Footpath: Hannahstown

T2. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the works to build a new footpath in Hannahstown village in west Belfast. (AQT 82/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** When I was previously in post as Minister in 2022, I visited Hannahstown with the Member, where I met representatives of the Hannahstown Community Association and saw at first hand the obvious need for a footway through the village. I can confirm that the scheme is a priority for my Department. I am pleased to tell the Member that the detailed design process is progressing well. Following a recent public meeting that my officials attended, the next stage of the design process is to meet individual residents affected by the scheme to agree accommodation works with them. That will start soon. It is a challenging footway scheme, and its delivery is subject to completion of the detailed design, achieving funding and land and a separate procurement process.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Minister for his response and for his commitment to the project to date. He mentioned that he met the Hannahstown residents' association recently. I know that it might be difficult to answer it at this stage, but my follow-up question is this: can the Minister ensure that the scheme remains a priority for capital funding in the Department when it gets to the stage where that funding is required?

**Mr O'Dowd:** It is a priority in terms of the stage that it is at. It will have to be assessed against all other projects when it reaches the stage where I have to match it with a capital budget. I have been pleased with the work that my officials have carried out thus far. I am hopeful of a successful conclusion.

### On-street Car Parking Enforcement

T3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his plans to review on-street car parking enforcement. (AQT 83/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** None at this stage. Enforcement is carried out for the Department by a private contractor. I have no plans in the pipeline to review that.

**Mr Beattie:** The Minister will be aware of the negative impact that on-street car parking charges have on small towns and villages. What consideration will he give to helping those communities?

**Mr O'Dowd:** There is another side to that argument. A car parked for several hours in a town centre may be taking up the parking space of somebody who is prepared to stop, go into a shop and purchase goods or services. There is certainly a number of elements that you have to look at when you are deciding on a car parking charge for any town centre or small village. However, it should be in line with how we support commercial activity rather than restrict it.

### School Safety Zones

T4. **Ms Eastwood** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after congratulating him on his new role and telling him that she used to work with his brother and is looking forward to working with him, to state whether he plans to roll-out more 20 mph school safety zones. (AQT 84/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The locations are being reviewed to see how effective they have been and whether they are having any impact on driver

behaviour. Before we came back here, I used to drop my child off at school, and I was alarmed at the speed at which some drivers thought it appropriate to drive past a very busy school, whether in the morning or the evening. Sometimes, I asked myself what signs would stop them, other than a police officer standing there ready to give them a ticket.

**Ms Eastwood:** I agree entirely with the Minister. The issue of speeding outside schools in the North needs to be prioritised. I promised my young constituents at Harmony Hill Primary School, Lisburn — Liam, Rory, Maria, Lyla and Hannah — that I would ask the Minister on the Floor of the House whether he would consider installing one of those school safety zones outside their school. I will follow up with the Minister in writing.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am happy to engage in writing with the Member about that and even to respond to her young constituents. However, as I say, the scheme is under review. We are trying to establish how effective it has been and whether it changes driver behaviour.

## A2: Resurfacing Scheme

T5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to ask his departmental officials for an update on the resurfacing scheme for sections of the A2 dual carriageway between Greysteel and Londonderry. (AQT 85/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am more than happy to engage with my officials about that, and I will report to the Member. The £8.1 million that I announced recently is for larger, more significant road resurfacing and maintenance schemes. I will report to the Member when I have a response.

**Mr Robinson:** Thank you for your answer, Minister. Do you agree that all of us who represent the north-west wish to promote it positively? However, that key route, which services the airport in the north-west, is in such poor condition and gives a terrible impression to visitors, not forgetting the damage to vehicles.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not familiar with the stretch of road, but it is clear that our roads have fallen into a state of disrepair. It is not because of unwillingness among my team or staff to repair them; it is down to the simple reality that we are not properly financed in this place. That is recognised across the Chamber. The British Government have to start financing us properly to run public services. Road maintenance is a

public service, and it needs properly financed and properly resourced.

## Potholes: Fill Level

T6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, who is on record saying that he does not choose which potholes are repaired, albeit he sets the policy, which is to fill potholes that are over 50 millimetres deep, whether he will consider reverting to the historical measure of 20 millimetres. (AQT 86/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I hope that the Member is not going around measuring potholes in his constituency. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Nesbitt:** Every day. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr O'Dowd:** You might need a metre ruler in some places, unfortunately.

We are carrying out emergency repairs. That is the service that we can deliver because of the financial situation that we are in. I assure you that my officials, the grounds team and those who work on the roads want to do more, but, unfortunately, apart from the additional finance that I gave them towards the end of this financial year, we are significantly underfunded. I am looking at my budget for next year, both capital and resource, to see what we can do. We went through a period, understandably, of much discussion of what we cannot do: I want to enter a period of discussion about what we can do. That is the approach that I am taking in the Department.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Millions is paid out because of potholes. When you think about what you pay out in compensation to drivers whose vehicles are damaged, is there not a compelling case for invest-to-save?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Invest-to-save would be an Executive strategy, and I would welcome it. However, the Executive are not exactly flush with funds either. The absence of Ministers over the last couple of years has not helped matters. Officials have had to work within a stringent budget. I have more flexibility in how I deal with my budget internally. I am studying it to see what imaginative proposals we can bring forward to ensure that we maintain our roads safely so that we are not paying out those compensation fees and can use the money that we have on improving the state of our roads, our active travel routes and anything that we can invest in.



## **Pedestrian Crossing: St Columbanus' College**

T7. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the project to install a pedestrian crossing on the East Circular Road in Bangor, which the pupils and staff of St Columbanus' College have been waiting for for four years, will actually happen. (AQT 87/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The honest answer is that I do not know, but I am more than happy to engage with my officials and report to the Member. Such things are set against criteria on traffic and the number of pedestrians in the area. It is about whether it is even safe to install the pedestrian crossing at a certain section of the road and ensuring that it does not cause a danger to pedestrians or drivers. I am more than happy to engage with my officials about that.

**Mr Easton:** Minister, all those criteria have been met, but the situation is still going on after four years. Does the Minister agree that the safety of the pupils at St Columbanus' College who use that road is paramount?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Without a doubt, the safety of all our pupils attending schools is paramount. I will put this on the record: drivers need to change their behaviour. Accidents are largely caused by speeding or carelessness. No matter how many measures are put on a road, if someone is going to speed or drive carelessly, they will cause an accident. I appeal to drivers to change their attitude to road users, both vehicles and pedestrians. We will then have much safer roads.

## **Regional Imbalance**

T8. **Mr Delargy** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to state how he intends to tackle regional imbalance. (AQT 88/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** To tackle regional imbalance from a transport perspective, the Department is preparing a new suite of transport plans that will continue to improve the connectivity and sustainability of the transport system across the region. That will include the ambitious plans outlined in each council's local development plan. My Department continues to support the development of the city and growth deals and to play our part in delivering those. Among other things, I am committed to delivering the upgrades to the A5 and phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine railway line as part of that progress.

**Mr Delargy:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he provide an update on the speed of the Portadown to Derry railway line?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes. In a previous debate, I said that it was around 200 kilometres per hour. It is a high-speed rail link between Portadown and Derry. It is part of the all-island strategic rail review. It is an ambitious plan that gives connectivity, tackles climate change and promotes public transport. Those projects are medium- to long-term projects, but they are important. It is crucial that they include tackling regional imbalance and correcting the mistakes of the past.

## **Road Safety**

T9. **Ms Ferguson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will make road safety a priority and to state when a road safety strategy will be delivered, given the rise in road deaths, as mentioned previously, particularly over the past year, and the high number of collisions and fatalities on the A5. (AQT 89/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for her question. I published the 'Draft Road Safety Strategy to 2030' in October 2022. Since its publication, officials have continued to progress the work on the strategy and the one-year action plan that supported it. Our report on the progress of the actions for 2022-23 was completed, and it is available on the Department's website. A new 52-point action plan for 2023-24 was developed. A progress report for those actions will follow in due course. As it is a cross-cutting matter, I will present an updated road safety strategy and action plan to the Executive in the near future.

**Ms Ferguson:** The Minister mentioned a range of actions. In the meantime, what clear actions is the Department taking in the incoming year to reduce road deaths and serious injuries?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Unfortunately, one of the areas in which we have had to reduce spending is advertising about road safety. There are some deliberations about how effective that messaging can be and at what times it should be at, but I want to send out this clear message: no matter how much my Department spends on improving roads, fixing potholes and correcting faults, if drivers do not change their attitudes towards speeding and careless driving, our death toll, which has increased in the past year, will continue to increase. Drivers' attitudes to other road users are vital in improving road safety.

## Narrow Water Bridge

T10. **Mrs Mason** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to confirm that he will work with his counterpart in the South to ensure the delivery of the Narrow Water bridge, particularly given the Irish Government's welcome announcement last week of their commitment to funding that project. (AQT 90/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Both Administrations continue to attach priority to the Narrow Water bridge. The Irish Government's Shared Island Fund provided €3 million to bring the Narrow Water bridge project to the tender stage, with a further €2 million provided to complete the tender process, which concluded in October 2022.

### 2.45 pm

Following an evaluation of the tenders, the Irish Government officials intend to bring a memorandum to Government in the coming weeks to award the tender. The project is being brought forward by Louth County Council, and most of the works on the project fall to that council. My Department will play its role on the Warrenpoint side. It is a very exciting project, which will provide a huge economic boost to that area. I can assure the Member that my Department will play its role.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions to the Minister for Infrastructure.

## Speaker's Business

**Mr Speaker:** I wish to notify the Assembly that I will not be in the Chamber on Monday 11 March. I will be representing the Assembly at a summit for Commonwealth Speakers in London to mark the 75th anniversary of the Commonwealth. The Principal Deputy Speaker and the Deputy Speakers will chair next Monday's plenary session. In my absence, any decisions that are required will be made by me or the Principal Deputy Speaker. I will be back in the House on Tuesday 12 March.

I invite Members to take their ease as we make changes at the top Table.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Dr Aiken] in the Chair)

## Private Members' Business

### School Uniforms: Affordability

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That this Assembly notes the findings of the 2023 Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) school costs survey, which shows that 41% of parents in this jurisdiction go into debt due to back-to-school costs, with the largest expense for parents being school uniforms; is deeply concerned that the high cost of school uniforms is a source of financial stress for many families; recognises that the support provided locally through the uniform grant is the lowest on these islands; believes that the benefits of school uniforms are at risk of being undermined by unaffordable costs; calls on the Minister of Education to make school uniforms more affordable by introducing statutory guidance requiring schools to have competitive tendering processes, to remove the use of unnecessary branded items and to permit the use of cheaper high-street alternatives; and further calls on the Minister to conclude the review into the eligibility criteria for, and consider an increase in, the school uniform grant. — [Mr Sheehan.]*

*Which amendment was:*

*After "make school uniforms more affordable by" and insert;*

*"implementing an annual price cap on total school uniform costs and" — [Mr Mathison.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Nuala McAllister to make her winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has up to five minutes.

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Minister for his response just before the lunch break. I want to point to some of the specific issues that were highlighted in the debate by many Members throughout the Chamber. Before I do that, however, I want to take a moment to describe what we all know as a school uniform and what is seen as a standard school uniform.

We all know that a young child usually wears a uniform comprising a shirt and tie, looking like they are going off to an interview. At the age of four, they sit at a desk for six hours a day, with a scratchy jumper and tight trousers on. They are little kids, who were used to running about in the nursery playground for four hours, but

they are sat at a desk for six hours in their little school tie, a jumper, skirts or pinafores. That is not really the image that we think of when we think of kids. We think of laughter, fun and innocence. The child should not be part of the school uniform; rather, the school uniform should be part of the child and complement what it is that they do in school and, most importantly, it should be comfortable.

Many Members noted the expense for parents but also the stress on the children that that causes. Some Members expressed concern about that, and I share that concern. No child should be stressed by the financial circumstances that their parents find themselves in because of the burdens placed on them with the expense of school uniforms. We all agree that the school uniform grant is not sufficient and that it should have been updated many years ago.

The Minister said that he was one of five children that his parents had to find school uniforms for. I can top that, Minister: I am one of eight children.

**Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):** Oh, wow.

**Miss McAllister:** At one point, my parents had to find uniforms for six different post-primary schools. We all know that we have to buy blazers, jumpers and PE kits. It is simply unaffordable; it was unaffordable 20 years ago when I was at school, and it is still unaffordable today. As has been highlighted by MLAs, it is often getting worse.

Another issue that I want to address, which other MLAs shared, is the idea of branded PE uniforms. I make reference to Mike Nesbitt's comments around branding that, if the school wants a branded PE uniform to be worn, why should the school not pay for it or not have a wardrobe of that PE uniform? If a particular brand wants to be shown on a school uniform, why does it not pay for that through school sponsorship? Why place the burden on a child? It exacerbates the problem that we have with division in our school system. We all know that our schools are divided. They are not integrated on a true basis, and I am not talking just about religion. I am talking about academia and about a financial set point. Children who come from families that can afford it will receive school tuition and are more likely to go to a grammar school. Families that can afford it will be able to afford the school uniform and the branded PE gear, and their children will go on to play for the school sports team, whether that be football or rugby. If branded PE gear is required, the

families that will be able to afford it will more than likely be the ones that will opt for it.

I have heard everyone in the Chamber agree with that today, and I listened to the example provided by Danny Baker about the family that had three children, one of whom was a child who attended a special needs school. That is an important issue to reflect on, because what uniforms surely are not is inclusive. When we talk to children about reasons that they are not happy with their school uniform, we hear that it is not about getting rid of the school uniform in its entirety. Rather, it is about comfort. Given that a lot of SEN children, many of whom attend mainstream schools, have sensory issues, are our school uniforms built for purpose to enable those kids to feel comfortable?

There was some focus on the add-ons to school uniforms, and I will expand a little bit on that. Once parents purchase a school uniform and a PE uniform, there is then the idea of a scarf and a coat. To be perfectly honest, in this day and age, not being allowed to wear a scarf or a coat to school unless it has school branding is a disgrace. When the weather is cold, we need to ensure that parents can provide their children with anything.

I will touch on a few of the things that the Minister said. I welcome his points about ensuring that affordability can work for parents.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Unfortunately, the Member has only a very short time in which to do that.

**Miss McAllister:** One thing that I want to highlight is the fact that inclusivity was missing from the Minister's comments. I want to ensure that, in the consultation, he includes inclusivity. I am glad to hear —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

**Miss McAllister:** — that he is including the cap as well.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Cathy Mason to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Mrs Mason:** Every family should be able to afford their child's school uniform and PE gear, no ifs, no buts. We can work together in the Assembly to ensure that, thus giving families the much-needed break that they deserve. I have with me in my hand today the responses from over 1,500 families to a recent party

survey that we conducted. At the time, I gave a guarantee to each of those families that I would try to make their voice heard. With the Education Minister here today, I will take the opportunity to read out a few of their personal testimonies to him:

*"I dread July and August coming around every year. It is a time when most people love, but I don't. I struggle to purchase food because of school uniform costs."*

Another parent said:

*"I am a full-time nurse and in a good band in the health service, yet I financially and mentally struggle with the costs of school uniform for my children. Work is tough enough without this."*

Another said:

*"I work full-time and, whatever overtime I can get, still I struggle to afford the cost of my kids' uniforms and school costs. I am now looking at taking on a second job."*

Another said:

*"I have sleepless nights with the worry of school uniform costs. I have tried taking out loans, but that doesn't go far enough."*

The unfortunate and very sad reality is that I could go on and on with those personal testimonies. Many families are really hard-pressed at the minute as a result of the high costs of heating, electricity and food. They already struggle to make ends meet, and, when the summer comes around, the cost of school uniforms really can be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

By putting all our shoulders to the wheel and working together in this Assembly, we can make school uniforms more affordable and help keep the money in families' pockets. Making a positive difference to the everyday lives of ordinary people must be our focus. We need to make sure that going to school is as easy as possible for each and every child in the North, and that means removing unnecessary barriers by making school uniforms affordable for all families, giving our children a good meal and getting them to and from school easily. We cannot have that single mother having sleepless nights, worrying about whether or not she can get her daughter the expensive blazer, the father working extra hours to get that PE uniform or the grandmother spending her much-needed pension on her grandson's branded

jumper. It is simply not acceptable. Many families are burdened by debt every year because uniforms and PE gear cost hundreds of pounds for just one child. It is an experience that I, as a parent, have been challenged by as well, and, I am sure, many in the House have been too.

Some of the stark findings from Parentkind are a clear signal that families need help to tackle the huge cost of school uniforms. In the North, 71% of parents surveyed claimed that their top school cost worry is the price of school uniforms, and 30% of parents in the North struggle to afford the costs associated with sending their children to school. As has been mentioned, the Children's Society found that parents who had to buy two or more items from specified suppliers said that the average cost was around 50% more expensive. That should not be the case.

One in 10 parents surveyed by Save the Children said that their child had missed school due to issues relating to school uniforms or PE kits. That cannot go on: every child has the right to a good education. Children should not miss out on school because of the cost of their uniform. Families should not be priced out of schools, and children, especially, should not be burdened by financial pressures. Families do not deserve that.

Save the Children also stated that 60% of parents find the cost of school uniforms and PE kits financially challenging, and that disproportionately affects low- and middle-income households. A third of parents across the North have had to borrow money to cover the cost of school uniforms and PE kits. As has been mentioned, we are now in the scenario where families are being forced into debt, year-on-year, borrowing from their local credit unions, taking out high-interest personal loans or credit cards, and they are finding it very difficult to break the seemingly never-ending cycle.

It is clear that the Department of Education's current guidance on the cost of school uniforms is not touching the sides of the transformations that are needed to help our struggling families. We must be more ambitious to help working families with rising school costs. The current school uniform grants available from the Education Authority are inadequate to deal with the rising cost of living, and that must be rectified if we want to make uniforms affordable. The Department should urgently review the grant threshold to ensure that all children in poverty receive the support they deserve, and that no child is excluded from accessing their

education. There is much more work to be done to establish a fair tendering process for school uniforms, one that aims to provide high-quality, affordable uniforms that are built to last, can be passed down through households or passed on to new pupils.

We must also be more ambitious to help working families with rising school costs by looking at the concept of voluntary contributions. It is clear that those contributions are putting further pressure on families, with 17% of them stating that it is their top worry. Families deserve a break, now more than ever. I will work with everyone in the House to ensure that that happens. The Education Minister must act now to address the issue, particularly as we near the time of the year when parents begin to buy uniforms. There have been so many valid points made by all parties, right across the House, and it is clear that those concerns are being raised with everyone.

I want to mention specifically the comment made by Connie Egan, who made the point that the compulsory wearing of skirts is a gender equality issue, and that everyone should be able to wear what they feel comfortable in. My party colleague Pat Sheehan raised the issue that parents are already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis, and this cost is only adding to it. He made comparisons with other countries, such as Spain. David Brooks mentioned the value of a school uniform, but also the dangers of obsessive branding. Robbie Butler mentioned that the lack of accountability acts as a barrier to accessible education for all, and that people should have a choice.

### 3.00 pm

Cara Hunter said that the North was lagging behind in grant support and drew comparisons with England, Scotland, Wales and, of course, the South. Gerry Carroll said that it is appalling that families are having to choose between eating and affording school uniforms. That is the reality that we face. Those are just a few of the strong arguments that were made.

I welcome the commitment from the Minister today to launch a consultation to legislate on the issue. I urge him to do that as quickly as possible, as we are nearing the time of year when many parents begin to purchase school uniforms.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate, and I thank the Alliance Party for its amendment. I thank Members for their support on what is a very important issue to many of their constituents.

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

Main Question, *as amended, put and agreed to.*

Resolved:

*That this Assembly notes the findings of the 2023 Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) school costs survey, which shows that 41% of parents in this jurisdiction go into debt due to back-to-school costs, with the largest expense for parents being school uniforms; is deeply concerned that the high cost of school uniforms is a source of financial stress for many families; recognises that the support provided locally through the uniform grant is the lowest on these islands; believes that the benefits of school uniforms are at risk of being undermined by unaffordable costs; calls on the Minister of Education to make school uniforms more affordable by implementing an annual price cap on total school uniform costs and introducing statutory guidance requiring schools to have competitive tendering processes, to remove the use of unnecessary branded items and to permit the use of cheaper high-street alternatives; and further calls on the Minister to conclude the review into the eligibility criteria for, and consider an increase in, the school uniform grant.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Please take your ease.

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

## Apprenticeships

**Mr Brett:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly believes apprenticeships offer an opportunity for everyone, regardless of age or sector, to upskill or reskill as part of their lifelong-learning journey; welcomes the commitment in the skills strategy for Northern Ireland — skills for a 10x economy to introduce all-age apprenticeships across key sectors of our economy; further welcomes the intention to improve entry routes and career progression in our health system and wider public sector by establishing a new nursing higher-level apprenticeship framework and expanding public-sector apprenticeships; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to set ambitious targets for increasing Northern Ireland's apprenticeship offer by the end of this Assembly mandate.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Phillip, as the proposer, you will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. As an amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate.

**Mr Brett:** I am delighted to propose the motion this afternoon to recognise the importance of the apprenticeship sector to the Northern Ireland economy, and to outline how all of us in the House can work together to build on that success. In light of that genuine desire to build a stronger economy by working together, I am delighted to accept the amendment that will be proposed by my Economy Committee colleague Ms Eastwood. I look forward to working with all Members across the House to make the aims of the motion a reality.

Our motion seeks to recognise the important commitments that have been made to date by the Executive but goes further by calling for the Minister to set out ambitious targets for increasing Northern Ireland's apprenticeship offering by the end of the mandate. I thank the Minister for his attendance this afternoon, which shows his willingness to work with all Members to make that a reality.

I welcome the comments of the Economy Minister, when he outlined his economic vision to the House a few short weeks ago. One of the key ways in which the Minister outlined his vision was by stating the important role that we have in increasing the number of good jobs that are available. The skills strategy for Northern Ireland, which was published in March 2022 by the then Minister Lyons, made it clear that, if we are to make our economy 10 times stronger, 10 times more prosperous and 10 times more resilient, it will require transformation in our skills system. The skills of our people are the primary driver of our success. I would welcome the Minister outlining his commitment to build on the strength of the skills strategy that was published in 2022.

The Democratic Unionist Party has proudly spearheaded the 10X strategy, which received the backing of key business and educational leaders across Northern Ireland. We recognise it as a crucial tool in closing the skills gap and in building a workforce that will take our economy to even greater heights.

**Ms Bunting:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, given the emphasis

on skills and apprenticeships and their importance to our economy, in such a climate, it is utter folly to even consider the closure of the Castlereagh college?

**Mr Brett:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I know that she and her colleague Mr Brooks have eloquently articulated the need to ensure that that campus remains open. I know that they have put those comments on the record to the Minister. They make a strong case for their constituents.

The new Economy Minister has signalled, on the record, his intention to deliver key recommendations contained in the 10X strategy, and he can be assured of my party's support as we work together to achieve that. At the centre of the strategy is a clear commitment that we must focus our attention on the sectors that are best placed to add value in the global economy. Because of our productivity edge — a productivity edge that our people help us to secure — in that context it is impossible to overstate the importance of apprenticeships and investment in skills.

My party is extremely proud of our record in driving forward the Northern Ireland economy. The economy of 2007 is virtually unrecognisable when set against the economy of 2024, but that cannot be the limit of our ambition. We owe it to the next generation to set our aim and our gaze even higher and to deliver an even stronger economy. Central to that is the role of apprenticeships. We want to provide the conditions for more economic growth and to ensure that there is confidence in all aspects of the sector that we have the people and the skills ready to deliver.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was DUP Economy Ministers who led the apprenticeship recovery package to minimise apprenticeship loss, and it was Minister Dodds who launched a new supply chain and logistics course for higher-level apprentices at the Northern Regional College. I put on record my support for and commitment to the FE sector in Northern Ireland. I am proud to have the Newtownabbey campus, which, I know, the Minister visited recently. On occasion, we fail to recognise the importance of the FE sector. I send a clear message that it plays an important role in delivering for our communities and our economy in all sections of Northern Ireland.

As an MLA for North Belfast — it would not be a speech if I did not mention my constituency — I made a pledge to my constituents that no one there would be left behind. I made a pledge to them that I would ensure that they would not be

denied the economic opportunities that their predecessors were denied as a result of our troubled past. I made a pledge to the communities that I represent that economic exclusion would no longer be tolerated. I made it clear to them that the factories that overshadow their homes would be welcoming and open to them. To that end, I want to reference a few of the organisations that have helped to remove the barriers to economic opportunities in North Belfast: Impact Training; Women'sTec; Rathcoole Boxing Club; the Hubb Centre; RATH Community Group; the Ashton Centre; Newtownabbey Arts and Cultural Network; Queenspark Women's Group; and the list goes on and on. Each of them shares my vision of ensuring that everyone has an opportunity.

Our greatest economic asset is our people, and global investors rightly recognise the ambitions and skills that the people of Northern Ireland have to offer. However, we can maintain and build on that investment only if we have the pipeline of skilled workers who can adapt to an ever-changing economy. That is the case even more so now, as the global economy pivots towards green growth and other exciting, fast-moving industries. This offering needs to keep pace with the demand for skills from people and employers. Apprenticeships have been key to our success in the past. As an Assembly, we must commit not only to increasing funding for skills but to promoting apprenticeships across all age sectors in our economy. As Chairman of the Economy Committee, I receive this clear message from investors: apprenticeships in Northern Ireland are of an exceptionally high standard, so let us commit to continue to work together and set ambitious targets that we can reach.

The wide range of sectoral opportunities continues to grow almost weekly. From accountancy, construction, health and beauty to IT and transport and all in between, those offer opportunities to all the people of Northern Ireland. For many young people, it is an opportunity to earn whilst gaining a recognised qualification. For others, it is an opportunity to step into a new career path.

In growing our apprenticeship offering, the Executive must ensure that it is fully included in the careers advice offered in schools, the further education sector, training and in job centres. The Committee for the Economy has been keen to work with the Committee for Education to ensure that we have a well-rounded careers advice service in Northern Ireland. Those wrap-around services will be

vital to ensuring that we continue to move that forward.

The motion rightly recognises the intention to improve entry routes to and career progression in our health system by establishing a new nursing higher-level apprenticeship framework. However, nursing is not the only profession in which our health service would benefit from a renewed focus on apprenticeships. In other parts of the United Kingdom, occupational therapy apprenticeships have been available since 2019. They play a vital role in freeing up front-line services in the health system. I encourage the Minister for the Economy to continue to work with his colleague the Minister of Health to develop those proposals. It is now more important than ever that the House commits to working together on these issues.

All-age apprenticeships also offer opportunities to all people in all walks of life. Removing the age cap on apprenticeships was a welcome step by the previous Executive. I am sure that the Minister will want to recommit his intentions to continue to have that cap lifted.

We have the opportunity to continue to build on the success of our apprenticeship sector and set our sights even higher. We have an opportunity to commit to continue to work together to build an economy that is ready for the future — an economy that delivers for every community in every corner of Northern Ireland.

I commend the motion to the House.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Phillip.

I call Sorcha Eastwood to move the amendment.

**Ms Eastwood:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after 'public-sector apprenticeships;' and insert:*

*'recognises the crucial role our further education sector has in delivering many apprenticeship programmes; notes the need to have a dedicated skills fund to help expand apprenticeship provision; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to set ambitious targets for increasing Northern Ireland's apprenticeship offering and the number of people starting apprenticeships by the end of this Assembly mandate.'*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorcha, you have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

**Ms Eastwood:** I really welcome today's motion. I echo the comments of the Chair of the Economy Committee; somebody whom I have really enjoyed working with in the past few weeks. I know that we are on the same page when it comes to social inclusion in terms of skills and education. Our amendment is a friendly one. It is intended to support the motion, build on it and reiterate the important elements of apprenticeship policy that I will touch on.

I strongly believe that apprenticeships are a transformational educational route for people of all ages; indeed, education and skills provide people with a passport for the rest of their life. Apprenticeships can help our society to fill skill gaps and provide accessible routes into excellent careers such as manufacturing, healthcare, technology, business, hospitality and trades. When was the last time you tried to get a tradesperson? They are like hen's teeth. They can call their price, and fair play to them. Apprenticeships can also ensure that people emerge from education with hugely valuable skills and without the level of debt that can be experienced through other paths.

In 2021-22, we had 7,608 apprenticeship starts from level 2 through to level 7. Across the board, we have seen the trend of people undertaking apprenticeships increasing, but slowly. Our apprenticeship participation rate per 1,000 remains the lowest in the UK, while the latest employer skills survey showed that there were nearly 40,000 vacancies in the North, nearly 14,000 of which were deemed skills-shortage vacancies.

A lot more work can be done around apprenticeships, although that has been made significantly harder with us having lost crucial EU funding following our exit from the EU and the difficult financial position of our Departments.

Progress needs to be made, and I will touch on a number of areas. The first is the tone with which we discuss apprenticeships and vocational training in society. There remains a perception among many that the academic route is somehow inherently better. I have nothing against universities — I even went to one, later in life — or people who choose the academic route. However, we need to make it



clear that university is not inherently better or worse than vocational pathways; there should be absolute parity between the two. That lingering perception does not exist to the same extent in the likes of Switzerland or Germany, because they simply look at the facts. Technical and vocational pathways such as apprenticeships produce highly skilled and sought-after individuals who are desperately needed in our society. In fact, without those people, our daily life would grind to a halt.

### 3.15 pm

The lingering societal bias is changing, but we need to speed up that change. That is, in part, why I am so passionate about reforming careers advice — something that the Chair of the Economy Committee already mentioned — especially in schools. Young people need to be aware of every opportunity and path that is available to them, including apprenticeships, and they need to be empowered and supported to follow the route that they want to follow. That means delivering the long-delayed careers portal, having earlier interventions, making it easier for young people to experience the world of work at first hand and ensuring that that happens more than once throughout their school career. It also means having ongoing conversations about the routes that young people can take — I think of excellent organisations, such as Young Enterprise, that do brilliant work on that across Northern Ireland.

The motion speaks of increasing the apprenticeship offer, and I agree with that. For example, the development of a nursing higher level apprenticeship framework is welcome news. As the Committee Chair touched on, there is definitely potential for other frameworks to be developed, particularly in social care.

We mentioned the climate challenge and the potential for green growth. Indeed, just last week, the Economy Committee heard about the transformational opportunities of moving towards net zero. There are not just opportunities to reduce fuel poverty, but opportunities for local businesses and technologies to develop and thrive. Those growing and future sectors need a strong pipeline of emerging talent. Northern Ireland Electricity Networks and other companies have clubbed together to form a utilities apprenticeship, which will be absolutely key for us.

**Mrs Dillon:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that all the apprenticeships and

the skills that are required need to be led by the industries, whether that is nursing, health and social care or the engineering businesses in my constituency of Mid Ulster? The apprenticeships need to be led by the businesses. The businesses need to be listened to, because they know what skills they need and what training is required to deliver those skills.

**Ms Eastwood:** Absolutely. I agree with the Member: I am thinking of her constituency of Mid Ulster and of the incredible work that Manufacturing and Engineering Growth and Advancement (MEGA) does to bring young people to the workplace. As the Member said, it is crucial that this is led by industry, which has the innate ability to understand where our economy is going and can give our young people the chance to progress through that.

Developing the sorts of frameworks and sectoral partnerships that we have talked about does not, alone, equal success. England has had apprenticeships in nursing since September 2017, and, although the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) says that there is a place for them, it has noticed, in the course of their execution, a shortage of training capacity, a lack of funding, and constraints caused by the apprenticeship levy. Healthcare apprenticeships need to be part of a strategic workforce plan, and that requires close cross-departmental working. In my short time here, I have already raised issues around the health workforce challenge with the Health Minister and the Economy Minister on the Floor of the House. We know that that will not be down to one Department; it will be a cross-departmental job of work.

There needs to be acceptance that Northern Ireland is made up of SMEs; we are predominantly an SME economy. We need to ensure that SMEs, like bigger organisations, are empowered and supported to take on apprentices. That requires supporting them through advice and training, but it also means further developing our managerial capacity. Again and again, we hear about the need for interventions to develop more managerial talent across all sectors. That needs to be carried out as part of a twin-track approach with apprenticeship development, as good managers will ensure that apprentices are motivated and get the most out of the training.

Our amendment makes specific reference to the role of further education. That is incredibly important at this time. I echo the sentiments of the Committee Chair. I feel that it was important to put that on record, as I feel, particularly at

this time, that our colleges, and the lecturers and students within them, need champions right now. The FE sector was, rightly, at the heart of the skills strategy. The reality, however, comprises ongoing industrial relations issues, lack of pay parity with schoolteachers, a voluntary redundancy scheme costing millions, and the potential of campus closures, all while we have been told that a project is under way to consider the future structure of the FE system. That transformation project needs to be brought forward urgently and discussed openly before the voluntary redundancy scheme goes ahead and before any decisions on campus closures are taken. Otherwise, we are simply jumping the shark.

**Mr McReynolds:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Eastwood:** I will, surely.

**Mr McReynolds:** Does the Member agree with me and my constituency colleague Ms Bunting that the potential closure of the Belfast Met's Castlereagh campus, combined with the ongoing redundancy schemes, is misguided, given that no Economy Minister was in post during that time? Does she share my view that the Minister must engage proactively to find a solution that keeps the campus open?

**Ms Eastwood:** Absolutely. I thank the Member for his point. I share that concern, not just on the specific campus that but on what he raised in general. We are right to pause in that regard.

We need a strategic vision for FE, and we need to provide clear delineation of the role and functions of universities, colleges and schools. The recommendations included in the independent review of education should be considered. Our amendment refers to a dedicated skills fund. That was a recommendation of the OECD skills strategy for Northern Ireland and is a request of many businesses. It will be essential to making real progress on developing apprenticeships and supporting more people to start them. Establishing it would also send a signal that the Department is making lifelong learning and skills a priority. In this country, we tend to think that learning stops at 16, 18 or 21. That mindset needs to change. I know that the Minister shares that view of the world and has made strides to frame that conversation. Instead of benefiting from a dedicated skills fund, our larger businesses currently have to pay an apprenticeship levy to the UK Treasury of circa £80 million without seeing any direct benefit. Although it is a reserved matter, we need to

continue to make the case that it does not work for our local organisations.

We want to see a growing number of apprenticeship frameworks and opportunities, as long as they are well designed, well considered and properly supported. We want the number of people starting and, most importantly, completing apprenticeships to increase. We believe that ambitious targets should be set around both. As they say, what gets measured gets done. We also want to see changing demographics, with more women undertaking apprenticeships, more people from disadvantaged backgrounds moving up through them, and all-age apprenticeships. We therefore support the amendment and commend the motion to the House.

**Mr McGuigan:** I welcome the motion and will support it and the amendment. Apprenticeships must be an integral part of any strategy to develop our skills base in the North. Young school-leavers in my constituency of North Antrim should have the option and opportunity of an education pathway to reach their full potential through an apprenticeship, in order to earn as they learn. I therefore welcome the Economy Minister's commitment to creating more and better-paid apprenticeships and skills academies, as outlined in his economic vision.

I support and agree with the aspirations in the motion and the amendment. It is worth noting that those aspirations have been and will be made more difficult by the impact of the loss of substantial funding from the EU. The British Government's supposed replacement, the Shared Prosperity Fund, is not adequate and leaves the Executive with a significant gap to plug. Ultimately, we can speak about and support a ring-fenced skills fund, but, in reality, any funding lost as a result of Brexit needs to be restored so that we can extend provision and achieve the ambitious targets that all of us here would like to see.

The motion mentions the 10X skills strategy, but it is important to point out the limitations of 10X, in that it is narrowly focused on just six sectors, the majority of which are digital sectors such as cybersecurity and financial services. Although those are no doubt important, a skills strategy needs to be consistent with the needs of all local employers, across all constituencies and sectors. As was pointed out, one of the best examples of apprenticeships working well is in the manufacturing sector in mid-Ulster, under the MEGA model. At the time of 10X, Sinn Féin made the case that some of the labour and skills shortages in areas such as tourism, construction and the health service

could be resolved by investing in apprenticeships. Sinn Féin previously supported, for example, the provision of nursing higher-level apprenticeships. Recruitment to fill more than 1,700 registered nursing and midwifery vacancies is taking place in Health and Social Care (HSC). Nursing apprenticeships can offer an additional pathway for people to enter the nursing profession without having to take a more academic route and could help people who work in other roles in the health and social care sector to move into the nursing profession if they wish.

Similarly, we need to be much more ambitious and elevate the importance of investing in green skills. Again, I am glad to see that green skills and a just transition are key features of the Economy Minister's economic vision. About 5,000 people are employed in full-time green jobs here in the North, but we can expect that number to grow substantially as more jobs become available in areas such as renewable energy, manufacturing, retrofitting and conservation.

The energy strategy sets out the potential for almost 14,000 jobs to emerge in the low-carbon workforce. Apprenticeships can and should be used to bridge the gap between the levels of qualifications needed for carbon-intensive industries, which are likely to close or change, and those needed for the renewables sector, where the workforce will definitely expand.

In September 2023, the Department chose to fund all-age apprentices, meaning that anyone over the age of 25 can receive public funding for their apprenticeship. That is a welcome move. All-age apprenticeships will be a game changer for skills, meaning that workers of all ages can reskill and upskill without having to pay for their own apprenticeship training and can therefore find a path into a better job or enhance their career opportunities.

In conclusion, apprenticeships and apprentices, whatever their age, must be treated with the same consideration and as being of the same importance as other third-level students. That career pathway must be embedded in the careers education and advice system. Increasing the uptake and expansion of apprenticeships will depend on reform of careers advice. For too long, academic pathways and routes to university have overshadowed the importance of apprenticeships and vocational pathways to success. That needs to change.

**Mr Nesbitt:** As the economy spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, I am happy to support

the motion and the amendment. I like the amendment for a couple of reasons: the recognition of the crucial role for further education and the call for a dedicated skills fund. The latter was a manifesto commitment of my party in 2022. We made it so after having studied similar initiatives, namely the Skills Development Scotland initiative and Skillnet in the Republic of Ireland, which are both very successful. They coordinate, organise and make sure that funding for job skills goes to the right place, and that includes apprenticeships and lifelong learning. Importantly, given the day that is in it, we also envisaged that body as a tripartite arrangement between government, business and trade unions. I say that because, earlier today, in the Long Gallery, I was with the Minister and other Members, as the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions published its document 'Democracy at Work: Social Dialogue and the Tripartite Model'.

Our view of the role of further education is, I think, a fundamental of how we view our society, what we think of education and which intelligences we cherish. We all know that there are different forms of intelligence, and it seems to me that our formal education system values the academic over everything else. If we want to breed a nation of academics, we will probably be able to publish some great intellectual papers — just before we all starve to death. I often liken it to there being a new supermarket in the area, with 100 jobs. It sometimes seems that we think that only three of those jobs are worth having: general manager, finance manager and human resources manager. If the other 97 are not in play, we will not be able to put food on the table.

### 3.30 pm

We had an interesting debate or the start of an interesting debate at the Economy Committee last week about the definition of the term "good job". I know that the Minister had that in his economic vision, and he might care to expand on it. We will not get to a fully agreed definition today. There are probably many definitions, but it does not have to mean high-skilled, high-paid jobs. For me, a "good job" is a job that a person takes pride in, that society values and that the employer rewards appropriately. Working in that supermarket without being one of the three people that I mentioned could make for a very good job for an individual. You might also say that a good job is one of high value, but is that high value to society/the economy or is it high value to the individual? If it is both and you harmonise both, you will have a definition of success and of what a good job is.

The idea of what we think about education was mentioned. I am sure that we all know schools that take pride in saying, "We have a very high percentage of sixth-formers who leave to go on to university", but is that about that school enhancing its reputation as a centre of excellence for academic study or is it about saying, "We do the best for each individual pupil"? I suggest that it is the former, not the latter, because there tends to be the thought that a university degree is good but an apprenticeship is second best. However, that is not the case, so we need cultural change on that.

At the first meeting of the Economy Committee, the Chairman asked us all to talk about our priorities and interests. One of my key priorities is tackling our high rate of economic inactivity. That covers people who want to be at work but cannot because there are barriers. We know what those barriers are. One is affordable, accessible childcare, but another is skills, and skills and apprenticeships go hand in glove. Therefore, I am more than happy to welcome the debate and to support the motion and the amendment.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I welcome the motion and the amendment.

Apprenticeships are fundamental, because, if you want to grow your economy, the best place that you can start is with the skills base of your people. Skills drive economic growth and prosperity, and investing in apprenticeships is one of the greatest interventions that you can make to increase those skill levels. Every year, apprenticeships help thousands of people, particularly our young people, to develop their key skills and gain experience, which can then open the doors to full employment.

Apprenticeships strengthen the skill base in the key industries of our future, bring people back into the labour market and help to boost our shocking productivity levels, which, as we all know around here, have been the Achilles heel of our economy for far too long. Investing in apprenticeships should be at the heart of the Minister's approach, and I know that he has made a commitment to that. Indeed, it has been a failure of past Ministers not to invest as heavily in apprenticeships, and that has proven to be profoundly damaging to our economic potential. The loss of EU funding after Brexit has compounded that damage, and we need to find ways to make up the lost ground.

Earlier this week, Stephen Kelly from Manufacturing NI said that, if you talk to any business in the North, they will tell you that their

biggest problem is the availability of labour. He is right. We have a skills gap in Northern Ireland in comparison with the rest of the UK that shows no sign of closing. That skills gap is fuelled by many factors, including the low level of human capital, aided and abetted by the brain drain from our shores; the attainment gap in our schools; the lack of quality careers guidance, which desperately needs to be reformed; and the dearth of support for employers who would be willing to offer apprenticeship programmes.

In the context of those challenges, it is little wonder that the number of employers offering apprenticeships has stayed largely static in the last few years. We need to do so much more to improve our skills base by investing in apprenticeships and by closing the gap between us and other areas of the UK. I firmly believe that that investment must include the ring-fenced skills fund that can provide the financial support that is available; reform of the apprenticeship levy; more support for employers and further education colleges and the cohesion between them; and proper financial support for students who undertake those apprenticeships. They need to be supported and valued through their career pathways. It is also about finding the right balance between the appropriate pathways of further education and higher education, so that we do not overcompensate one and leave those who go on the other programmes feeling less valued.

I also believe strongly that we must invest where the need is the greatest in order to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has the chance to go as far as their talents will take them, regardless of their postcode. That means addressing — the Minister will hear it again — profound regional imbalances. Today, the rate of people with no qualifications in the lowest-performing council districts is more than double that in the highest-performing council districts. I say to the Chair of the Economy Committee that North Belfast has an extreme skills problem in this area that needs to be addressed. Of course, each area has its challenges, but that is an imbalance that we cannot allow to continue. It is another example of the need for legislation to address the inequalities.

I support the motion and the amendment, which makes the motion much more targeted in a way. In calling for targets, we cannot have a Northern Ireland target; we must address where the inequities lie, so subregional targets would be really good.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with her analysis that we must not adopt a scattergun approach per se just for the sake of numbers and that targets need to reflect where the gaps are. Does she agree that we need to ensure that we meet our goals on the climate crisis and our challenges in the Health and Social Care workforce and that that should be reflected in how we go about this?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sinéad, you have an extra minute.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you. I absolutely and totally agree. There are certain imbalances that we need to tackle in order to support those areas and regions. There is also a gender gap in apprenticeship programmes. We really need to look at that in order to ensure that more women and girls pick up apprenticeships and choose them as their career pathway.

Finally, I encourage the Economy Minister to be really ambitious in this space. We cannot overstate the importance of the issue for our economy and our people. Skills are the future. We need to put them front and centre of our approach.

**Mr Delargy:** In my role as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on further and higher education, I have had consistent engagement with businesses and, particularly in recent weeks, constituents who work in industry, in companies like FAST Technologies, Terex and Nuprint, which are going through apprenticeships in Derry and the north-west. When I speak to those businesses and constituents, the key thing that shines through in all of it is removing barriers, whether they are age or gender barriers, which colleagues have mentioned, or barriers due to location or qualifications.

My party's number-one priority in the debate is to make apprenticeships accessible to all. On that, I want to touch on three key themes: North/South relations, careers guidance and nursing. A key issue that has been brought up in my constituency — I know that colleagues in other border constituencies have had it raised with them as well — is around the fact that, if someone is studying, for example, at the North West Regional College and is taking on an apprenticeship, they have to do that in the same jurisdiction. That locks out a lot of people who live in border constituencies. It comes back to that piece on regional balance and ensuring that those apprenticeships are accessible to all. It works both ways; it locks people out on both sides of the border. I know that the Minister has been cognisant of that. We need to look at it as

a Committee. Hopefully, we can work on that in the time ahead.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the Member for giving way. I do not mean or intend to interject an awful lot, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, but I just want to say that the Member is absolutely right. There are learnings that we can take from the South. We need to adopt more of an all-island approach when it comes to how we shape our economy and where the potentials are from our dual market access going forward. Does the Member agree with that contention?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** You have an extra minute, Pádraig.

**Mr Delargy:** Yes, absolutely. On this issue, in particular, we need to put politics to the side. In my constituency, I have not spoken to one business that does not see the benefit of this. That is across the board, and it is reflected in other constituencies as well. We hear from businesses and people who take on apprentices that they need that flexibility to grow and survive but also to continue to bring through new people and new skills in all those areas.

The second key theme, which has already been touched on by colleagues, is careers advice. That is essential. What the Chair suggested regarding a link-up between the Education and the Economy Committees will be vital for us to do that. We suggested that in our party response to the 10X strategy. I would like to see that being reviewed and implemented, because there is consensus across the Chamber and our Committee that it needs to be addressed. There has been far too much focus on academic routes and on achieving university places. I would like to see a careers advice service that is professional, personalised and sustained throughout a young person's education.

The third point that I want to touch on is about nursing apprentices. My colleague Philip McGuigan touched on the fact that there were 1,700 vacancies in December past in nursing. Both Minister Murphy and Deirdre Hargey, when she was Minister, introduced 45 public-sector apprenticeships during the last mandate. That was welcome, and it is an approach that we need to adopt in this mandate. There is now a clear pathway now for us to recruit nurses, but the barrier arises in retaining nurses. There is no point in us recruiting nurses if we are not going to pay them properly and make sure that they have fair conditions and a reason to stay. I want to continue working with all the Economy

Committee members on that. We have identified where the gaps and barriers are, but the key will be working collegially to ensure that they are addressed.

I welcome the motion and support it and the amendment.

**Mr Buckley:** I welcome the motion. It is a timely opportunity for the House to recognise and celebrate the key contribution that apprentices have played in the Northern Ireland economy. We can all relate to experiences where we have interacted with apprentices and seen the key contributions that they have made in a number of sectors. Looking back, we may think that they were very much in traditional crafts, training to be electricians, builders and joiners. However, that field has grown, and it continues to grow with exciting new opportunities.

For my sins, my first interaction with the working world was as an apprentice. I risk embarrassing a Member, but he is not here. I went for an interview for an electrical apprenticeship at an agri-food company, and sitting across from me was the Member for Mid Ulster Keith Buchanan, who interviewed me that day. I was 17 years of age. I am pleased to say that he gave me the job. In the end, I did not take it up, but never did I think that we would cross paths again in the apprenticeship world of politics.

That is a vital example of how interwoven apprenticeships already are in the Northern Ireland psyche. There is much more work to be done. We have to support apprenticeships. When we look at the significant issues facing the Northern Ireland economy, one thing that comes up time and time again — it has come up again in the debate — is the skills gap. The first thing a potential investor looks at is the skills that an economy has. We have significant gaps. There has been an inability of economies in the Western World to re-pivot their workforce towards the sectors that are growing. We have been too slow in acting, so I welcome the motion and the recognition that we must pivot to keep pace with the economy.

On that point, I pay tribute to former Economy Ministers Gordon Lyons and Diane Dodds, who recognised the need for apprenticeships and put them at the heart of a skills strategy and the 10X Economy. Traditionally, apprentices have always been looked on as being junior members of staff, but now we see the untapped potential of apprenticeships not only in those junior years but throughout life to tackle the issue of economic inactivity. We have a ready workforce that could easily be applied to growth

sectors, which would ensure that we can continue to develop the economy.

### 3.45 pm

One issue has been mentioned by all parties, and it is really interesting to see that it is a point of unanimity for the Committee: we all recognise the huge emphasis that there must be on better careers provision to ensure that we can train and offer opportunities to the workforce of the future. In many cases, it has been lacklustre. We can all look at our personal examples and see that some of the career opportunities that were offered to young people were bad — in fact, some of them were terrible — in different times gone by.

I tend to feel, however, that there must be much more cross-departmental working on that point. We need to take that point up with our Education colleagues as well, because, fundamentally, when we approach the topic of further and higher education, both are to be celebrated, as both bring great opportunity. If we look at the role of apprenticeships — they have the ability to pay good wages and allow people to earn while they learn — we see that they have a transformational impact. I believe that we are not selling that message at an early enough stage. I mentioned at Committee that, quite often, the conversations are had when children are picking their GCSEs or A levels. Opinions have often been formed by that stage, not in all cases but in some, and, therefore, our young people do not fully grasp the potential opportunities that exist.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Member for giving way. Last week, senior officials briefed the Infrastructure Committee, and one key issue that was highlighted was the high level of vacancies — over 28% — particularly in technical roles. The officials outlined that they were considering more innovative ways of addressing the vacancies. Does the Member agree that Departments such as the Department for Infrastructure should take the lead on that issue and do more by creating more apprenticeship places in their Departments and practising what they preach?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** You have an extra minute, Jonathan.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for that vital point. There are huge opportunities in our public sector. We are going through a moment of great change in our economy. Let us look at this. Birth rates are at a historic low in the Western World. There will be a huge push

towards AI technologies to meet the demands created by a workforce no longer being there and towards the automation of work lines in more public-facing services, such as manufacturing or agri-food. It will still, however, require the input of skilled young people and, indeed, people of all ages, who apply through the likes of apprenticeships and can man those machines. It is applicable to the public sector as well.

I welcome the opportunity to celebrate apprenticeships and to target resource. We talked about the apprenticeship levy and how that resource is being taken away when it should be put into the Northern Ireland economy. Let us focus on what synergy there can be across Departments to ensure that we give apprentices the opportunities that they deserve and employers a workforce that is fit for purpose as our economy changes, albeit for the better.

**Mr Dickson:** Like others, I am delighted to take the opportunity to discuss what can only be described as the transformative power of apprenticeships in bolstering our economy, reducing inequality and addressing the pronounced skill shortages faced by employers.

Recent data from the employer skills survey shows that there were nearly 40,000 vacancies across Northern Ireland, with a significant proportion – over 13,500 — attributed directly to a lack of skilled applicants. That situation reflects the need for a dedicated skills fund, as my colleague said, that aims to enhance our apprenticeship provision. Far from being a mere policy suggestion, that part is a critical step in nurturing a well-rounded, skilled and thriving work community. Unfortunately, since the important steps taken quite some time ago by former Minister Stephen Farry when he was Minister for Employment and Learning back in 2016, the apprenticeship sector has, sadly, seen minimal advantage over that time, in part, and not least of all, due to instability and the disruptive effects of the Assembly not being in place.

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for giving way. He speaks, quite rightly, of the need for a skills fund and to build apprenticeships. One of the things that frustrates industry most is the fact that the apprenticeship levy is collected but does not come back to fund apprenticeships in Northern Ireland. It goes into the general overall financial position that Northern Ireland is in. Does he agree that it would be helpful if we could retain some of the apprenticeship levy and direct it specifically at a skills fund to build skills and apprenticeships in Northern Ireland?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Stewart, you have an extra minute.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you. I appreciate the intervention from the Member who, as a former Minister, will understand the detail of the situation. However, it is a complex situation, which has been made more complex and, perhaps, has not been tackled — I am sorry to say it again — because of the lack of a consistent Assembly over the past number of years. Nevertheless, the Member is absolutely right: it is an area that needs to be tackled, and the best solution from our perspective is a local skills fund that may be able to replace or, at least, work directly with that.

Apprenticeships across all ages deliver a wide range of benefits. Not only do they offer hands-on training to fill existing vacancies, but they provide upskilling and expand the routes to qualifications. The expansion of those routes to qualifications is vital. In that context, as chair of the all-party group (APG) on social enterprise, I want to say that it has a role to play as well. The dedicated social impact and the ability to connect with people outside the mainstream makes members of the APG perfect allies to work with and expand apprenticeships.

A notable challenge is the entry barriers that are faced by many, which are often linked to additional support needs. There is a need for a cross-cutting and cross-departmental approach to all this, from the Education, Health and Economy Departments, so that we can deliver apprenticeships, try to reduce and remove all those barriers and enhance accessibility to apprenticeships. Furthermore, there needs to be a synergistic relationship between further education (FE) and apprenticeships. Despite the crucial role played, a gap remains in the integration, and that gap needs to be bridged to ensure that there is a holistic approach to vocational training. There is now an urgent need to refocus and review the future of FE in Northern Ireland. I make that appeal to the Minister as well today: that we tackle clearly, sensibly and seriously the role and work of further education in Northern Ireland. It is too valuable — it has been valuable — in the relationship with apprenticeships.

From my party's perspective, our vision for apprenticeships has to be expansive, from all-age apprenticeships to how we access them at the younger years, with the principle that regardless of the sector, fostering inclusivity, we can amplify our efforts to direct our focus on the genuine alternatives that apprenticeships deliver and enhance in education and skills. Furthermore, in our view, the apprenticeship

wage is inadequate. In a cost-of-living crisis, it is impossible to envisage a person living on such a low wage, even though they are gaining valuable skills along the way.

In closing, I offer my appreciation to our apprentices: those who are in training today, those who will be in training in future and those who have been trained in the past and are adding to our economy in Northern Ireland. Their dedication and hard work has been an investment not only in their future but in the future of business, commerce and industry in Northern Ireland.

**Dr Aiken:** I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and also as I am forming an APG on aviation, defence and the space sector.

Every time we talk to industry representatives, one of the key issues that they bring up is skills shortages. In northern Ireland 120-odd years ago, one of the big things that it had was its skilled labour and workforce. We did not have any natural resources, but what we did have was a commitment to the improvement of our workforce and, particularly, the addition of technical education. That is where the tradition of the apprenticeship came from, and it is one of the strong areas in which we need to reinvest in today's Northern Ireland.

Members will be aware that we have a student cap in Northern Ireland. The fact that we are not able to bring enough students to Northern Ireland has had an effect across the entire sector. It affects further education and everything that we are trying to do. It is not helped by, as has already been mentioned, the fact that the apprenticeship levy is not used as it is in the rest of our nation, particularly for improvements to education and training for apprentices. Only here does it go into the pot and not to where it should, which is to help to fund the further education colleges. Many of our industries have a lot of complaints about that. They see themselves as being doubly hampered by the fact that they have a skills shortage and, although they pay in for an apprenticeship levy, they get nothing out of it.

We also need to be able to support our traditional industries in Northern Ireland, such as aviation, shipbuilding, vehicle manufacturing and construction, as well as the new industries of fintech, life sciences and cyber. We need to do that by buying into the idea of the three ages. Most of us will work until we are 70. Indeed, some of us are a lot closer to that than others.

**Mr Buckley:** That is you, Mike.

**Dr Aiken:** Behave.

At each stage, we must be able to retrain and reskill. If we are going to have three ages of training, we need to have access to further education and upskilling. That has to be available to everybody across the sectors in Northern Ireland.

As Mr Nesbitt said, our party will support the motion and the amendment. We have an opportunity in Northern Ireland. We could and should be doing something radical. First, we need to remove the student cap. We need to increase the numbers of people — our greatest natural resource is our own people — we keep in Northern Ireland and give them the opportunity to stay. We also have to make sure that the funding that is available for upskilling is used for upskilling. We need to make sure that we invest heavily in the interrelationships between our businesses, our industries and our further and higher education sectors. More importantly, we need to reach out to our people to say that these are valuable things to do. We should all be out there saying, "You need to upskill and reskill". It needs to be a process of continuous improvement.

Some 125 years ago, we were the Everett — in case you do not know, that is where Boeing has its major manufacturing plant — the Toulouse, the Singapore or the Bangalore; that was here in Northern Ireland. The way for us to make it work again is to invest properly in our people and use the funding and resources that we have.

**Mr Buckley:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** No, Jonathan, I am not that old.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call the Minister for the Economy to respond. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** I thank the Members for moving the motion and the amendment. There has been a remarkable degree of unanimity in the views across the Chamber. The support for the motion and the amendment augurs well. I detected from almost all the contributions the need to, properly and publicly, value apprenticeships and the vocational and technical journey as having equal status to the academic journey.



Everyone seemed to agree on the need for full usage of and elevation in esteem for further education colleges; appropriate careers advice for young people, rather than just a steer in a certain direction; ambitious targets, as mentioned in the motion; and cross-departmental working, which will be very necessary, particularly given the financial constraints. If some of the approaches that Members have suggested are to be followed through on, they will, of course, require cross-departmental working. I find myself very much in agreement with all those things. The fact that most of the Members who spoke are on the Economy Committee augurs well for a constructive and cordial relationship between the Committee and I over the next three years. I look forward to all that. As I said, there seems to be a great synchronicity in that we are all on the one page.

#### 4.00 pm

That is important, because this is a very important area. More often than not, attention is drawn to division in the Chamber, yet here we have a debate that is at the core of how we develop and grow our economy, bring prosperity, create opportunity and create regional balance, and we have found a very high level of agreement right across the parties in the Chamber. That therefore augurs well, although it will not get the focus that it perhaps deserves, because division creates more column inches. My colleague Mike Nesbitt will know that division creates more news coverage than agreement.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Everyone is having a go.  
*[Laughter.]*

**Mr C Murphy:** Nonetheless, it fills me with a degree of hope and confidence that we have that level of agreement across the Chamber.

I have set out, and the Chair of the Committee made reference to, the four key objectives for a new economic vision: increasing the proportion of working-age people in good jobs; promoting regional balance; raising productivity; and the opportunities from the net zero approach. Those are all very much part of this debate.

The apprenticeships programme is a key tool for achieving that economic vision, as a people-centred business focused on a route to a good job. Apprenticeships bring significant benefits to employers across all sectors and provide high-quality opportunities for participants of all ages, and, importantly, they offer the opportunity for people to progress their learning and skills

whilst taking home a wage and gaining a recognised qualification. For employers, apprenticeships provide the opportunity to grow their own skilled workforce.

Our apprenticeships are delivered by a network of providers that includes further education colleges, private training organisations and local universities. The regional network operates on the ground with local businesses to support a regionally balanced economy. The ApprenticeshipsNI programme is well established, with over 130 apprenticeships available at level 2 and level 3, which are equivalent to GCSE and A level. The programme offers opportunities to gain a recognised qualification in a wide range of sectors, from accounting and agriculture through to engineering, pharmacy services and youth work.

I am pleased to report that apprenticeship numbers in the programme continue to rise year-on-year. There was a suggestion that numbers have remained static, but they continue to rise. Updated figures produced by the Department this morning show that there are now over 11,000 participants in the ApprenticeshipsNI programme. The higher-level apprenticeship (HLA), to which many contributors referred, has gone from strength to strength since its launch in 2017. Every year, we see new employers joining and existing employers increasing their number of apprentices and the range of job roles that they use HLAs to deliver.

HLAs are becoming increasingly attractive for young school-leavers and those leaving college. There are now almost 2,500 people on an HLA programme, studying for a qualification at foundation degree level or above. Higher-level apprentices earn while they learn, making higher-level education more accessible to a wider range of people and creating a pathway into good jobs. Businesses are working in partnership with colleges and universities to develop apprenticeships from foundation degree level up to master's degree level across a wide range of areas — that speaks to the point that my colleague Linda Dillon raised in her intervention — such as health and life sciences, civil engineering, childcare and youth work, and software engineering. We now have over 60 higher-level apprenticeship routes available.

That route has been proven to promote regional balance. In 2021, the highest rates of HLA participation per head of population — this answers a point made by Sinéad McLaughlin — were in the Mid Ulster District Council area, the

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area and the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area. We can therefore see that regional balance has already been achieved through taking that approach.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he recognise that, if we look at those areas and communities in particular, often when an industry takes root, business continues to grow, and, indeed, wealth is generated? Those apprenticeships also grow our employment and skills base in those areas, which are great examples.

**Mr C Murphy:** I agree very much with that. What we have there is a combination of industries that are organised. We find that in mid-Ulster and Craigavon. There is strong FE provision in those areas: for the southern area and, in mid-Ulster, for the western area. That points to the fact that FE colleges are not getting the elevated status or the full use that they deserve. We could do much more than has been achieved thus far with the colleges.

I agree that everyone should be able to access opportunities, including those who have already left full-time education. Introduced last September, figures that have just been published by the Department show that there are now almost 2,000 apprentices aged 25 and above on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, and that is very good news. All-age apprenticeships create opportunities for people at different stages of life to learn, upskill or reskill, and they allow people who want to change career or rejoin the labour force in a new area to do so without taking on student debt, which is an important factor. However, our levels of lifelong learning are low. We must explore the role of the Department in supporting training for wider age groups in more flexible ways.

The Government have a role to play through public-sector apprenticeships, and that has been referred to by a number of Members. Many apprenticeships are already being delivered in public-sector areas, such as civil engineering, IT and operational delivery. The existing nursing HLA is an example of a partnership approach between my Department and the Department of Health, and I want to see more of that. Again, that speaks to the point that a number of Members made about cross-departmental working in relation to these matters, including, critically, with the Department of Education. I have already had a conversation with the Education Minister about that. There will be more opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration in the time ahead.

In the absence of being able to directly fund public-sector apprenticeships, my Department has been supporting public-sector bodies that want to develop apprenticeships by sharing knowledge, experience and networks. Apprenticeships can, and should, provide an effective route for social inclusion by creating pathways to education and future careers through employment, but we can do better. Our apprenticeships are male-dominated. I think that that answers the point that Sorcha Eastwood made. Fewer than 30% of apprentices are female. I want to see more women in STEM apprenticeships and high-value jobs, and across the full range of sectors and types of employment. We anticipate that a further benefit of all-age apprenticeships will be a better gender balance. I look forward to seeing the evidence of that. We also know that our disability employment gap is significant. Employers are missing out on talented individuals who are not able to access opportunities. I want to ensure that apprenticeships are inclusive by design, and that they strengthen our workforce and tackle inequality.

The return on our investment in apprenticeships should benefit people and businesses in every town and village across the North. I want to ensure that communities are connected in to the apprenticeship system, that information is readily available and that businesses are well supported to take their first steps in hiring apprentices. My Department's careers advisers are at the forefront of communicating the opportunities and benefits of apprenticeships not only to our young people in schools but through the delivery of 50,000 interventions annually across all sections of our community. Careers advisers have undertaken 20,000 interventions with adults in the past year and have a critical role in raising awareness of the apprenticeship pathway. I welcome the ambition in the motion around setting targets. My focus is on supporting employers to create high-quality apprenticeships and helping more people to access those opportunities.

There may be some points that I have not managed to touch on in my contribution. As I said, there was quite a degree of unanimity across the areas of ambitious targets, the skills strategy, the FE sector and careers advice. The issue of Castlereagh campus was raised. That is currently a matter for Belfast Met. We do not have a hands-on role in devising its estate. Nonetheless, we are conscious that we need more support for our FE sector. We also need more usage. We have a very good FE sector. There is potential for it to grow and offer more opportunities for more people. I want to see it

expanding and growing and the people who work in it being properly recompensed. Those people have argued to be put on the path of equality of pay progression along the lines of teaching. I am committed to doing that.

Mike Nesbitt asked about the definition of a good job. Of course, there are varying definitions. That is why we have asked Dr Lisa Wilson to help us in relation to good jobs. She has expertise in that area and will bring together all the available evidence. It is not about creating a definition that rigidly applies; it is about getting more understanding of the range of factors that go in to good jobs. It is not simply about pay; it is about a range of opportunities and conditions that are attached to jobs, some of which include the ability of people to have representation in the workforce, something that has reduced over the years.

Pádraig Delargy raised the issue of cross-border apprenticeships. There is a significant degree of collaboration in that regard. I have already spoken to Simon Harris, who is my counterpart in the Southern Government, in relation to the matter. The intention is very clearly to continue the work that has already begun to try to reduce the barriers to people, particularly those who live in border areas, being able to access the education and opportunities that they need. An apprentice in the North can work for a company in the South. Officials in the South and my Department are, as I say, working through some of the issues to make sure that there are no gaps in eligibility. There is a degree of collaboration on that. I am very much looking forward to the formal reworking of the North/South arrangements, because we can achieve a lot of work on the issue in the time ahead.

There was a discussion on the apprenticeship levy. It is important to say that the apprenticeship levy is a reserved matter. We have no remit in the payment or the allocation of the funds that come from it. The Department provides £30 million a year to support the funding of apprenticeship training. The public sector pays into the levy but does not have recourse to the funding here. That is an issue that people have identified for some time. It needs to be addressed. It is not a satisfactory situation, to say the least.

Steve Aiken talked about the student cap and finances. Of course, the question is how we will fund universities if the cap is lifted and more people attend them. During the debate on the first motion that the Assembly agreed, there was an acknowledgement that we are underfunded and that Treasury needs to work

with us to address that. I hope that, in that context, we can work on getting more students and apprentices in the time ahead.

Once again, I thank Members for their contributions. As I say, I am very heartened by the strong sense that we are all on the same page. I am very much looking forward to working with the Committee to try to advance and make some progress on all the issues that were raised and, as we all suggested, to have ambitious targets that we intend to achieve over the mandate.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call David Honeyford to wind up on the amendment. David, you have five minutes.

**Mr Honeyford:** No problem. Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker.

I declare an interest as a shareholder in a business that has apprentices. I thank the Minister for being here, and I thank everybody for their contribution. I was going to name everybody, but — I echo the Minister's comments — we are all in agreement, and we have had a really good discussion, which is brilliant. I support the motion and our Alliance amendment.

We in Alliance want to see major change in and reform of our skills delivery, and we want people of all ages to be given the opportunity to be better and to grow, which will then enable our economy to grow. To do that, we need to help more employers to engage with the apprenticeship and skills programme. Recent figures show that only 8% of businesses offer apprenticeships. The number of businesses wanting to expand in that area is four times that figure. We need fundamental structural change to be able to deliver that, and we need a dedicated skills fund to help expand the apprenticeship provision. Working to help more employers is one practical example of how we can get on a path to delivery.

Transformation of apprenticeships and our education system as a whole, rather than just the FE sector, which promotes apprenticeships and skills, is key. Alliance firmly believes that transforming our education system is key to our economy. The two cannot and should not be seen in isolation. You cannot have one without the other. Our historical model of educational need massively needs practical transformation. The attitude that we all have to apprenticeships and to that model was referenced a few times. Key to growing the economy is the value — I stress the word "value" — that we place on technical learning and apprenticeships,

alongside every other route of higher academic education. One thing to note is that, in the South, they had regional technical colleges. Those have now been merged and transformed into five technological universities. However, we still rely on the same path. We do the same thing over and over and broadly get the same results year after year. There is a vital role for further education. We need to increase and grow what it offers and to strengthen links with our small businesses and industry to bring that change. Northern Ireland does not have such technical universities. I ask the Minister to investigate and look at that, because there is equal value in technical learning alongside the academic route. It is vital in the value piece of that learning's worth.

In my business life, I have employed apprentices, and I declared that interest. I want to tell you about one of those apprentices and explain why we need to change.

He started late and changed courses. He went to a grammar school, and he was not accepted back after his GCSEs to do A levels. He was not offered any careers advice and was, frankly, dumped out by his school. He did not know what he wanted to do, and his mum basically insisted that he went to tech and enrolled on a course. He was on that course for a little while, and he dropped out because it was not what he wanted to do. He started to work for us for a bit, and he was just labouring. However, the condition that he came to work for us was that he got himself onto an apprenticeship at the next opportunity. He was about 19 when he started that apprenticeship. He had been there for a few months, and I will never forget how, after Christmas and the new year, I asked him how he was getting on. He was with us for so many days per week and then at the tech for two. I will never forget what he said. This kid went to grammar school, and he said, "I've passed my first test". He said that that was the first time he had passed an exam since the 11-plus. That was appalling. That kid was bright. He was a great worker. He was a reliable employee who ended up working for us for six years, but it was not until that point that he felt he was of any worth. He has gone on to have a really good career.

#### 4.15 pm

I am sorry, but an education system that works for only the most academic, where careers advice — this is my experience as a parent — is simply a UCAS form-filling advice centre, needs to be reformed. I appreciate that what I am saying branches between two Ministries,

but the issues need to be sorted out with both. I echo the call on the Minister to set ambitious targets for increasing Northern Ireland's apprenticeship offering that is within his control. Our aim must be to create opportunities for everyone to excel, with much more diversity and opportunity for all ages, providing a skilled workforce and using greater apprenticeship opportunities that give us the ability to continue that learning journey.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Gary Middleton to make a winding-up speech on the motion. Gary, you have 10 minutes.

**Mr Middleton:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I am glad that Mr Honeyford did not summarise the speeches of all the Members, because that is what I plan to do. However, it is worthwhile to summarise what, I think, we would all agree has been a positive debate on the motion and the amendment. That is something that we can take heart in.

I will begin with a few remarks of my own. It is imperative that we invest in programmes that empower our citizens with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the workforce. Apprenticeships, with their unique blend of academic and practical training, play a pivotal role in achieving that goal. From an economic standpoint, apprenticeships provide a vital pipeline of skilled workers for industries that face labour shortages. By partnering with businesses and training partners, apprenticeships ensure that individuals acquire the specific skills that employers seek.

I also very much support apprenticeships on the basis that they promote social inclusion and provide opportunities for people from all backgrounds to succeed. To fully deliver inclusivity of our apprenticeship offering, we must address the gender gap. A recent Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry into investment in Northern Ireland heard evidence that women are poorly represented in apprenticeships, specifically in STEM jobs. It is crucial that the Department, in delivering the skills strategy, tackles the factors that have led to some apprenticeship initiatives becoming male-dominated. There is no doubt that more needs to be done to improve entry routes and career progression across the public sector as well.

I thank the Minister for being here, participating in the debate and listening to the many contributions. My colleague Phillip Brett moved the motion and accepted the amendment. He welcomed the economic vision set out by the Minister in terms of good jobs. He also

recognised the 10X strategy and the endorsement that that has from businesses and economic leaders in bridging the skills gap. He assured the Minister of DUP support for addressing the issue. He also spoke strongly about North Belfast. We will forgive him for that, considering that he hears about the north-west at every opportunity. He has been a strong advocate for North Belfast, and he spoke of the many organisations in his constituency that work in supporting apprenticeships. It is important that we recognise the great work that is being done in all of our constituencies, that we do not disregard that and that we appreciate it. However, more can be done. Finally, he summed up by saying that there is a need for joined-up thinking and a wrap-around careers advice service.

Sorcha Eastwood welcomed the motion and the amendment, which focuses on education. She spoke about education and skills being a passport for life. She said that apprenticeships very much offer an opportunity and a gateway. She also highlighted the fact that, on a UK-wide basis, participation in apprenticeships remains lowest in Northern Ireland. Sorcha also spoke about the impact that the loss of EU funding has had on apprenticeships and recognised that there are financial difficulties across Departments. We are all alive to that fact, but we have to ensure that we invest for the future.

There were so many other points, but a common theme that we heard from Sorcha and others was on careers advice and the need to empower people. The apprenticeship levy was mentioned alongside an acceptance that Northern Ireland is made up of SMEs and that we must support them with apprenticeship development.

Mr McGuigan — Philip — spoke about the Minister's economic vision. He highlighted the loss of EU funding and the inadequacy, from his point of view, of the Shared Prosperity Fund and the gap that it has left. He highlighted the benefits of nursing apprenticeships to that sector. He also highlighted the potential that the green sector and the energy strategy have to create additional jobs.

Mike Nesbitt highlighted the importance of a skills fund and his party's support for it. He also highlighted some of the best practice across Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. He mentioned an event at Parliament Buildings earlier for the publication of the document, 'Democracy at Work: Social Dialogue and the Tripartite Model'. He highlighted a debate that the Economy Committee had on what it means to have a good job. From his perspective, a

good job is one that a person takes pride in, that society values and that the employer awards appropriately. We will, no doubt, come back to that as we continue to work through the economic vision on the Economy Committee.

Sinéad McLaughlin said that apprenticeships are fundamental to driving economic growth and bringing people back into the labour market. Once again, she highlighted the issue of EU funding and said that we need to find ways to make up lost ground. She highlighted the comments of Stephen Kelly from Manufacturing NI on the availability of labour and the shortage of labour in particular sectors. She also highlighted the need to find a balance between the further and higher education sectors and to invest where the need is greatest in terms of regional imbalance.

Pádraig Delargy spoke about his engagement with local businesses Terex and Nuprint. He spoke of some of the concerns that we have all heard in relation to removing barriers to apprenticeships, such as age, gender, qualifications. He then highlighted some specific challenges with North/South relations, which the Minister responded to, such as the impact of apprenticeships in border communities. He also highlighted careers guidance and the particular challenges that exist in nursing.

My colleague Jonny Buckley spoke positively about apprenticeships and about the need to recognise and celebrate their value in society. He spoke about his personal experience, and he has our sympathy for having to sit down with our colleague Keith Buchanan. That example highlights the fact that apprentices come from all walks of life and backgrounds, which we should very much celebrate. He also paid tribute to previous Economy Ministers, Gordon Lyons and Diane Dodds, for what they did to progress apprenticeships. It is important that we put that on record.

Near the end, Stewart Dickson, chair of the all-party group on social enterprise, spoke of the transformative power of apprenticeships, the need for a dedicated skills fund and the wide-ranging benefits of apprenticeships on that sector.

Steve Aiken, as chair of the all-party group on STEM, highlighted some of the frustrations with the student cap and the impact that it has on various sectors. He mentioned the apprenticeship levy and the process for improving it.

Finally, the Minister spoke about his economic vision and the four priority areas in that. He answered queries from across the Chamber, and then Mr Honeyford summed up.

The debate has been encouraging. The tone has been set for how we will go forward to address a number of the issues and challenges. They will be addressed only by working collaboratively across all sectors; the issue is too big for scoring political points. We can really make a difference on it in the short time that remains in the mandate. I commend the motion and the amendment to the House.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly believes apprenticeships offer an opportunity for everyone, regardless of age or sector, to upskill or reskill as part of their lifelong-learning journey; welcomes the commitment in the skills strategy for Northern Ireland — skills for a 10x economy to introduce all-age apprenticeships across key sectors of our economy; further welcomes the intention to improve entry routes and career progression in our health system and wider public sector by establishing a new nursing higher-level apprenticeship framework and expanding public-sector apprenticeships; recognises the crucial role our further education sector has in delivering many apprenticeship programmes; notes the need to have a dedicated skills fund to help expand apprenticeship provision; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to set ambitious targets for increasing Northern Ireland's apprenticeship offering and the number of people starting apprenticeships by the end of this Assembly mandate.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair).]*

## Adjournment

### A5: Delivery

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Nicola Brogan to raise the matter of delivery of the A5. I call Nicola Brogan. You have up to 15 minutes.

**Miss Brogan:** I welcome the opportunity to have the debate. I thank the Infrastructure Minister, John O'Dowd, for being here and for his ongoing commitment to the delivery of the A5 project.

The A5 road upgrade is a hugely important issue for the people of West Tyrone and, indeed, for people across the north-west of Ireland. It is, without doubt, the topic that I am most often asked about by my constituents, who really want to see the road developed. I am really glad to bring it to the Floor of the Assembly. I will continue to raise the issue until we see the project's full delivery.

The upgrade of the A5 road network offers wonderful opportunities for the entire north-west of Ireland. It will improve connectivity to the region, it will boost economic growth and business development in the area, and it will mean that local people have better access to opportunities such as education, training and employment. As I said, those are wonderful opportunities that will be important developments for the area. For me and for many in West Tyrone, however, the most important reason for the upgrade of the road is to make it safer and to protect lives.

I secured an Adjournment debate on the safety of the A5 in January 2022, following the deaths of three young men who lost their lives on the road over Christmas 2021. I am sorry and saddened to say that, since then, the road has taken even more lives. More than 50 people have been killed on it since 2006. It is a heartbreaking reality that, until the A5 is upgraded and made safe for users, it will continue to take lives.

### 4.30 pm

Those tragic losses are completely devastating for families and communities. We heard about

the impact of those losses during the recent public inquiry into the A5 road scheme. Families who lost loved ones on the A5 shared powerful and moving testimonies about their losses, which illustrated the reality that people face because of the dangers of that road and the importance of completing the scheme. I again thank the families for their powerful and poignant contributions to the public inquiry. They have shown great strength and dignity through some very difficult times.

It is unfortunate that, owing to legal challenges brought by a small minority, there have been significant delays to the project. I join others, including the Infrastructure Minister, in urging those objectors to reconsider their continuing legal challenges, to consider instead how deadly the road is and to think of the many lives that have been lost and the many people and communities who have been left devastated by the death of loved ones because the road as it is now is simply not fit for purpose.

I welcome the commitment from Michelle O'Neill in her inaugural address as First Minister to the delivery of the A5 upgrade as a strategic priority for the newly established Executive. I welcome the Infrastructure Minister's commitment and determination to progress the road and make its delivery a priority. I was also really pleased to hear the Irish Government announce last week that they will provide €600 million towards the A5 project.

It is hugely important that we come together and work to ensure that this project is completed. We cannot accept any more delays to the A5. I look forward to working with the Executive and my colleagues across the House to ensure that the A5 project is completed.

**Mr McHugh:** For 30-odd years, I think, I travelled on the A5 from Castlederg to Derry. On that road, day and daily, I was in one queue of traffic after another. There was no doubt about just how inadequate it was as an arterial route, from Dublin to Derry or from Belfast to Derry and into Donegal. Yet and all, we continuously faced long queues of traffic, and motorists became more frustrated day and daily. It was no surprise that there were numerous accidents on that stretch of road — accidents in which many lost their lives and others were seriously injured. I acknowledge the part that was played by families, particularly those who were bereaved, and the way in which they have continued to highlight the whole issue of the A5 and the need for its improvement.

After 30 years of travelling from Strabane to Derry, when I became an MLA, I embarked on the journey from Strabane to Belfast. I was going in a different direction on that road, but the problem was exactly the same — the road was totally inadequate for the amount of traffic that travelled on it. I keep asking myself why. It is the arterial route to Derry, Donegal, Tyrone and Fermanagh, and we know that the road needs improvement in order to create the infrastructure that will allow that area of the north-west to be a net contributor to the Irish economy. When I use the term "Irish economy", I am talking about the economy throughout this island, which we will all benefit from.

Without doubt, it is time that we step up to the plate and ensure that the road project is delivered. Up to now, there have been objections that have been obstacles to the delivery of the A5. It is about time that we confront all the issues that objectors have raised. I am not arguing one way or the other about their right to raise them, but, in some cases, we have to ensure that we are well prepared for that type of objection to come forward. I remember that one objector whom I talked to at the time said, "Well, you know, it is not the road that needs to be improved but the drivers". He put down the whole idea of people losing their lives and accidents to being the result of careless drivers. I pointed out to him the case of the A4, which was at one stage the most notorious road on the island of Ireland. With the creation of a dual carriageway, the statistics for accidents and death on that road changed dramatically. The same thing will happen with the A5. It is time that that nettle is grasped. We have to ensure delivery for the health of the people who live in that area and for the economy of the north-west in every respect. That delivery will ensure that that part of the island is as well catered for as the rest of the island.

I will explain what I mean by that. Only this weekend, I travelled from Castlederg to Dublin, from Dublin to Killarney and from Killarney back up the west coast again. On every single part of that journey, I travelled on motorway that was safe and sound for everyone on it. If it was not motorway in some areas, it was dual carriageway. I asked myself the question: why can the rest of this island develop an infrastructure such as that — as we all know, that infrastructure has created an economy that makes it one of the richest of countries in Europe — yet, in the north-west, we find ourselves totally deprived of the kind of infrastructure that we need to ensure that we too are a net contributor to the greater economy of this island?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I point out now — I should have done it before — that all Members have five minutes to speak.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Member for West Tyrone Nicola Brogan for bringing this Adjournment debate on the A5 to the House.

We can all agree that the construction of the A5 is much needed. It is not just about a road for better connectivity; it is about safety for people who travel on that road. We are all cognisant of that fact in the Chamber. Sadly, across the nearly 60 miles of the A5, there have been many fatalities, countless people severely injured and so many more near misses. Homes have been broken and shattered with grief.

In July 2007, the Executive agreed to move forward with a plan for the A5. Since then, there have been a number of consultations, legal challenges and reports. I understand the right to challenge proposals. I recognise that we need to ensure that some people, particularly farmers, are properly compensated for the land they own. It is important to recognise that. However, it is equally important that we collectively sympathise with and pay tribute to all those who have lost their life. I cannot begin to imagine the grief of the families who are suffering.

I drive the road. Aughnacloy to Ballygawley is a well-known part of the road for me. It is situated in my constituency, and it is an extremely dangerous part of the road. We have to acknowledge that there are drivers who take chances. I was glad that the Infrastructure Minister, during Question Time today, referred to the need to ensure road safety. People take chances, and that is not acceptable. We have to tackle the ignorant driving that happens on our roads.

Whilst we cannot put a price on someone's life, we have to consider the cost of the project. That is a matter of discussion. Money that came recently from the Irish Government was very welcome. The funding announcement was a promise that was first made in June 2007 to the Northern Ireland Executive, which was then led by Dr Ian Paisley. Whilst the overall cost of the cross-border project has significantly increased over the years, I welcome the decision taken by the Irish Government to restore their funding commitment, which they could not honour until now due to the financial crash in the Republic of Ireland. Whilst we welcome that support for genuine cross-border projects, we must demonstrate the mutual benefit to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is not just the responsibility of the Republic of Ireland's

Government to provide financial support for provision of the public services; it is incumbent on our Executive to work with the UK Government to ensure that we have proper money for infrastructure.

Whilst, as I have pointed out, the costs of the project have been increasing, with any new road infrastructure, it is critical that we ensure that there is a high degree of collaboration. We look forward to seeing the report and to reading the views of local landowners, communities and businesses that were fed into the public consultation.

That having been said, I hope that we can move forward, because, when I drive on that road, I am literally praying behind the steering wheel. That should not be the case. It should not be for anyone who drives on that road to be concerned for their safety. It should not be that we worry about near misses happening. Parts of that road are extremely dangerous to drive on. I thank the Member again for securing the Adjournment debate. The A5 is a vital part of the infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Although the new dual carriageway will provide better connectivity, most importantly, I hope that it will deliver a safer way in which to travel for the people who drive on it.

**Mr McAleer:** I am glad that we are having this debate this evening. It is great to have the Minister and, indeed, the Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure here. I welcome her comments and the comments of others that have been made so far in the debate.

It goes without saying that I heartily support the call for the construction of the new A5 dual carriageway. Last June, I participated in and sat through a public inquiry. I have to say that the most harrowing and compelling evidence for that new road was the stories from the loved ones — parents, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews — of all the people who have lost their life on that road. Far too many lives have been lost on that road; which is the most dangerous road in the country. We must bring that to an end. I pay tribute to the families. Despite their grief and hardship, they keep the campaign going. It is the families that have really brought home to us what is needed: we need the A5 dual carriageway, and it must be a dual carriageway.

In November 2022, I submitted an FOI request to the PSNI for figures on road deaths. Before the A4 was dualled, between 1998 and 2010, there were, sadly, 40 deaths on that road. In the following 12 years, on the A4 dual carriageway, there were, sadly, two deaths. Two deaths is



two too many, but we can see the huge differential in the rate of carnage. I am certain that many people are still alive who would not have been had that A4 dual carriageway not been constructed. Just as Maoliosa McHugh said earlier, I am 100% certain that we will see a safer route and more lives saved on the new A5 dual carriageway.

I will go back to my point that the dual carriageway is the only option. I know that the Alternative A5 Alliance talks about online options. It is important to point out that 1,300 individual lanes and little roads are connected to the existing A5 dual carriageway. As was said at a public meeting some years ago, every single one of those 1,300 roads and lanes is an accident waiting to happen. There is that deadly interface between the strategic traffic that is commuting between, say, Dublin and Derry or Donegal and local people who are dropping off their children at playgroup or going to school, mass or whatever. It is that deadly interface that causes so many accidents.

The offline dual carriageway is also much safer to construct. It has been pointed out strongly that an offline dual carriageway is much safer and more durable in the long term. A new offline road that is properly built would have more integrity. The current A5 is crumbling, so good tar would be being put down on top of bad tar, and the road would continue to crumble. A new road would be much safer for those constructing it. A new offline dual carriageway would result in eight properties being demolished, but any alternatives that have been put forward suggest that at least 34 properties would need to be demolished. In short, there would be a bigger footprint from trying to develop an alternative solution to the A5 dual carriageway. Lanes and local roads would also have to be blocked and traffic diverted, so the footprint would be bigger.

Road consistency is another important factor. I recently drove 140 miles from Dublin to Limerick along the M7 and the M8.

However, if you drive 140 miles north-west from Dublin, you have the M1, single carriageway, two plus one, a bypass, the N2 and the notorious A5.

#### 4.45 pm

It makes more sense. There will be less land take for a proper dual carriageway, fewer properties demolished, reduced journey times, increased economic development and, most importantly, more lives will be saved by the

construction of a new A5 dual carriageway. I welcome the debate.

**Mr Brown:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As this is my first time addressing you in the Chair, I congratulate you on your new position.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate as an Alliance Party infrastructure spokesperson and a member of that Committee. I thank the Member for West Tyrone for bringing this to the Chamber. I hope that the debate contributes to a renewed sense of momentum behind this important, major road project.

We could say a lot about the scheme and its benefits to the area and to the major towns of Omagh and Strabane. However, perhaps the most important factor to reflect on is that, since the original plans for the road were launched in 2007, almost 50 people have died on what is one of the most dangerous roads on these islands. The A5 serves an enormous number of side roads, houses, farms and other accesses. Those many junctions, combined with increased vehicular traffic in recent decades, is the main reason why the road is so dangerous and why we must deliver an alternative. In one year alone, between October 2021 and October 2022, 10 people tragically lost their lives on the A5. The road accounts for 11% of road deaths in Northern Ireland. Yet it is the main road linking Donegal with Dublin, as well as Derry, Omagh and Strabane, carrying over 17,000 vehicles per day. The route is a crucial part of our infrastructure, economy and North/South connectivity, yet it is a single-carriageway road for most of its 58-mile length, with just a few overtaking lanes. Simply focusing on minor mitigation schemes will not do enough to secure road safety on the A5. Such works, as have been the practice to date, are only a sticking plaster, and, whilst we know that the cost of the scheme is significant — as much as £1.6 billion — it is also vital for the safety of road users that we deliver it, the largest road project in the history of Northern Ireland.

We have seen the inflation of capital-build costs of other projects make the headlines in recent days, and that serves as a lesson: where we have crucial infrastructure to build, time is of the essence in case costs spiral even further upwards. Consider, for example, that the project was estimated to cost £800 million in 2007. Now that we have the welcome commitment from the Irish Government to provide €600 million towards the cost, it is on the Executive to come up with a plan for its delivery that may include asking the Irish Government to meet their original commitment

to fund half the project, given that their current contribution equates to roughly a third of the total cost.

Whilst a phased approach may undermine the cost-benefit analysis informing the business case, it would make perhaps most sense to focus on the sections linking Derry and Strabane and Omagh to Ballygawley, given how highly those stretches figure in fatality statistics. The economic ripple effect of the project in Strabane and Omagh would be huge and would breathe new life into those important but often forgotten towns, given the improved linkages that it would also create with the cities of Derry, Belfast and Dublin.

I conclude by recognising those who have campaigned tirelessly over many years to make the plans a reality, particularly the 'A5 Enough is Enough' campaign, its founders Tyrone GAA and all the families who have lost someone on the A5. I also recognise the broad, cross-party support for the scheme and the efforts of our councillor in Omagh, Stephen Donnelly, who has worked hard to see it progress. I hope that all parties will come together at the Executive to finally see the project funded and delivered.

**Mr Durkan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and, while many Adjournment debates have a narrow constituency focus and the A5 runs through the heart of Miss Brogan's constituency, it is fair to say that the negative impact associated with the A5 has been felt much more widely. The benefits of the improved new A5 will be enjoyed across the north-west, including my constituency of Foyle and beyond.

The A5 is one of five key transport corridors on the island. The significant recent funding commitment from the Irish Government is hugely welcome. I hope that that announcement will see movement for this long-awaited and continuously delayed project. The £600 million investment was made possible thanks to the unwavering fortitude of campaigners, including, as mentioned, families of victims who lost their life on that treacherous route and to the political perseverance of Members across the Chamber. It would be remiss of me not to mention my party colleague Daniel McCrossan, and I would not be forgiven if I did not. He has been a huge champion for the project and has managed to keep it on the collective agenda of the Governments on both sides of the border.

The winding north-west corridor in the heart of rural Tyrone has earned its title of the most dangerous road on the island. The deadly

nature of the A5 is ingrained in the collective consciousness. For many, the fight to change that perception and tragic reality has been fraught with difficulty.

We have heard a bit this afternoon about the history of the project. The Dublin Government included it in the fourth national development plan. That was largely down, I have to say, to the lobbying of the SDLP at the time, which can be proved. Its inclusion and priority in that programme was challenged by Peter Robinson, who claimed that it would be sectarian to prioritise a project in the west. He pushed for the inclusion of the Belfast to Larne dualling project, and that was ultimately included as well. That road has been open for nearly 10 years, and we still have not seen a sod turned on the A5, despite the Executive granting approval for it in 2007.

In this case, the intervening period of dysfunction and delay, which is now decades long, has not only resulted in disillusionment but perhaps played a part in the devastating loss of so many lives. Many more people have suffered serious injury, and countless families have been devastated by the trauma of loss. While there are many factors of causation in road traffic collisions, we cannot deny that that extremely dangerous road is a massive contributing factor to the high number of road deaths, nor can we deny — I have mentioned this already — the role of the valiant and steadfast campaigners and the bereaved families. I pay tribute, as others have done, to all those who have turned their grief into the power to deliver change and ensure that no one experiences the same avoidable heartbreak that they have experienced. When completed, the new road will stand as a lasting testament to the love and dedication that they hold for their loved ones.

The upgrade of the A5 will not only improve safety but bring significant economic opportunities, attracting much-needed jobs and investment for the entire north-west region and the people of Tyrone, Derry and Donegal. We now need the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Infrastructure to get on with its delivery. I appreciate the process that the Minister has to go through and how carefully he has to do that. There has been many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, but we are nearly there. We look forward to getting to the starting point and getting the job done. We call on the Minister to do that and will support him in doing so.

**Mr Gildernew:** I thank Nicola for securing an Adjournment debate that brings a very important issue back to the Chamber. I have reflected on some of the things that have been

said. I live close to Aughnacloy, and a large part of the A5 runs from Kelly's Inn and right down through that section of Fermanagh and south Tyrone.

Where I live is 90 miles from Dublin airport and 60 miles from Derry. I can be in Dublin airport in the same time that I can be in Derry, and I can be there safely, with the vast majority of the road when I drive South either a two-plus-one or a motorway. The impact of that is that it starves our area of investment. When companies reach a certain size, they have to go elsewhere to get the infrastructure. Over many decades, that has restricted what is a hugely entrepreneurial area.

The other issue that I want to raise in particular today is, again, related to the Aughnacloy section. All the A5 traffic on that strategic arterial route, which Maoliosa McHugh mentioned, goes through the town of Aughnacloy. The result is that at virtually any time of the day, if anyone wants to cross the main street in Aughnacloy, the traffic on the A5 both ways has to voluntarily stop to allow them to cross. The one crossing in the town is some distance from the shops and from where buses are travelling up and down the length of Ireland, and local school buses, are dropping pupils off at the shops and all of that. Older and younger people in particular are hugely vulnerable, not only to that traffic not stopping, but, when it does stop, somebody else coming around in frustration, cutting inside and going through. It is an absolute disaster waiting to happen, and it is the same with the entire stretch of the A5.

Every couple of days on our WhatsApp groups at home, we get a messages telling us to avoid a certain section of the road, because there is a car on its roof or over the hedge or whatever. On the day I was travelling up to give evidence to the public inquiry on the A5, I almost collided with the back of another car. That happened as a result of what Declan McAleer mentioned, which is all the small entrances. A car was making a right turn, and there was a line of perhaps half a mile of traffic. Every one of those cars had to brake slightly harder to get stopped, and it virtually finished up in a pile-up. Those incidents are going on all the time, and it is only a matter of time until there is another serious incident.

I want to acknowledge the work that Enough is Enough and the GAA community have done. Its launch night in Garvaghey was a very poignant evening. The campaigners had listed all the GAA members and their clubs, the very first of whom was Mickey O'Neill, from our club and from the town of Aughnacloy. He was a very

close friend of my brother Ruairi. We were standing at a football game when we got word that, on his way to the game, Mickey had been killed on the A5. That has happened repeatedly and will continue to happen.

I want to finish by pleading with those people who have objected to the road to please consider the impact of their objections. Please allow this road to be developed and allow people in our constituencies and communities to have the same level of access to safe road travel as other people.

**Ms Ferguson:** I also welcome this important discussion on the A5 and echo the absolute need to upgrade it. As we all know, the A5 is the key route that connects the north-west and, in particular, the constituencies of Foyle and West Tyrone, in which I reside, to the rest of the island. As we have heard from many contributors this evening, the upgrade will have major economic benefits that can create jobs, attract investment, cut down journey times and help unleash the area's full potential. Most importantly, however, it is an issue of safety and saving lives and upgrading one of the most dangerous roads anywhere on this island. As we have all witnessed, there have been scenes of heartbreak and tragedy for too many families, some of whom I know personally. Too many mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters have been left in mourning because of the deaths on this road, and that must change.

Years and years of objections have delayed work starting on the project. My home backs on to the A5, so I have been quite closely involved throughout the whole consultation process for 20-plus years. I went to consultations in the Fir Trees Hotel, and we have seen all the different scenarios. It is really pertinent that, 20 years on, we must move. It has been frustrating, but there can be no more delays. The objections must end.

Like everyone, we welcome the announcement of the €600 million from the Irish Government for the project and the ongoing commitment from our Minister John O'Dowd to deliver the A5. Everyone who I speak to — like everyone who is here this evening, I speak to our local businesses, our constituents and others — understands the major benefits of delivering the A5 and the opportunities that it will open up for everyone. Huge progress is now being made.

**5.00 pm**

Before I conclude, I pay tribute to all the families, particularly those who have been

bereaved over the years, who have campaigned and have attended the inquiry to get us to this stage. I particularly thank the A5 Enough is Enough campaign that took place quite recently. We need to continue to work together, and it is heartening to have in the Chamber the Minister for Infrastructure and the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee. We are all united on ensuring that the A5 is built and delivered and that we transform this road and our neighbourhoods and communities for the future.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):**

First, I thank Nicola Brogan MLA for instigating this debate on the delivery of the A5 dual carriageway. I have listened with interest to the comments and issues raised by Members, and it is clear that the delivery of the A5 project is of huge importance for Members, as it is for me as Minister for Infrastructure. I have made clear on many occasions my commitment to taking this project forward in accordance with the statutory procedures.

As Members have pointed out, with over 50 fatalities along the existing A5 since 2006 — a staggering and depressing figure, I have to say — the dangers to the users of the current A5 are evident for all to see and have caused heartbreak in too many family homes. Clearly, a new dual carriageway can significantly reduce collisions through the physical separation of vehicles travelling in opposite directions; by facilitating safe overtaking for the entire 85-kilometre length of the new dual carriageway; by enabling vehicles to travel at a consistent and safe speed; by minimising manoeuvres at busy junctions and side roads; by separating those on strategic long-distance journeys from those on local trips; and by providing significant relief to the many towns, villages — Colm pointed out the impact on Aghnacloy — and hamlets along the existing road that will no longer have to endure the burden of constant heavy traffic volumes through the heart of their local communities and local facilities such as schools and shops that adjoin the existing road.

An example, if one is needed, that has been mentioned by several Members is the provision of the dual carriageway on the adjoining A4 between Dungannon and Ballygawley. That notorious road had 37 fatalities in 10 years, and the new dual carriageway was opened in 2010. While every fatality is, of course, regrettable, there have been just two since the opening of the A4. I had a conversation recently with a farmer who lost land as a result of the A4 scheme. He told me that, at the time that the A4 was being proposed, he was deeply frustrated and, indeed, angry that he was going to lose

land. I know the connection between farmers and their land. He also had a business that was severely disrupted as a result. He is now proud that he contributed to the safety features of the A4. He has since rebuilt his business, and he said to me, "John, tell anyone who has concerns to come and talk to me because I am proud to be able to say that I helped save people's lives on the A4". The A5 is a similar example.

While improving road safety has always been, and remains, one of the key objectives of the new road, it is not the only one. The new dual carriageway is also of significant strategic importance to the north-west region and to our wider island, as several Members have pointed out, and will help to tackle regional imbalance and improve the economy, job prospects, prosperity and the connecting of communities.

I share the frustrations expressed by Members about the length of time that it has taken to get this transformative project through the statutory processes. My Department and I must, nevertheless, follow due process and apply due diligence. As the House will be aware, the A5 dualling project is an Executive flagship project: its origins are in the St Andrews Agreement and it was agreed through the North/South Ministerial Council in 2007. As a project to deliver 85 kilometres of new dual carriageway between Newbuildings and the border at Aghnacloy, it is a significant and ambitious by any standards. It is the biggest roads project ever to be undertaken here. My Department must comply with the statutory procedures governing the construction, improvements and acquisition of land for trunk roads as contained in the Roads (NI) Order 1993. Members will know the history of the project. For the record, following the first public inquiry in 2011, the statutory orders to allow the A5 to proceed were made in 2012. Subsequently, however, they were challenged by the Alternative A5 Alliance, a group that was opposed to the new road from the outset. The challenge led to the quashing of the statutory orders in April 2013, and it was judged that the Department had not fully met its obligations under the habitats regulations.

That unprecedented ruling set a new compliance benchmark for the development of all major infrastructure schemes from that point onwards. Lessons were learned from that ruling, and further development work to address the deficiencies followed, leading to the publication of a consultation on a new environmental statement and draft statutory orders in February 2016. With almost 1,000 representations made, a public inquiry was

deemed necessary, and the second inquiry took place in the latter half of 2016.

The Planning Appeals Commission's (PAC) report from the inquiry was received by the Department in May 2015, and it advised that the project should proceed. In the absence of a Minister, a formal decision to proceed was made in November 2017 by the then permanent secretary of the Department. The decision, if unchallenged, would have represented the completion of the statutory procedures and allowed the project to move to the construction phase. However, the decision was again legally challenged by the Alternative A5 Alliance in December 2017. Some 10 grounds of challenge were listed, including the powers for the permanent secretary to make the decision in the absence of a Minister.

After careful consideration of the relevant Court of Appeal's decision made during 2018 in Buick, as well as the provisions of the NI (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, the legal advice that was provided to the departmental officials indicated a high likelihood that the permanent secretary's decision would be quashed. It was concluded that it was not therefore in the public interest to continue defending the legal challenge, and, consequently, the decision to proceed was quashed, taking effect from 16 November 2018. Essentially, the quashing of that decision took the project back to the February 2016 position, effectively knocking it back three years.

Since November 2018, the Department has carried out work to enable a decision by a new Minister. It is a requirement when assessing environmental impacts that decisions must be based on up-to-date environmental information. With that in mind, updated environmental information in the form of an environmental statement addendum was published for consultation in March 2019. By necessity, that information continued to relate to the base data contained in the original environmental statement of 2016. It is important to note that, with the passage of time, new and updated environmental standards are being continuously introduced through legislation and other technical guidance, and that can present a risk of challenge.

With 264 representations made to the 2019 consultation exercise, the Department concluded that a further public inquiry would be necessary, and the third inquiry took place over seven days in February and March 2020. In September 2020, my Department received an interim report from the PAC on its findings from the inquiry. It was not a final report, as would be

the normal procedure. The report contained two key recommendations on the need for further assessments: on flood risks and scheme alternatives. The PAC recommended that the assessments be incorporated into further addenda to the environmental statement and made available for further public consultation. The PAC therefore adjourned the inquiry, indicating that it could be reconvened when the Department had taken those steps.

In an interim departmental statement issued in March 2021, DFI accepted the recommendations relating to flood risks and route alternatives. That led to the publication of and consultation on a further environmental statement in March 2022 and the release of information for consultation in November 2022 and January 2023. The 2020 public inquiry was reconvened in May 2023 and concluded in early June. Members will be aware that many members of the public also attended, including grieving families. The Planning Appeals Commission, which administered the public inquiry, issued its final advisory report to the Department on 31 October 2023.

I have been fully briefed on the current progress and the advisory recommendations of the PAC. Work remains ongoing in considering those recommendations, and I hope to be able to make an announcement on the project in the coming months. In response to Mrs Erskine's comments, when I make my announcement, I will publish the PAC report at the same time.

When I make my announcement on the Executive flagship project, I will do so in accordance with the relevant statutory procedures and on the basis of all the evidence, representations and advice that I have received from my officials; statutory agencies, North and South; members of the public; and other bodies that have participated in the process to date.

Subject to the completion of all necessary statutory processes and environmental assessments, as I have outlined, the construction of the project could begin later this year. However, major projects such as the A5 are inherently complex and can be vulnerable to legal challenge. I appeal to the people who were behind the previous legal challenges to think carefully about their actions, to think about the greater good of our society as a whole and to think of our communities and future generations in getting a safe road in place that serves the needs of all road users.

I thank Nicola for bringing forward this Adjournment topic. I also note and welcome the support of all Members who have spoken for

the construction of the A5. I assure Members of my commitment, and that of my Department, to progress the project in accordance with the statutory procedures as far as possible to reach a decision within the shortest time frame that is reasonably possible. I also commend those grieving families who have made their voice heard in relation to the A5. Despite their grief, they have championed the cause of improved road safety for all users of the A5.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I thank the Minister for his response.

*Adjourned at 5.11 pm.*