



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 February 2024

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Members, there are a few matters that I want to address before the start of today's business.

First, I confirm to the House that I have written to His Majesty The King to convey our best wishes following the announcement of his cancer diagnosis. Cancer is something that affects many families in the community. Thankfully, medical advances have made a huge difference to its treatment. We have thousands of cancer survivors in our community and, indeed, survivors in the Assembly, including me. I know that we have a Matter of the Day shortly for parties to express their views, but, on behalf of the whole House, I send our best wishes to His Majesty for a speedy recovery.

On a different matter, after my election on Saturday, we said how important that it was for the Assembly to get down to business, and we are glad to see that we have a motion today to allow the Assembly the opportunity to discuss a really important issue.

I also inform the House that the Business Committee has agreed that Question Time should begin a week sooner than is normal after Ministers are appointed. We will be encouraging Ministers to bring business to the House at the earliest opportunity. When I referred to myself on Saturday as "a poacher turned gamekeeper", I meant that in more ways than one. I am the first Speaker to have been a Minister previously, and I therefore know many of the ministerial strategies that Ministers will use with the Assembly and Committees [*Laughter*] and the tricks that they will try to pull, so I will be writing to Ministers this week to remind them of the key procedural issues and requirements and of the courtesies towards the Chamber.

Ministers have exceptionally important roles, but so do Members in carrying out their scrutiny and ensuring accountability. That is the case for

every Member who is not a Minister. Whether a Member belongs to a party on the Executive, the Opposition or a smaller party, or is an independent, I intend to uphold every Member's right to exercise that scrutiny. Thank you.

## Matter of the Day

### His Majesty King Charles III: Cancer Diagnosis

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Sorcha Eastwood has been given leave to make a statement on the recent cancer diagnosis of His Majesty King Charles III that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate that by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that interventions are not permitted, and I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until this item of business has been concluded.

**Ms Eastwood:** I have tabled the Matter of the Day as an opportunity for Members to express sympathy and support for King Charles III, who has recently been diagnosed with cancer. I wish to reserve my maiden speech at this time, given the nature of the Matter of the Day; indeed, I also want to extend the Alliance Party's condolences to the family of former Taoiseach John Bruton.

The King did not have to share his cancer diagnosis, but he did so to raise awareness of the issue; indeed, with a full heart and public spirit. As well as Members having an opportunity to express well wishes and support at this time, it is important for us to do exactly what the King has said and assist public understanding of cancer. Over 10,000 people are diagnosed each year in Northern Ireland. Projected figures show that one in two of us will get cancer. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your comments at the start of the sitting. I know that this is something that you have battled with personally, as have many other Members in the Chamber today. All of us have been directly or indirectly impacted by cancer; indeed, it was only on Saturday past that the issue was raised in the House by both the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That gives me hope that it is seen as urgent and as a priority.

We know that, while great progress has been made, Northern Ireland lags behind comparable countries in survivability. We also know that the King revealed that it was only by accident that his cancer was found. Immediately, I can think of three people in my constituency of Lagan Valley who were diagnosed in the emergency department last year. Sadly, two out of the three are dead. Time is of the essence in battling the disease. I think of people like Christine Campbell, who, with late-stage

ovarian cancer, is using her platform selflessly to advocate for cancer care and survivors. I also think of Eimear Smyth, Ozzie Rogers, Adam Watson and Adam's Army, Poppy Ogle, many other young people and, indeed, family members of Members of the House.

While we take the opportunity, rightly, to offer support to the King in his fight ahead and wish him strength and recovery, it is also vital that we listen to the other part of his message, for it is we in the Chamber whom the people of Northern Ireland have charged to address this, make it better and get it right for them and their families. I know and trust that we will all push forward to make that happen. I know that we have the support of the whole House in wishing His Majesty The King well and, indeed, all the families who, in the past 24 hours, have also received a cancer diagnosis.

**Mr Allister:** There is palpable shock and empathy across our nation at the news that His Majesty The King has fallen victim to the pervasive and dreadful disease of cancer. Of course, it is a reminder to us that cancer is no respecter of persons. Therefore, our first and primary thoughts, undoubtedly, are with the King himself, the Queen and his immediate family, who have all to shoulder the burden. Of course, as has been said, it is something that has touched many families, yourself included, Mr Speaker, and, indeed, the family of the previous Member to speak in the debate. It, therefore, creates a common feeling among so many.

As you have properly conveyed to the King the best wishes, thoughts and prayers of the Assembly, we trust that he will see a speedy and effective recovery and be enabled to continue to rule over us. The transparency with which the matter was dealt with was highly commendable. I trust that its effect will be that people go to seek help. They may have neglected symptoms but will now take it upon themselves, as they probably did after the King's prostate situation, to ensure that they put their health first and foremost.

I join as many in the House as are conveying thoughts, prayers and support to His Majesty and his family at this time.

**Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister):** I thank the Member for bringing the issue to the House this morning. I am very mindful of her own family situation, and I offer my best wishes to her husband, Dale, whom she has spoken publicly about previously.

I extend my support to the King and wish him the very best and a speedy recovery in his journey. Over the last 12 hours, since yesterday evening, when the news became public, the issue has hit home, as others have said, to so many families. We are all acutely aware of all the people who are going through a cancer journey. Few of us in society have not been touched in some way in our family or friend circles, and it can be such a devastating time for so many people. I am so glad today that we are here and are back to business. We have work to do to deliver on our cancer strategies here. We have a lot of work to do, and, certainly, I know that we are up for that.

I am also mindful of this morning's news headlines about the Children's Hospice. I know that we will all be concerned and will all want to do our very best for the hospice service, particularly given that it deals with children going through such a difficult time. I have spoken to the Health Minister. He, I and, I am sure, the deputy First Minister will want to do everything that we can to be as supportive as we can of the hospice, and I have communicated that to the hospice this morning.

Finally, I want to pass on my condolences to the family of former Taoiseach John Bruton, who, we have just been notified, has sadly passed away. We send his family and friends our condolences at this very sad time.

**Mr Buckley:** I join many in the House in paying tribute to His Majesty The King for the bravery that he has shown in coming forward to publicly put on record what he is going through. Nine months ago to this very day, many millions in the United Kingdom and across the world celebrated the King's coronation. To listen to the news yesterday and hear of the cancer diagnosis was certainly a shock to many in the nation, but I commend the King for his bravery in highlighting an issue — cancer — that has affected so many homes across Northern Ireland and across the world.

I listened yesterday to the news and was particularly touched by how, following the King's prostate operation, he was touched by the uptick that there had been in the number of those contacting the NHS helpline. I think that it was up 1000%, and those people talked about issues that had been affecting them. It is sometimes a taboo subject, but the King came forward and put, at the front and centre, what he and many others are facing.

As the King begins his treatment, I want to put on record the thoughts and prayers of the Democratic Unionist Party and, indeed, of all

the constituents whom we represent. We are proud to have a King whose commitment to his duty is unwavering. The fact that, just yesterday, he announced that, while his treatment starts, he will continue in his state duties shows the type of leader that the nation has. I join everyone in wishing His Majesty The King well and a speedy recovery. Our thoughts are with his family and all the families across the nation that suffer from cancer. We pray and thank the Lord for the continual advancements in cancer diagnosis across the spectrum, and we wish everyone well as they continue that battle.

**Mr Beattie:** Cancer is a terrible disease that respects nobody, young or old. I do not think that there is anybody sitting in the Chamber now who has not been affected, directly or indirectly, by cancer.

I am minded to think of Dale, and I send my best wishes to him. Even in my party, there are members who have had to battle through cancer. It is so invasive. It really is a disgusting disease. However, we have made huge advancements. I am also reminded of the fact that, right across these islands, many families are dealing with cancer at this moment.

#### 10.45 am

The Ulster Unionist Party's best wishes go to the King — of course they do — and to his family, who will have to deal with this in the long term. We hope that he has a speedy recovery, and we thank him for being open with the diagnosis that he has received. That conversation cannot be hidden, and it needs to be had more often than it has been. Our best wishes go to him.

I will finish by passing on my condolences to the family and friends of John Bruton on his passing. That is another terrible shock. The one thing that I am grateful for is that we are now in a position to start to help those people who are dealt this terrible affliction.

**Mr O'Toole:** I commend the Member for Lagan Valley for bringing this Matter of the Day to us. Obviously, she spoke with immense emotion of the cancer experience that she and her husband are going through. She, like the King, is an example of people being open about their experiences with cancer, which, as has already been said, will very soon affect 50% of us. Our condolences also go to the family of the former Taoiseach John Bruton, whose sad passing we learned about today. We may have an

opportunity to debate his legacy on another occasion.

The King has done something very brave. He has used the office and the role that he holds not simply to make this a private matter but to do something that takes courage at a very difficult time for him and his family, which is to talk about his cancer experience. It has also been said that, because of the problems in health services — this is true in England but even more so in Northern Ireland — an increasing number of people receive their cancer diagnosis on an incidental basis. That is deeply troubling and worrying. It is a good thing that we are back in the Chamber and able to do something about that, and it is a good thing that a Health Minister has now been appointed who can start to deal with the issues in our health service, which will, hopefully, improve cancer outcomes.

Once again, let me express that my thoughts are with the family of the King. It is true that very few roles in the world are more public than that of a monarch, but I pay tribute to him for using his office not just to bring awareness but to encourage discussion and openness about this very difficult situation.

Our thoughts go to the King and the rest of the royal family as they deal with an intensely private moment. I thank them for talking about it with candour and honesty.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister):** I add my thanks to the Member for bringing this subject forward. It is incredibly important that, across the House, we formally offer our concerns and best wishes to His Majesty The King.

We all know that it is about not just the person who goes through that journey, difficult as it is, but the huge pressure that is put on the family and friends of those who are suffering. I am sure that many people across the House have been through that or at least know many people who have been through or are going through that very challenging journey. We absolutely wish His Majesty The King all the very best for his treatment and recovery.

I am glad that, at our Executive meeting yesterday, we took the opportunity — it was important to do so — as one of our first items of business, to talk about the waiting lists for cancer. There are waiting lists for all kinds of different issues of course, but, in particular, we discussed the waiting lists for cancer because they are, quite simply, unacceptable. That is a very good example of the type of issue on

which we, collectively, need to work to try to resolve. I am confident that there is that collective will, just as there is in the House today as we send our best wishes to the King, to work together constructively to find the solutions that, as we know, so many families and individuals need.

Many in the House and beyond will be deeply concerned to hear the news today about the hospice. We will raise that and, hopefully, find a resolution. It is not just about the person and their family and friends; we rely hugely on the incredible work of so many people in our health system, in the hospices and beyond. It is about the people who care for and support people going through what is often the very worst time of their life. We should put on record our thanks to them. I have no doubt that the King will receive excellent care, as do many of those who go through a similar journey throughout Northern Ireland.

I also extend my condolences to the family and friends of former Taoiseach John Bruton this morning.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank my colleague Sorcha Eastwood for the very brave and open way in which she has dealt with her husband, Dale's, diagnosis of cancer. I add my best wishes to those of the House to His Majesty The King and the royal family as they face this particularly difficult time. I know only too personally, as a survivor of one of the eight least survivable cancers in the world — oesophageal — what it is to face that diagnosis, to have to share it with family and friends, and then, as I have a small insight into public life, to stand up to let people know and share my story, without knowing what the end of it was to be, with Mark Devenport and the BBC, and subsequently with the 'Belfast Telegraph'. That was four years ago. Oesophageal cancer is one of the least survivable cancers. It must be caught early. It is vital that our health service is ready, willing and able to support patients like me and others who have those particular cancers. I place on record my thanks to the cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital, the nurse specialists who looked after me, my oncologist and my surgeon, all of whom did an amazing job for me and do an amazing job for the many patients like me who face the diagnosis of oesophageal cancer.

I have immense admiration for His Majesty The King and the way in which he has publicly come forward at this very early stage to make people aware of what is happening to him and the difficulties that his family will face. I also place on record my particular sympathies to the family of John Bruton, the former Taoiseach, who,

sadly, died this morning. As others have said, I am sure that we will have an opportunity to pay tribute to him. My memories of him go back as far as the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation: he was very actively involved in the very early stages of our peace process.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank Members who have spoken for the dignified way in which this item of business has been conducted. I add my sympathies to the Bruton family. I became aware of the situation only on taking the Chair. I will write to the Bruton family. John Bruton was a fine man, a man of integrity, a very decent man and a fine Taoiseach.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to raise a matter of far less significance than the issue that we have just discussed, but it is, I think, appropriate that I raise it. How are the dignity and expectations of your office compatible with your public venting of your desire to "clean" my "clock", which has the colloquial and indisputable meaning of indulging in physical violence? How is that compatible with the dignity of your office?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for his point of order. In reference to that, I think that the Member is being a little sensitive. We were in a debating Chamber, and the reference was in the import of the debating Chamber, so, Mr Allister, had I had the opportunity to put you right, I would have put you right on that occasion, but I did not have the opportunity to do that. No other connotation should be taken from it. That would be entirely disingenuous or misleading. That is the situation.

## Assembly Business

### Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

**Ms Ennis:** I beg to move

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for Tuesday 6 February 2024.*

**Mr Speaker:** Before I proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for Tuesday 6 February 2024.*

### Statutory Committees

**Mr Speaker:** As this is a business motion, there will be no debate.

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Orders 46 and 47, this Assembly determines that nine Statutory Committees shall be established, as follows:*

*the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs;*  
*the Committee for Communities;*  
*the Committee for the Economy;*  
*the Committee for Education;*  
*the Committee for the Executive Office;*  
*the Committee for Finance;*  
*the Committee for Health;*  
*the Committee for Infrastructure; and*  
*the Committee for Justice.*

*Terms of reference, quorum and composition of the Committees shall be prescribed in Standing Orders 48 and 49. — [Ms Ennis.]*

### Statutory Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons

**Mr Speaker:** In accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 48, I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in Standing Order 48, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a



Member of the Assembly to be the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

I remind parties of the requirement of Standing Order 48(5) that nominating officers shall prefer Committees in which they do not have a party interest over those in which they do. For the avoidance of doubt, that means that I will expect parties to refrain as far as possible from selecting Committees that coincide with the ministerial offices held by their party.

I now call on Mrs Michelle O'Neill, as nominating officer of the party that has the highest figure under the formula, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Ms Ennis:** Mr Speaker, may I call for a short suspension at this juncture if that is agreeable to the House?

**Mr Speaker:** A number of Whips have asked for this matter to be suspended because some more work needs to be done. I propose at this time to suspend for 15 minutes.

*The sitting was suspended at 10.58 am and resumed at 11.15 am.*

**Mr Speaker:** Members, we resume business.

**Mr McGrath:** We propose another break, of 30 minutes, to allow discussions to continue.

**Mr Speaker:** That is granted, but get it sorted in the next 30 minutes, because we will not grant another one. The sitting is suspended for a further 30 minutes.

*The sitting was suspended at 11.15 am and resumed at 11.46 am.*

**Mr Speaker:** Members, we will resume business.

**Mr Brooks:** Mr Speaker, on behalf of the party Whips, I seek another 30-minute suspension.

**Mr Speaker:** Granted. This is definitely the final time. The sitting will resume at 12.15 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 11.47 am and resumed at 12.18 pm.*

**Mr Speaker:** The sitting is resumed. I remind Members that Standing Orders allow 15 minutes for a nomination to be made and for a

nominee to take up the selected office. It is not necessary to seek a suspension for this time to be available. Any additional time would require Assembly approval.

I call on Mrs Michelle O'Neill, as nominating officer of the party that has the highest figure under the formula, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I select the Committee for Health and nominate Liz Kimmins as Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Kimmins:** Yes.

*Ms Liz Kimmins appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Health.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Keith Buchanan to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate Joanne Bunting as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

**Mr Speaker:** Is Ms Bunting willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Bunting:** I am.

*Ms Joanne Bunting appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.*

**Mr Speaker:** I now call on Miss Nuala McAllister to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Miss McAllister:** I select the Committee for Education, and I nominate Nick Mathison as Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Mathison:** I am.

*Mr Nick Mathison appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Education.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Mrs Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I select the Committee for Communities, and I nominate Colm Gildernew.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Gildernew:** Tá mé. I am.

*Mr Colm Gildernew appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Keith Buchanan to select and nominate.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate Phillip Brett for Chair of the Committee for the Economy.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Brett:** I am.

*Mr Phillip Brett appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.*

**Mr Speaker:** I now call on Doug Beattie to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mr Beattie:** I choose the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. My nomination for Chair is Tom Elliott.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Elliott:** I am.

*Mr Tom Elliott appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We select the vice chair of the Committee for Education, and we nominate Pat Sheehan.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Ms Ennis:** Mr Speaker, a letter was lodged this morning. Pat is absent today, so the letter states that he is willing to accept the nomination in his absence.

**Mr Speaker:** We have written confirmation that Pat Sheehan is willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated.

*Mr Pat Sheehan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Nuala McAllister to select and nominate.

**Miss McAllister:** I select the Committee for the Executive Office, and I nominate Paula Bradshaw as Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Bradshaw:** Yes, I am.

*Ms Paula Bradshaw appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Keith Buchanan to select and nominate.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate Deborah Erskine to be Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Mrs Erskine:** Yes, I am.

*Mrs Deborah Erskine appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.*

**Mr Speaker:** I now call on Mr Matthew O'Toole to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mr O'Toole:** This is slightly embarrassing, because I was not expecting to be in this position. I select the Committee for Finance, and I nominate myself, Matthew O'Toole MLA, to be Chair of said Committee. I hope that that is within Standing Orders.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office of Chair? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr O'Toole:** Mr Speaker, may I have a 15-minute suspension? *[Laughter.]* Yes, I am willing to take up said office.

*Mr Matthew O'Toole appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I choose the vice chair of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and I nominate Declan McAleer.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McAleer:** Yes.

*Mr Declan McAleer appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Keith Buchanan to select and nominate.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate Diane Forsythe to be vice chair of the Committee for Finance.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Forsythe:** Yes, I am.

*Ms Diane Forsythe appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Nuala McAllister to select and nominate.

**Miss McAllister:** I am in a similar position to Matthew O'Toole. I select the Committee for Health, and I nominate myself, Nuala McAllister, as vice chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Miss McAllister:** Yes, this time.

*Miss Nuala McAllister appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I select the Justice Committee and nominate Deirdre Hargey as the vice chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Hargey:** Yes.

*Miss Deirdre Hargey appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Keith Buchanan to select and nominate.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate Gary Middleton to be the vice chair of the Economy Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Middleton:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, I am.

*Mr Gary Middleton appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Doug Beattie to select and nominate.

**Mr Beattie:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My nomination for vice chair of the Infrastructure Committee is John Stewart.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Stewart:** I am, thank you.

*Mr John Stewart appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I choose the vice chair of the Communities Committee and nominate Ciara Ferguson.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Ferguson:** I am, thank you.

*Mrs Ciara Ferguson appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.*

**Mr Speaker:** Finally, I call on Nuala McAllister to select and nominate.

**Miss McAllister:** I nominate Connie Egan as the vice chair of the Committee for the Executive Office.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Egan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, I am.

*Ms Connie Egan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.*

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. That concludes the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Statutory Committees.

## **Standing Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons**

**Mr Speaker:** I am required to supervise the appointment of a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to each Standing Committee other than the Business Committee, in accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 51. Standing Orders make provisions for the Committee on Procedures, the Public Accounts Committee, the Committee on Standards and Privileges, the Audit Committee and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Further to those, the Windsor Framework (Democratic Scrutiny) Regulations 2024, which came into force last Friday, make provision for a Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee to be established by the Assembly. The membership of the Committee is to be determined in the same way as the membership of Standing Committees.

Before we commence, I remind parties of the requirement of Standing Order 56(3) that neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior Minister appointed to the Department of Finance. I also remind parties of Standing Order 56(4) that, where there is an Opposition, the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee shall be nominated by the leader of the Opposition. For all other Standing Committees, I shall ask the nominating officer for each political party, in the order required by the formula in Standing Order 51(2), to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

I call on Michelle O'Neill, as nominating officer of the party that has the highest figure under the formula laid down in Standing Orders, to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We choose the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee and nominate Declan Kearney as the Chairperson.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Kearney:** Tá mé toilteanach. I am willing.

*Mr Declan Kearney appointed Chairperson of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Keith Buchanan to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate Jonathan Buckley to be Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Buckley:** I am.

*Mr Jonathan Buckley appointed Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.*

**12.30 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Nuala McAllister to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Miss McAllister:** I select the Committee on Procedures and nominate Kellie Armstrong as Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Armstrong:** I am.

*Ms Kellie Armstrong appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We choose the Standards and Privileges Committee and nominate Philip McGuigan.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McGuigan:** Yes.

*Mr Philip McGuigan appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Keith Buchanan to select and nominate.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate David Brooks as vice chair of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Brooks:** I am.

*Mr David Brooks appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Mr Doug Beattie to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

**Mr Beattie:** We select the Audit Committee and nominate Alan Chambers.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Chambers:** I am.

*Mr Alan Chambers appointed Chairperson of the Audit Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We choose the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and nominate Pádraig Delargy.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Delargy:** I am.

*Mr Pádraig Delargy appointed Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Nuala McAllister to select and nominate.

**Miss McAllister:** I select the Committee on Standards and Privileges and nominate Danny Donnelly as vice chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Donnelly:** I am.

*Mr Danny Donnelly appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Keith Buchanan to select and nominate.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate Cheryl Brownlee as vice chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Brownlee:** I am.

*Ms Cheryl Brownlee appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** It is now the turn of the SDLP to nominate. On Saturday, the party informed the Assembly that it chose to be recognised as the Opposition. Standing Order 56(4) requires that, where there is an Opposition, the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee is to be nominated by the leader of the Opposition. I now call on Matthew O'Toole to nominate a Member to be Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

**Mr O'Toole:** In line with Standing Order 56(4), in my role as leader of the Opposition, I nominate Daniel McCrossan as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McCrossan:** I am.

*Mr Daniel McCrossan appointed Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Michelle O'Neill to select and nominate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We choose the Committee on Procedures and nominate Sinéad Ennis as vice chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Ennis:** I am.

*Mrs Sinéad Ennis appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Keith Buchanan to select and nominate.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I nominate myself to be vice chair of the Audit Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr K Buchanan:** Yes.

*Mr Keith Buchanan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the appointments of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Standing Committees.

## Election of Principal Deputy Speaker

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is the election of a Deputy Speaker to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. The process will be conducted in accordance with Standing Order 5A. I will begin by asking for a nomination. Any Member may rise to nominate one of the Deputy Speakers to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. I will then confirm that the person nominated is willing to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. A debate relevant to that nomination will then take place. The Business Committee has agreed that only one Member should speak on behalf of each party in the debate. They will be allowed up to three minutes each. At the end of the debate, I will put the Question on the nomination. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I shall ask for a further nomination and the process will be repeated.

Do I have a proposal for a Deputy Speaker to be nominated as Principal Deputy Speaker?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I nominate Carál Ní Chuilín for the position of Principal Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Carál Ní Chuilín, do you agree to act as Principal Deputy Speaker?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Glacaim leis. [*Translation: I accept.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Standing Orders provide for a debate to take place on the nomination. Members may speak only once in the debate. Standing Orders require the debate to be relevant to the nomination, so I will not allow Members to stray into other areas. Members will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is my privilege to nominate my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín for the position of Principal Deputy Speaker. Carál is no stranger to many of the MLAs who are in the Chamber, having been here since 2007 and having held many roles, including as a Minister across several Departments and as Chief Whip. Those roles gave her enormous experience of the operation of this place — the institution itself.

I have worked with Carál for many years. She has always been a determined voice for not just the people of north Belfast but those in the marginalised sections of society. I have no doubt that, when called upon, she will bring maturity and respect to her new role. She will be a valuable support to you, as Speaker, and a huge asset to the Chamber.

I am delighted to nominate her not as Deputy Chief Constable today [*Laughter*] but as Principal Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Allister:** This is a wholly farcical position. It exercises no greater authority than a Deputy Speaker. Of course, it was brought in in 2011 to stroke some egos so that the two big parties could demonstrate their superiority over the lesser mortals in the smaller parties. They puffed themselves up and decided, "We need a Principal Deputy Speaker, and we'll get a nice plaque and put it on the door of a swanky office and pretend that this is a really forceful, important office". What a farce, and here we go again, appointing a Principal Deputy Speaker as a moment to show the lesser parties that they are lesser and that the egos of the big parties are here to be stroked.

Today, it is Miss Carál Ní Chuilín. Of course, she showed her propensity in the past to have an attraction to titles, because, when she became a Minister, her first appointment was her commander from the IRA in the jail, a murderer, as special adviser until, thankfully, we were able to put an end to that obscenity, and here she is now: Principal Deputy Speaker.

It really is a farce. I hope that this appointment does not end in the same ignominy as that of the previous Sinn Féin Principal Deputy Speaker, Miss Ruane, who even her party could not get out of office or get her funds in that respect.

However, it reminds me that the previous Principal Deputy Speaker was a man of panache and ability. I am referring to the late Christopher Stalford, who filled that office, whatever the title, and the Chair with great ability and humour. Today one thinks of his wife, his children, his sister and his mother while remembering the indelible manner in which he conducted affairs in the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for mentioning the late Christopher Stalford. His absence has certainly been on my mind over the past few days.

We now move to the next element, which is to remind the Assembly that cross-community support is required.

*Question, That Ms Carál Ní Chuilín be Principal Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Ms Carál Ní Chuilín be Principal Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.*

**Mr Speaker:** As there were Ayes from all sides of the Chamber and only one dissenting voice, I believe, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. I offer my congratulations to Carál Ní Chuilín as Principal Deputy Speaker. That concludes that item of business.

## Private Members' Business

### Public Finances

**Ms Ennis:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly endorses the letter sent to Prime Minister Sunak by all Executive Ministers calling for our public finances to be placed on a sustainable footing and for the Executive to have the resources that they need to deliver effective public services.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. As an amendment has been selected and is published in the Marshalled List, 15 minutes will be added to the total time for debate.

**Ms Ennis:** It is a relief, and we are delighted, that we have been able to achieve all-party support for the motion. I am sure that I speak for us all when I say that we are relieved to be back in the Chamber doing the job that we were elected to do and working together to support workers and families.

All parties today speak with one voice to ensure that the Executive have the resources that they need to deliver effective public services. Our public services have been devastated by a decade of Tory cuts and austerity. The money now available from the Treasury does not compensate for the funding that has been stripped from our public services, and that is totally unacceptable.

I was struck by the absolute irony of the Secretary of State's suggestion that we should focus on delivering public services, when his Government are solely responsible for the underfunding of and the damage done to those public services. If we are to cut waiting lists across our health service, make childcare affordable, improve special educational needs services for children and young people and give public-sector workers the pay rise that they are absolutely entitled to, we need the finances to deliver that.

The British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, heard that message yesterday during his engagement with the Assembly parties. The £3.3 billion funding package on the table will bring short-term relief to Executive Departments, but it falls far short of what we are entitled to and what is required to efficiently run public services, delivered on the basis of objective need.

Just before Christmas, the British Secretary of State conceded that we have been underfunded for many years. That is an important and telling admission.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way so early in her speech. I agree with absolutely everything that she has said. I agree that we have been underfunded, and we have all signed up to the letter, but the other thing that the Northern Ireland population has been subject to is, in five years out of 10, a failure to have a democratic Assembly. Could the Member say — perhaps the Members to my right might answer — whether there has been any retrospective thinking from the two parties that have denied democratic access and systemic change in Northern Ireland, which also has to be factored in to the calculations on where we are today?

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I remind him and everyone else in the Chamber that today is a day for party unity. We are here to talk about the shortfall in our funding package. That is what we need to focus on, and that is what I expect everybody's remarks to follow.

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

**Ms Ennis:** I will not give way, sorry. I will just finish, if you will allow me.

Just before Christmas, the British Secretary of State conceded that we have been underfunded for many years. As I said, that is an important and telling admission. It needs to be followed by action and funding to address the underfunding and serious problems in our health service that that has created. It is time for a fresh look at the model of how we are funded. That is the conversation that Executive Ministers will collectively have with the British Treasury in the coming days. That must come in the form of a new fiscal framework that delivers effective public services that meet the needs of people here, instead of one that results in an endless cycle of financial crises.

As I mentioned earlier — I will probably finish on this point — the irony will not be lost on anybody that, yesterday, we had a British Prime Minister and Secretary of State telling other people that they should not be talking about a border poll but be focused on public finances. My response to Mr Sunak and Mr Heaton-Harris is this: how about you take your own advice? The audacity of a Tory Government to tell anyone else to focus on public services when they have made it the hallmark of their

time in Government to gut public services and bring our health service to the point of collapse.

My response to him is this: take your own advice. Give us what we need. Stop gaslighting us about our public finances. Give us what we need to effectively fund our Departments and public services and to rescue our public services, because that is what they need.

I am delighted that all parties across the Chamber have been united in signing the letter that will go to the British Treasury and that they have supported the motion today. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

**12.45 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** I call Matthew O'Toole to move the amendment.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am delighted that we are back in the Chamber of the Northern Ireland Assembly, debating the vital issues that face the people —

**Mr Speaker:** You just need to move the amendment first.

**Mr O'Toole:** I need to move the amendment first. Do I need to just say "moved"?

I beg to move the following amendment:

*At end insert:*

*"; and calls on the Minister of Finance to work with all Executive Ministers to produce and publish costed plans for revitalising public services and addressing immediate priorities, including public-sector pay awards, hospital waiting lists and delivering affordable childcare in line with a comprehensive Programme for Government."*

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

**Mr O'Toole:** Like Scrappy-Doo, let me at 'em. Some of us are slightly rusty on the process after a couple of years.

I am delighted that we are back in the Assembly Chamber, debating vital issues. Let me say first that we were pleased to co-sign the letter with the Executive parties, and I concur with Ms Ennis that the settlement from the UK Treasury



needs to reflect the level of need in Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute genuinely to the fact that all parties, including our party, which was not going to be in the Executive, gave a unified message at Hillsborough Castle before Christmas and since that there has been a long-term and unacceptable underfunding of Northern Ireland. That is not just the opinion of political parties here; it is obviously the opinion of the Fiscal Council, the Fiscal Commission and various independent academics, who have acknowledged that this place needed to be funded at need and that it was not. I commend the letter and the motion in that respect.

We have said consistently that we intend to be a constructive Opposition. That role has two parts. First, it is about being constructive. We joined in agreeing with the letter, although we were not signatories to it, because we are not in the Executive. We agreed and signed today's motion. The second part is opposition. Opposition does not mean, as some have said, tearing lumps out of those in the Executive, but it means offering challenge and scrutiny. Today, we saw me being nominated as Chair of the Finance Committee and my colleague Daniel McCrossan being nominated as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. We intend to bring to those roles seriousness, scrutiny and a sense of constructive opposition. Given that both roles face into public finances, they are very relevant to the motion and the amendment that we are debating.

Northern Ireland's public services are in an absolute mess. It is almost too painful to list the problems with our health service, but they are shocking. Hospital waiting lists are twice as long as those in the Republic. They are not just the longest in the UK but are among the longest in western Europe. Cancer waiting times are far behind their targets. We know what public-sector workers are having to endure. Many of us have been on the picket lines in recent weeks, talking to them not just for politicking's sake but because they are our constituents. They are teachers, nurses and classroom assistants who, in many cases, cannot afford to put petrol in their car to get to their place of work and serve all of us.

It is welcome that we are in the Chamber, doing our work and debating. It is welcome that there is a degree of unanimity around the need for the maximum financial settlement from the UK Government, but it is also important that the Executive parties, particularly under the leadership of both First and deputy First Ministers and the new Finance Minister,

promptly and quickly come together to agree, as our amendment says, a costed plan to start to resuscitate public services.

Pivotal, the Northern Ireland policy think tank that has come together in the past number of years, published a paper recently that talks about the need not just for a period of stability but for difficult decisions from the Executive parties. It also talked about a proper move towards budget setting and honesty with the public around the time that it will take to repair our public services and the steps that will be needed. In our role as an Opposition, we think that it is vital for us to say this to the Executive parties and particularly to the Minister of Finance. She is not in her place, but I congratulate her warmly on her appointment.

She is a really talented public representative. I served with her on the Economy Committee, and I wish her well. I am sure she will acquit herself and work very hard in that role. The time is right to ask her to take the lead, with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, in order to bring forward a plan, in conjunction with the financial settlement that has been provided by London, and communicate to the public in this region what the plan is to start to resuscitate public services. How are we going to start to get waiting times down? How are we going to start to deal with the crisis in special educational needs, and, yes, how are we going to take advantage of the economic opportunities that lie in front of us?

What I, as the leader of the Opposition, will pledge is that our approach to that will always be constructive. I am sure that, at times, we will be accused of stunts, as we were the other day; we will be accused of hurling from the ditch or of being Monday morning quarterbacks, but that is the job of being an Opposition. Those are the things that are levelled at an Opposition, just as it is the job of those in Government to take difficult decisions, to be honest and to provide leadership to the people who elected them.

Let me commend our amendment and reiterate my party's support for the motion, which, I hope, will become the motion as amended. Those who have just entered office have a really big job to do. What I promise them is that we will not be unreasonable and unfair and we will not carp. We will, however, be robust, serious and fair, and we will, on behalf of the people who have elected us, ask fair questions and ask, as our amendment calls for, for a plan and for honesty — a plan to deal with the crisis in our health service, a plan to deal with the crisis in special educational needs and a plan to allow working parents to come close to the support

that working parents in other jurisdictions get to deal with the crippling cost of childcare. Those are promises that have been made to the public in Northern Ireland in recent years, and we intend to ensure that those promises are kept. We will do our best to work with the Executive parties to ensure that they are.

**Mr Speaker:** I now call Phillip Brett. As this is Mr Brett's maiden speech and is his first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind Members of the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption. However, if you choose to express views that may provoke an interruption, you are likely to forfeit that protection.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I associate myself with your remarks and with the people of North Belfast in sending our best wishes to our monarch.

I start by offering my apologies to my mother, who has been logged on since 7.00 am to watch proceedings today [*Laughter*] and to watch this moment. I apologise for our tardiness here today.

It is with huge honour and grateful thanks to the people of North Belfast that I rise to support this motion and to make my maiden speech here in the Northern Ireland Assembly. In May 2022, the people of that wonderful constituency bestowed upon me the greatest honour — the honour of being their voice, the honour of being their champion and the honour of being their MLA. They chose a new voice from a new generation who is committed to working hard for everyone. They elected me to be on their side and to fight their corner, and they supported me in my vision to ensure a better and brighter future for everyone who calls North Belfast home. While I will never be able to fully repay the trust that they put in me, I commit myself today, with a renewed sense of vigour and, indeed, boundless optimism for the future, to continue to work in order to build back that proud community by bringing to an end the chronic housing crisis in North Belfast, by ensuring that every child in North Belfast fulfils their full potential and by demanding an end to health inequalities. As long as I remain an MLA for North Belfast, we will never settle for second best. We are a proud community, yes, shaped by our past, but that will not define our future, and I am even more confident that our best days in North Belfast lie ahead.

While time will not allow or permit me to thank all those deserving, I stand here only thanks to the loyalty and support of my friends and family. To them, I owe a huge debt of gratitude. I want

to pay a particular tribute to a former Member of this House and a Member of the other place for putting his faith in me. The faith and trust that Nigel Dodds placed in me, a 20-year-old who wanted to make his community that he loved a better place, is something that I will never forget. For that, Nigel, I will be forever grateful.

For me, it cannot simply be about holding office. Rather, it is about how we use that office to improve the life of every person in our society. That is why the motion is so important.

It would be remiss of me not to credit the start of that process to my party's deputy leader, Gavin Robinson, who put in the hard yards to ensure that we proved and got agreement that there has been underinvestment in Northern Ireland. He busted the myth peddled by others that hundreds of millions of pounds sat in a dormant Stormont bank account, and he forced the Government to recognise that we were funded below our level of need. Now, in this House and in this place, we must finish the job together. The money that has been secured from the Government is important and welcome. It does not, however, provide the long-term sustainability that is required. Maintaining services in the here and now simply to make drastic cuts in the future cannot and will not be a tenable or acceptable way forward. The cost-of-living crisis, the disparity in public-sector pay, industrial action and the further deterioration of public services will, I am sure, unite the House to work together.

There was a rightful public expectation that the funding that was secured would resolve the public-sector pay disputes. I think that all Members now recognise that we need a long-term sustainable basis for that in order to ensure that our hard-pressed public-sector workers get the pay rise that they deserve. The public will rightly judge this House and this place not simply on our returning but on how we use this House and this place to deliver on the issues that matter to them, which include the transformation of our health service and driving down waiting lists, providing hard-working families with the childcare support that they need, ensuring that innocent victims receive their victims' pension without delay, and ensuring and delivering jobs to every region and part of this place.

The collective will of the House will be a clear sign to the Government that Northern Ireland deserves better. The Democratic Unionist Party, with all other parties, will work to ensure a better and brighter future for all the people of Northern Ireland. I urge all parties to support the motion.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Poots:** I call Mr Eóin Tennyson. Again, this is Mr Tennyson's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, so I remind the House that it is convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption. However, if you choose to express views that provoke an interruption, you are likely to forfeit that protection.

**Mr Tennyson:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, I congratulate you and your team of deputies on your appointment. I also wish the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and each of their Executive colleagues well as they embark on this new endeavour.

I am hugely grateful to the people of Upper Bann, who have placed their trust in me. It is a huge honour to represent them in the Assembly as the first Alliance MLA for that constituency. I pay tribute to Dolores Kelly of the SDLP, my predecessor, who served the constituency with distinction for many years.

There have been a number of historic firsts this week. It would perhaps be remiss of me not to mention at the outset the historic moment on Saturday when my party colleague Andrew Muir MLA was installed as the first openly gay Minister. On a personal note, I am immensely proud of my colleague, whose appointment represents a landmark moment for equality and takes us one step closer to having an Executive that fully represent the diversity of the society that we are all here to serve.

Rightly, there is an expectation outside the House that we move on quickly from the symbolism and start to deliver for the people whom we represent. There is no doubt, as others have said, that the challenges are immense. The cost of living weighs heavily on households and businesses, with too many struggling to make ends meet. Nurses, teachers, classroom assistants and so many other public servants have been forced on to picket lines in pursuit of fair pay. Our health service is in need of radical transformation and reform. Parents are being crippled by the cost of childcare. Delivering on the ambitions that we all share in the Chamber and tackling those challenges will require a step change in our approach to public finances, both from the UK Government and, I argue, from those of us in the Chamber. On that basis, my party is content to support the motion and the amendment.

Over the past 13 years, successive Tory Governments have given us more than a decade of austerity, a botched Brexit and a disastrous mini budget. They have prioritised

tax cuts over public spending and ignored the impact of the so-called Barnett squeeze. The constraints that flow from that are having an impact right across the UK but are perhaps most acute here in Northern Ireland, as attested to by the Fiscal Council, because we are the only devolved Administration that are currently funded below the independently assessed level of relative need.

It is welcome that that is now a matter of public record and that, in recent negotiations, the UK Government conceded that fact. It is inconceivable, therefore, that the Government will continue to wilfully underfund Northern Ireland on that basis, yet that is exactly what the Government propose to do.

### 1.00 pm

The adjustment to our funding formula diagnoses the problem but ultimately fails to remedy it. Instead of being applied to baseline Barnett, as is the case in the Welsh model, the formula operates not as a fiscal floor but as a fiscal ceiling, with funding per head slowly gliding towards a point below which we should never have been allowed to fall in the first place. The deal that the Government have put forward is imperfect. It is not a guarantee of long-term financial sustainability. However, it provides space and time to engage with Treasury on a more sustainable financial framework when the £3.3 billion runs out in two years' time. Crucially, with the Executive restored, we now have a stronger collective position from which to negotiate rather than separate and disparate political voices. To inform that negotiation, Alliance proposes the establishment of an independent commission to set out recommendations pertaining to our funding formula and fiscal framework, drawing on the experience of the Holtham commission in Wales, to ensure that our funding model is built on evidence rather than political horse-trading.

We must also be honest that it is simply not possible to have sustainable public finances without sustainable political institutions. Stop-go government has impeded our ability to deliver good governance and has undermined the Executive's ability to transform public services and make the necessary changes to tackle the cost of division. It is therefore regrettable that, given the opportunity on Saturday by the Opposition and again here today by Mr Butler, to commit not to collapse the institutions for the remainder of the mandate, neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister was able to make that commitment. It again underlines

the need for reform of the system to ensure that the institutions can never again be collapsed so that we protect our people, our public services and our public finances.

Undoubtedly, huge challenges and difficult decisions lie ahead, both for the Assembly and the Executive. At this juncture, I give my commitment that I want to work constructively with all the Executive Ministers as they navigate those challenges. I would much rather that those decisions be taken by locally accountable and elected local Ministers than be in the hands of the Secretary of State and the Conservative Government, so I wish those Ministers well as they proceed.

**Dr Aiken:** I start by congratulating Mr Tennyson and Mr Brett — he seems to have disappeared off for his lunch — on their maiden speeches. The speeches were both good examples of what we should all be moving towards.

The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion and the amendment, but there are issues that we need to be aware of. I notice that Jayne Brady is in the Building at the moment. We have until May to get together a plan that we can present to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to enable us to unlock funds for stabilisation and transformation. We have to get a Programme for Government that matches what we need to do to be able to demonstrate that we can put ourselves on a sustainable footing.

I welcome the idea of having an independent commission to look into, as Wales did, the relative levels of funding. We know from the Fiscal Commission and the work that the Fiscal Council has done that there is already a lot of data there, and we need to be in a position where we can make a strong and arguable case that Northern Ireland's level of need is where it should be. However, when we compare ourselves with Wales, the north-east and north-west of England, Devon and Cornwall and other areas in our nation, we have to be cautious about how we approach that, because, using the Fiscal Council's figures, we can see that, in some areas, we pay several hundred pounds less than those areas. Lest anybody think that this is just an issue to do with Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, I say that we would be paying thousands more if we were part of the Republic of Ireland. These are really significant issues that we need to look at and manage going forward.

The one thing that we have to do is to think about a plan for growth and a plan for

opportunity. Many of us sat in Hillsborough Castle for far too long and had numerous conversations about trying to improve our finances, but the most significant point that we talked about was prosperity and how we can get that growth agenda moving. We need to shift the dial.

It is regrettable, I suppose, that neither the Economy Minister nor the Finance Minister is here. On several occasions — indeed, all the way back to 2010 — the Ulster Unionist Party proposed changes to corporation tax. Whether we like it or not, we are in the single European market for a lot of our business, trade and economy, yet we are absolutely penalised by the fact that we are dealing with a corporation tax level that is uncompetitive with the rest of this island. We need to argue strongly to get our corporation tax to the OECD level of 15%.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way, and I congratulate him on his appointment as Deputy Speaker. It sounds like he is arguing in favour of an all-island economy and greater harmonisation. Can I assume that he and his party will make those arguments in the Executive?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much indeed.

Here are the circumstances: we did not ask to be put in an all-island economy, but we have businesses in Northern Ireland that have to compete on an all-island basis and they are hampered. We should be making a very strong case to get corporation tax down to 15%. For those of us who were in Hillsborough Castle, I said to the representative from the Treasury, who looked at me a bit askance, "We didn't ask for a border to be put in the Irish Sea. It is there. We need to make sure that our businesses are not damaged by that". I would hope that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister will argue for corporation tax to be lowered to 15%.

I would also like, as we move forward, to start thinking seriously about fiscal responsibility and where it lies. Difficult decisions will need to be made. The Health Minister has already started to make them, and other Departments are going to have to do exactly the same. We are going to have to bring forward things like mutualisation of Northern Ireland Water, and look at the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Those are really big issues. For the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the rest of the Executive: we need to get on with it. This

is February. In May, we will need to make our case to the Chief Secretary of the Treasury. Time is running out. I encourage everybody to start thinking about fiscal responsibility.

I welcome the new Chair of the Finance Committee. We did have some fun, Matthew, didn't we?

**Mr O'Toole:** *[Interruption.]*

*[Laughter.]*

**Dr Aiken:** I welcome the fact that we are now beginning to take this seriously. *[Laughter.]* Through the Speaker: do not chunter from a sedentary position. I have read my notes about being a Deputy Speaker.

We must take this seriously. We cannot keep on kicking it down the road. We have to make difficult decisions, and we have to make them now. We must push forward and do that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Diane Forsythe. As this is Ms Forsythe's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. However, if you choose to express views that provoke an interruption, you are likely to forfeit that.

**Ms Forsythe:** I welcome the opportunity to support the motion and make my maiden speech. I consider it a great honour and privilege to represent South Down in this place. I am a proud Mourne woman from a small village, Ballymartin, at the foot of Slieve Binnian. I love where I live: the beautiful countryside, the culture and the diversity of industry, through farming, fishing and manufacturing and much more. However, especially, I love the people at the heart of our rural communities.

South Down is large geographically but it is made up of many individual core rural towns and communities: Kilkeel, Annalong and Newcastle, and over the mountains to Rathfriland and Katesbridge. We have Warrenpoint, Clough, Dundrum, Crossgar, Downpatrick and many more. I represent all those rural communities, which have been disproportionately disadvantaged by the chronic underfunding that Northern Ireland has experienced over many years. Access to emergency healthcare in the countryside is a huge challenge. The poor transport infrastructure cuts us off so easily in times like the recent flooding. Rural transport, access to

nearby preschool places and childcare facilities all face significant barriers.

All of that is a consequence of the long-term injustice in the funding of public services in Northern Ireland. For decades, our public funding was spent on rebuilding and patching up our roads, hospitals and town centres after the devastation of bombings. Unlike other jurisdictions at that time, we were not investing our money in enhancing our infrastructure, railway networks or on making our hospitals world-class, and we have, inevitably, fallen behind in our services.

On top of that pressure, our funding model has not been sufficient. I support all that my colleague Phillip Brett said, and I thank our DUP deputy leader, Gavin Robinson MP, and our DUP peers in the House of Lords, particularly Lord Morrow, for securing debates on the matter. The consequences of funding being below need are so damaging and dislocating that, when parts of the United Kingdom get so close to need, it is vital that the UK Government treat them and are seen to treat them in exactly the same way, affording them equality of protection. I make no apology for arguing strongly that Northern Ireland should benefit from exactly the same protections as Wales has enjoyed since 2012 and especially since 2018-19.

Northern Ireland's funding should never have been allowed to fall below need. The UK Government cannot adopt a UK needs formula and agree to intervene to protect one part of the UK to ensure that its funding does not fall below need while not doing so for another part of the UK, which has allowed the funding not only to fall to need but to plunge well below it. That is what has happened. Not only that, but the Government have had the audacity to compound our underfunding by making us pay back an overspend last year. That overspend would never have happened, had they funded us to need in the first place, let alone funded us to need plus an uplift. It is not acceptable to say that protecting funding to need in one part of the country must be done by means of an uplift and a fiscal floor, while another part of the country will have to make do with a fiscal ceiling to the level of need and a recurring £600 million deficit in the baseline arising from our underfunding. Northern Ireland cannot afford to settle for a fiscal ceiling or a fiscal floor. Our block grant budget needs to be afforded the same protection as that in Wales: a fiscal floor to need and an uplift. That is the only fair way forward.

I support the motion. I support sustainable finances with multi-year budgets. We need them to be able to deliver public services for Northern Ireland; to deliver on key objectives, such as childcare, to ensure that no mother or father in Northern Ireland has to choose between caring for their children or going to work; to ensure that our rural communities are delivered the critical infrastructure that they need to thrive; and to deliver a better future for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Danny Donnelly. Again, as this is the Member's first opportunity to speak, I remind Members of the convention that he is heard without interruption.

**Mr Donnelly:** It is a huge privilege to make my maiden speech here today, on the first sitting of what, I hope, will be a sustained and productive Assembly term. As MLAs in a functioning Assembly, we have the ability to effect more change in a day in this place than we will have in a lifetime once we walk out of those Doors. Like Mr Brett, I apologise to my parents, who have been up in the Gallery all morning.

Before I get to the motion, with your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will say a few things about my predecessor and my constituency of East Antrim. Roy Beggs will be known to many of you in the Chamber. He was one of the class of 1998 and served as an MLA for East Antrim from then until 2022, including as Deputy Speaker on two occasions. He was widely respected across the Chamber and the constituency. His continuing dedication to public life was reflected by his recent election to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. I look forward to working with him and with all our other local elected representatives to deliver a better and more positive future for the area.

It was a huge privilege to have been elected to the Assembly by the people of East Antrim and to join my good friend and colleague Stewart Dickson in doubling the Alliance representation in the area, working for everyone from Jordanstown to Cushendun. Like those of all 17 Alliance MLAs, our politics are liberal and progressive. We are committed to working towards a peaceful, prosperous and shared society. The constituency of East Antrim is a wonderful part of Northern Ireland. Nowhere else compares to the beautiful scenery of Islandmagee, the coast road and the glens of Antrim. I grew up in Larne and went to school at Garron Tower, outside Carnlough.

My wife, Maeve, and I moved back to Larne to raise our family in the town, and it is truly an

honour to represent the constituency and its people in this place.

**1.15 pm**

My career to date has been in healthcare, and I am a proud nurse. As such, I am acutely aware of the crises that are afflicting our health service. We have more than 500,000 cases languishing on waiting lists in a country of fewer than 2 million people. Many people, predominantly older people, wait years for routine operations such as hip or knee replacements and cataract surgery. They suffer unnecessarily as their condition worsens, often resulting in increased pain, loss of mobility, worsening eyesight and associated mental health conditions.

We have a retention and recruitment crisis across the service, with more than 7,000 vacant posts, 2,000 of which are in nursing. The Royal College of Nursing recently published a survey showing that 83% of nursing staff in Northern Ireland said that, on their last shift, the actual number of nursing staff was not sufficient to meet patients' needs safely and effectively. As well as fair pay, safe staffing was a key factor for many striking nurses in the recent industrial action. It is something that I am passionate about, and I hope to see a safe staffing Bill delivered by the Assembly to protect patients and improve the working lives of nursing staff. Many of our healthcare staff feel overworked, burned out and undervalued, and that needs to change.

Our accident and emergency departments are regularly full of patients waiting to be admitted to wards that have no beds available for them. Indeed, the wards regularly have extra patients lying in undignified corridor beds, pushed wherever there is space for them. Ambulances that cannot safely discharge patients to departments end up stacked outside with patients in the back for many hours at a time. We know that extended stays in A&E are associated with longer stays in hospital and even increased mortality rates. Overcrowding is a major threat to public health.

There is a huge issue with how we care for older people in the community. There is a critical shortage of care packages, and that means that people who are well enough to be discharged from hospital end up staying as inpatients because their needs cannot be met at home. It is essential, therefore, that people are attracted into working in domiciliary care and not pushed out of it.

We all know that we have to reform our health service, and the Bengoa report has been sitting on the shelf since 2016. All the main parties have pledged to support the Bengoa principles, and there has been a missed opportunity here. We could have been seven years into a 10-year programme of reform by now. We cannot miss another opportunity. Inaction is no longer a choice. There is no point transforming something if you cannot make it stable. We need funding for transformation and for stabilisation. This is, first and foremost, a finance issue, and I support the motion as all of our public finances, including the health service, need to be placed on a sustainable footing. The Executive need adequate resources to deliver effective public services.

I also wish to congratulate Minister Swann on returning to the role that he held from 2020 and throughout the pandemic. Clearly, he is experienced and knowledgeable and is well respected across the health service. I know that the issues that I have highlighted and many others affecting the health service will be familiar to him. It is worth being clear from the outset that, where the Minister is willing to proceed with tough decisions to deliver on the transformation and improvement of health and social care, he will be able to rely on our party's full support. If we disagree, we will seek to be constructive. It would send a powerful message if all MLAs supported the motion as a signal of our intent to work together to improve public services for everyone in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I congratulate Mr Donnelly, Ms Forsythe, Mr Tennyson and Mr Brett, who have made their maiden speeches. I see that Mrs Brett has just noticed that I have got to my feet — and has logged off.

I come to speak in support of the motion. I will not oppose the amendment, but it conflates matters a little. The amendment, it seems to me, deals with the short-term pressures that we as an Executive and Assembly have to deal with, whereas the motion is about sustainable long-term funding from London. I do not think that we have always had fair and equitable funding coming out of the UK Government; in fact, it has not always been generous. Looking around the Chamber, I see that not that many Members will remember, as I do, that famous moment in 1974 when the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, described us all as "spongers". The block grant is not about being a sponger. The annual subvention is about giving us the tools that we need to run the country; in fact, I cannot describe it better than another Harold, Harold McCusker, did in the House of Commons in November 1985:

*"I can accept money from the richer parts of the United Kingdom being given to Northern Ireland if it is the decision of the Parliament of the United Kingdom to redistribute the United Kingdom's wealth to the poorer parts. However, I cannot accept, and I do not want, United Kingdom charity."*

The block grant is not UK charity. The block grant is about giving us the appropriate financial tools to ensure that our people prosper.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Nesbitt:** You are very keen.

**Mr O'Toole:** After two years, Mr Nesbitt. I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate his comments about our amendment. I just want to say gently that it is designed to be constructive and complementary. Some of those urgent public-service resuscitation plans are exactly related and are related in the public mind to long-term, sustainable financing. You will note that our amendment does not call for that plan to be delivered tomorrow, next week or next month, because that would be unreasonable; it is about linking the two, which is important.

I do not think that Harold Wilson, in 1974, was talking about all of us. He had in mind a particular group of people who were blockading some of the roads outside this Building, but that is one for the historians.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his intervention. On the second point, that is a matter of interpretation. On the first part, yes, they are complementary, but I would rather keep the focus on what the UK Government are and are not doing for us financially.

Back in 1998, the buzz phrase, as Members will remember, was "the peace dividend", and that was a financial thing. We were saying that, if we stopped spending tens of millions, as we had to, on security, we would free up that money to invest in the economy and therefore in our people and in prosperity. It seems, 25-and-a-bit years later, that far too many people have not had a taste of that prosperity agenda. For example, I point out the truly shocking levels of economic inactivity in our society.

We need to attack the barriers to people becoming economically active, and I can think of no bigger barrier than the lack of accessible and affordable childcare. I am glad to see that the Executive are going to make affordable and

accessible childcare one of the key priorities for the rest of the mandate. You cannot fix the lack of affordable and accessible childcare unless you have the appropriate funds to do so.

I understand that we have to focus on the current pressures, not least the public-sector pay deal, but we also have to think about infrastructure, otherwise we will short-change the next generation. If we think about transforming the health service, we have to take a blank map of Northern Ireland and populate it with the ideal National Health Service structure, then take the map of where we are and figure out how we get from A to B in simple, affordable steps. Those steps will not be affordable unless we get the appropriate help from London.

I will finish by mentioning one thing that is in the letter to the Prime Minister and one thing that is not that fascinates me, that I am curious about and that maybe the First Ministers can address. What is in the letter is a call for a fiscal reserve, and it makes enormous sense to have that kind of rainy day money, because what happens come the next pandemic, holiday pay or McCloud judgement? All these things come upon us and we do not have a reserve to help us start to work through that fix. The thing that is missing is something that I remember the late Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson promoting at all-party talks back in the day, and that was the sense of a Northern Ireland bond, whereby we would raise money specifically for projects in Northern Ireland. I note it is not in the letter. I have not heard it discussed in the talks that led to the restoration, and, if either First Minister could shed some light on that, I would very much appreciate it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Nuala McAllister. Again, as this is her first opportunity to speak, it should be done without interruption.

**Miss McAllister:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I make my first contribution in the restored Assembly, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Nichola Mallon. She served the North Belfast constituency for six years, and everyone in the Chamber knows just how hard Nichola worked. I wish her all the best for her future.

I also want to say thanks to a number of people. I will start with my family. Like some other Members, I have my mum in the Gallery. She has been loving the biz about the place so she did not mind all the reconvening in the breaks. My nephew is also in the Gallery. He is supposed to be at school today, but he is a politics A-level student, so I was thinking that, perhaps, if he gets a letter from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring to

school, he will not get into any trouble. They are just two members of a very large family that I have to thank for all the support in getting me here today, and there are three very special boys who are watching at home: Sam, Finn and Art. Most of all and most importantly, I thank my constituents of North Belfast. I hope that I can repay them over the coming years.

As I move to the motion before us, it is important to reflect that, while we may be discussing the financial settlement, we need to ensure that we do not get lost in the numbers. We must not forget the impact that the previous year's Budget has had on people, schools, hospitals, businesses and the entirety of our society. There are clear examples of that in my North Belfast constituency. Schools across North Belfast are in dire need of adequate resources to ensure that our young people receive the education that they deserve. Belfast Boys' Model, Stanhope Street Nursery School and Glengormley Integrated Primary School have been waiting for capital works to be approved or work to be completed. That work would free up much-needed resources or additional places for students. Our teachers and classroom assistants in all our schools deserve to be paid fair wages. Instead of using resources to teach, resources are being used to plug gaps and gaping holes across our education system.

It is clear from the financial package that we have already won the argument for financial reform. The UK Government have accepted that Northern Ireland is funded below the level of need. Our underfunded finances, coupled with years of Tory austerity, have had devastating consequences. Research undertaken by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network last year showed that North Belfast had the highest rate of child poverty in Northern Ireland, at 27.6%. Organisations such as the North Belfast Advice Partnership work to address the crisis, but with Barnardo's UK finding that the two-child limit impacts on more than 1,000 households in North Belfast, we cannot leave it to our community and voluntary sector.

Adding to that, a report from the mental health champion last year reaffirmed that poverty can have an extreme adverse impact on mental health, which is acutely clear in North Belfast. Where mental health services have fallen down, excellent community organisations have stepped up. PIPS on the Antrim Road, for example, provides outstanding mental health support services from counselling to crisis support to people in North Belfast and beyond. However, that crucial support should not fall



solely to an under-pressure and underfunded community and voluntary sector. Our health service, including mental health support, must be sufficiently funded. It is literally a matter of life and death.

Our health services have been crippled by the dire financial circumstances that we find ourselves in. I took the opportunity to join public-sector workers on the picket lines in North Belfast a few weeks ago. I spoke to workers from the Mater Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, and their commitment to our health and social care services was undeniable. If we do not pay fair wages, we will literally drive away those dedicated workers.

We feel the impact not only on our health and education system but on our economy. In the past two years, our people have not been able to reap the benefits of any new Barnett consequential and the impact any additional finances could have on our economy. We could have had a bespoke affordable childcare system implemented so that parents in all our constituencies are helped back into the workforce. More money in parents' pockets means a more thriving local economy.

Our public finances must also enable safer communities. We need to properly fund our police service so that we can protect neighbourhood policing, which is fundamental to our communities. In North Belfast, we feel that squeeze just as much as any other constituency in which boots are being pulled from front-line policing.

Mr Speaker, I am glad that you indulged my slight sidetrack into North Belfast, but it is important that we highlight the fact that the Executive approach to public finances is about all our constituencies and all our people benefiting. For that, I hope that every party and every Member can support the motion.

**Mr Chambers:** I wish each of the incoming Ministers well. While we as an Assembly have a very important role in holding them to account, ultimately, it is in our interests and those of all the people whom we represent for the new Executive to succeed.

### 1.30 pm

There is little other way to describe the pressures weighing down on so many public services than "crisis". While that word has often been bandied about in Northern Ireland throughout the respective political impasses, on this occasion we really face an emergency and

a dire position. Recent weeks have seen unprecedented industrial action and disruption. Even more serious is the perilous state of essential and life-dependent services. That, of course, is nowhere more important and apparent than in our health service; indeed, just this morning, we learned of the pressures faced by our Children's Hospice.

As this is my first opportunity to do so on the record, I wish the Minister of Health in particular well with the mammoth task ahead of him. While we may be the smallest party in the Executive, once again I am proud that the Ulster Unionist Party demonstrated bravery and commitment by stepping up and taking by far the biggest Department. With Health being so big and so far-reaching, it is perhaps unsurprising that, when there are constraints on public finances, the implications are often felt most in Health. Equally, when pay awards cannot be delivered, it is often health workers who experience the immediate inequity. The 2020 Executive made a clear and welcome decision to support Robin Swann's ask to restore and maintain pay parity for health workers. Unfortunately, owing to subsequent budget and political barriers, that pledge was no longer maintained after he left office.

I do not want to make political points today, because, to their credit, I believe that all political parties are now on record as saying that they want to see the reinstatement of pay parity. I therefore very much welcome the fact that significant funding was set aside in the recent package for public-sector pay. While it may be a big figure, it is not sufficient to meet the range of cross-departmental pay demands, so I wish the Executive well in their request for sufficient funding.

There are so many areas in the Health Department that deserve and could really benefit from immediate financial intervention: primary care, social care and the slate of initiatives and previously published plans that are ready to go. The one that I want to focus on is the funding needed to tackle our truly appalling waiting lists. While I acknowledge that funding alone will not be enough, without adequate resources and the necessary workforce we will never turn the situation around. That was a point well made in the previously published elective care framework. As with restoring pay parity, I think that all parties in the Chamber are at one in recognising that tackling waiting lists is an absolute priority.

I look forward to our working collectively on that in the weeks and months ahead. Doing so will

require sustained investment. While money from the recent package, especially that set aside for stabilisation, will help, we need to recognise that sporadic allocations here and there simply will not work, nor will single-year budgets provide the sustainability that we need. When, during their engagement with the UK Government, our new First Minister, deputy First Minister and Finance Minister are making the case for additional funding, I urge them to keep to the forefront of their mind the absolutely horrendous position facing so many of our patients and staff.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Mr Speaker, I congratulate you, the Deputy Speakers, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and all the Ministers in our new Executive on their positions and wish them good speed in their work.

As the Assembly begins its work, it is clear that the Executive have a huge job ahead when it comes to our public finances. Over the past two years, public services have been allowed to crumble and collapse. Services that were already overstretched were tipped to breaking point, and families and workers paid a heavy price from the boycott of the institutions. I am glad that we are back in the Chamber. It has been a long time, but the hard work starts now.

In that work, the SDLP has always made it clear that we will be a constructive Opposition and that we will work with parties in every corner of the House on the issues of common cause. That includes coming together to make the case for a better deal for Northern Ireland, recognising that our public services need to be properly funded to meet the level of urgent need across the region. The British Government have already admitted that they have failed to fund us properly for many, many years, and we agree that the current deal on the table does not go far enough. We cannot allow Northern Ireland to be trapped under a fiscal ceiling and permanently disadvantaged. Short-term funding will go only so far before we see this institution lurch into another crisis. Immediate and durable changes are undoubtedly needed, and the truth is that we are already years behind when it comes to implementing the changes that we need to see.

The British Government must listen to the united voice of the parties in the Chamber. However, we need to be very clear on that point and on the responsibility of the Executive parties. After years of chaos and collapse, people want to see delivery. It is often easy to write a letter, but the public do not just want to know that we understand that there is a problem; they want to see solutions, and they

want to see results. The Tories have been absolutely catastrophic for people and public services here, but the failure of government here does not end there.

We need to see plans from every Department that detail how the same public services that have been decimated in the past few years can be revitalised and transformed. Those plans must include helping parents to deal with the crushing costs of childcare that put so much pressure on so many parents, particularly mothers. That is the responsibility of the Government.

In the interests of the public sector that the Executive parties claim to be fighting on behalf of, I will make another point: this mandate, we need a different approach to government, particularly from the two largest parties, which have taken turns at tearing this place down when the going got rough. That is not acceptable, and it is not a recipe for fiscal sustainability. The truth is that our finances will never be sustainable until our politics are sustainable. Fiscal sustainability needs political stability. Parties that entered the Executive need to fight for a fair deal for Northern Ireland, and, where we can, we will support the Government on that issue. I support the motion and the amendment. Now, let us get on with the job.

**Mr Allister:** I begin by commending those who made their maiden speeches for their thoughtful contributions. I noted that all except one Member paid tribute to their predecessor. It was disappointing that Miss Forsythe could not find anything worthwhile to say about a man who served 24 years in the House, namely Mr Jim Wells. Everyone else was able to pay tribute to their predecessors. I trust that, at some point — even now — Miss Forsythe will make good on that oversight.

**Ms Forsythe:** Yes, thanks very much to Jim Wells for all his service to South Down. It was greatly appreciated by the entire community.

**Mr Allister:** I am struck by how short a time it took for the Assembly to get back into its parallel universe orbit. The very first debate is about taking apart a financial deal that all these parties accepted. That was the basis on which they came back to the House.

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

**Mr Allister:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Tennyson:** Surely the Member recognises that, in the remarks of each of the contributors from right across the parties, we all acknowledged that the financial package on offer is a temporary stopgap solution. It is to give the Executive space to stabilise so that transformation can take place. No one is saying that it is a long-term financial settlement. It is disingenuous for the Member to suggest that individual political parties could negotiate such a fundamental change with the Government. It is for the Executive to do that, and the Executive is the place to take that forward.

**Mr Allister:** Each party that came back to Stormont came back on the basis of the financial deal that was offered. It is quite clear when you read the letter from Sunday that it is a deal that does not match up to anything. On the very first page, it says:

*"It is clear that the current financial package ... does not provide the basis for the Executive to deliver sustainable public services and public finances."*

— but that was the basis on which you came back —

*"it will only serve to provide a short-term solution".*

You go on to say:

*"it does not provide the long-term sustainability required."*

You came back into an Assembly knowing that you had not got long-term stability, and you were content to work on that basis. You then go on to tell us that you are over £100 million short, even on public-sector pay. You need £690 million, you have only got £584 million, so what are you doing here, having accepted a deal that sells short our public-sector workers? You then point out that there is nothing in it for capital funding. It really is quite incredible that the parties came back here on the basis of that offer and the first item of business is to try to deconstruct it.

We heard from the Sinn Féin contributor the attack on Mr Sunak. That surely could not be the same Mr Sunak as the one who Miss O'Neill was hugging yesterday, could it? This Assembly is in a parallel universe.

There are parties here today that would have come back for less. They were so keen to get back here that they would have come back for nothing. There are some who wanted to pay to

come back here, and they paid by their principles. The DUP leadership paid with their principles on the Donaldson deal to get back in here, but every one of you is here on the basis of accepting a financial offer that you know, that everyone knows and that you have to write up yourself as being totally inadequate.

We then have an Opposition, and what do they do? They sign the very same Government motion. Is that the way that opposition is going to work in this Assembly? Are they to be cheek by jowl with the Government? There is no amendment pointing out the folly of accepting that which falls short: none whatsoever.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am pleased that the Member gave way. Throughout today's debate, and, indeed, for the past 18 months while we have been preparing for opposition, we have repeated a word before opposition, which is "constructive". I am not sure whether he is aware of that word. I am happy to buy a dictionary and point it out to him, but constructive means that, occasionally, you try to build things. Yes, we are the Opposition, but we are also keen to be constructive. I am happy to offer him a definition of that concept at some point.

**Mr Allister:** Before the Member gets as far as "constructive", he should look at the definition of "opposition". It means to oppose, not to acquiesce, support or sustain. That is the first action of the leader of the Opposition: to sign a motion and to table an accompanying amendment that supports, sustains and does not oppose the fallacious deal, which is being packaged up, and which, before we get to the end of the first week, is falling apart in its own glaring inadequacies.

**Mr Carroll:** I support the motion and the amendment. There are certainly some points raised in the motion and the letter that we welcome, such as the issue of public-sector pay awards. I repeat that workers here have been underpaid for more than a decade. There has been divergence between pay for workers here compared with workers in Britain, but I note that there was no Assembly collapse from the DUP for those workers.

For too long, workers have been asked to stomach unacceptable wages. They did the correct thing by taking strike action in unprecedented numbers on 17 January. Some 170,000 public-sector workers downed tools and took strike action. They were right to do so, and they put significant pressure on the DUP to

get back to work and on the British Government, who control the purse strings.

Our message to those workers is this: if the new Executive, amidst all the sparkle and the pomp, do not award workers satisfactory pay, you must strike again, and you will have widespread support across the board if you do. No longer can it be acceptable that we have substandard pay while workers knock their pan in. No longer is it acceptable for services to be run on a shoestring budget and for people not to know whether they will have a service from one year to the next.

### 1.45 pm

There is a lot missing from that letter, which does not ease the fear that exists in our communities. We know that, a few months ago, the Secretary of State launched an attack wish list on people and communities here that he passed to Departments to consult on. It included water charges, prescription charges, higher university fees, abolishing free travel for people over 60 and more. New Ministers and the Executive must make their intent clear on those issues. I hope that they make the correct decision, but their track record on policy positions does not leave room for a lot of hope. People must be ready to take it to the Executive if they proceed with those cruel and anti-working-class policies.

When it comes to an overspend, which is mentioned in our amendment, I will remind people that the Executive had no problem overspending when it came to providing money to private healthcare providers, and there was no problem breaking the bank for the renewable heat incentive — hundreds of millions of pounds of public money up in smoke. We know that parties here have previously angled to cut corporation tax, which would take hundreds of millions of pounds out of the economy and public services. In addition, there is not one shred of evidence that that would bring a single job here. It was concerning to hear Mr Aiken's endorsement of that proposal. The plan is Thatcherism on steroids: cut the profits of bulging, profitable corporations while throwing hundreds of millions of pounds down the drain — economic and political madness.

We further reject the idea that there is a begging bowl when we demand what people here need from the Tories. The money from London that was pulled out of here needs to be returned immediately. Executive parties must decide whether they will stand up to the Tories or simply do their dirty work. The amendment

that I submitted, which, unfortunately, was not selected, would have committed the Assembly to rejecting harsh austerity measures, such as water charges, and to protecting working-class people, who are already struggling to make ends meet. It further called on Stormont to work to a managed overspend, if necessary, in order to deliver public services and to give public-sector workers a proper pay rise.

Those who continually repeat the lie that the money does not exist need to be challenged and called out. We know that the Tories gave corporations £11 billion in tax cuts in their autumn statement, yet the well-being of people in the North was worth only £3.3 billion. Stormont can, and should, overspend if necessary and challenge the Tories to sort out the deficit. If Stormont will not stand up for communities, ordinary people need to be ready to challenge it. The Executive should be looking over their shoulders at striking public-sector workers and others before doing the Tories' bidding.

Further figures show that Danske Bank's profits went up by 80% in the North last year. Profits have risen, but so, too, have people's mortgages. There is no relief for struggling people, while corporate profits boom. It gets worse for ordinary folk. The North's biggest businesses saw their sales soar by almost 17% in the past year, despite a cost-of-living crisis. 'Ulster Business' magazine's list of the top 100 companies showed that revenues grew by over £30.7 billion. There is a lot of money around the North. Let us get it and put it in the pockets of the people who need it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. They will have 20 minutes.

**Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister):** Thank you for agreeing that I and the deputy First Minister may respond to the motion. I know that that is not the normal practice, but we thought that, given the significance of the issue and our shared desire to highlight its significance, it is important that we both speak. We discussed that at the Executive meeting.

It is our wish today that a very clear sign be sent out that we have a shared view of the importance of the matter and a shared determination to secure a fair and just outcome for all our people. I thank all Members for their contributions today, many of which, from all sides of the House, were made with passion and commitment. There is no doubt that this is a broad church, with a broad range of views on many of the areas that we will, no doubt, go on

to debate in the days, weeks and months ahead. We might have a difference of opinion on or different approaches to some of it. For today, what is significant is that we are united in what we are trying to achieve, because, on some matters in life, it really matters to be united. Some matters are so fundamental and profound that they bring together all shades of political opinion. I am glad that this is one.

The unfair and unjust treatment of public-sector workers and the public who rely on them is one issue that falls into that category. As I said, I was heartened to hear the voices of support for what has been tabled and the cross-party support from all parties in the Executive, the official Opposition and other Members. I thank everybody for the support and unity that were shown today. We are sending a clear message to the British Government in Westminster that we are not asking for special treatment; we are asking for fairness and equality. We are asking for funding that reflects the needs of the people whom we serve. We are asking for a funding model that is taken for granted in Scotland and Wales but is being denied to us. We will make our case to the Westminster Government with determination and commitment. Just yesterday, we had the opportunity to meet the Prime Minister, and we put that to him directly. We presented him with a letter setting out all the facts and evidence: clear evidence from the independent Fiscal Council that our funding is below need; and clear evidence that this is the only devolved Administration being treated in this unfair way. The Government, however, still seek to ignore that evidence.

Many Members have reflected on the fact that the Prime Minister described the offer as "generous" and pointed to the headline figure of £3.3 billion. To a public-sector worker who is struggling with the cost of living, £3.3 billion sounds like a lot of money. I can see how someone looking on who is struggling to put food on the table, a teacher who has been forced to go a food bank or someone who is struggling with the cost of living in general and has had no pay rise would think that it is a large figure, but large is not the same as fair — that is the distinction.

The Government had hoped that we would be lured or bowled over by that headline figure and rush to accept it without due diligence. I hear the Member at the back saying that we should all just suck it up and accept it. That is not how we roll. We are determined here to work together and try to fight a better case for public services. I look forward to the battle that we have ahead. We are all well motivated to do that because we believe in trying to make public

services work and, in turn, support public-sector workers.

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** I think that we have heard enough.

We have scrutinised the deal and looked past all the rhetoric that I referred to. We held the deal up to the light, under which its flaws are clear to see. In particular, I want to take on three of the claims that have been made that, quite simply, collapse when put under some sort of scrutiny. First, it is claimed that the deal has enough money to settle public-sector pay claims, but the pay element that was put on the table lasts for only one year. Secondly, it is claimed that the deal allows us to settle the debt created by underfunding, but that debt, in itself, is unfair, because it would not have arisen had we not been underfunded in the first place. If we had been funded according to need during the spending review period, we would have had an extra £500 million a year to spend and would not have that debt today. Thirdly, the deal contains a so-called "needs-based factor". Those are carefully chosen words: "needs-based factor". They have avoided calling it a fiscal floor, because it is not one. In fact, it is a fiscal ceiling, and it may take up to 20 years before that funding formula brings us up to the level of need. How can that be fair? How is it fair to condemn us to ongoing instability, trying to plan and deliver key public services in a hand-to-mouth existence? That is not even the worst of it, because the unfairness of the deal is compounded by asking citizens to pay more while services continue to deteriorate.

**Mr Elliott:** Will the First Minister give way?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go ahead.

**Mr Elliott:** First, I congratulate the First Minister on her appointment. I listened to what she has said about the issues. Climate change has not been mentioned at all. I noticed in recent correspondence that it is indicated that it will cost Departments £2.3 billion up to 2027 just to implement the climate change actions. Has any thought been given to that with regard to the additional finances that are required?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There is no doubt that that is another huge issue that the incoming Executive and all of us with mandates will have to grapple with.

I welcome you to your new role. You have been appointed Chair of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

There is big work to do there, and, no doubt, you will fight the fight for the farming community. I would like to do that with you. We will have many challenges to grapple with, but, if we do not fix the fundamentals of the funding formula in its entirety from this day-1 position, we will be in trouble when it comes to dealing with all the things that we need to deal with, not least the climate catastrophe that we now face.

The deputy First Minister also wants to contribute to the debate. I will hand over to her, but I will finish by saying this: it is unjust to say to our citizens and taxpayers that they have to pay more while they are waiting to get into the health and social care system that they need today; that they have to pay more while special education is rationed and children's lives are being blighted; and that they have to pay more while our schools and infrastructure crumble and decay. I am really pleased that this is our day-1 effort, and I am really pleased that the House stands united in its rejection of unfairness and in support of the position that has been taken by the Executive. I thank Members for all of that and for the passion with which they have spoken. I assure you all that our determination will not waver in ensuring that we establish a proper funding model that delivers on the needs of the people whom we collectively serve.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister):** Thank you very much to everybody who contributed to the debate. The suggestion from the Alliance Member for North Belfast might set a dangerous precedent: if the First Minister and I could write letters to excuse children from school, we may be occupied for much of our time.

I welcome the debate, and, like the First Minister, I welcome the support on this important issue. We felt that it was incredibly important for us to be here and for both of us to contribute to the debate to show that there is a strong and joint endeavour to get the right and fair settlement for Northern Ireland while recognising that progress has been made. I welcome the fact that, across the Chamber and, with some exceptions, across all the political parties represented, there has been strong support for what we are trying to achieve not just for the Executive or for those who sit in the House but for the people of Northern Ireland, no matter where they come from or what community they live in.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion and thank every Member who spoke during the debate. Many important issues have been raised, many of which we have already spoken

about, certainly in terms of the First Minister and me but also in relation to the Executive, as I referred to earlier. We are conscious that there are really important issues that genuinely matter to people and that demand action. We want to ensure that we can take meaningful action that can result in the right outcomes. However, to do that, we need the right tools. Members across the House mentioned that. That means getting the right long-term fiscal settlement for Northern Ireland.

Incredibly, I first came into the Executive Office, which was then called the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), 17 years ago. I have had the privilege of serving as a special adviser, a junior Minister and now as deputy First Minister. I had some time out from the office, but I have served for a considerable time there. In all that time, I do not recall an Executive or a First Minister and deputy First Minister collectively signing a letter on the very first day on which they were appointed to those roles. That sends a strong and positive message, and I hope that it sends a very clear indication to the Government not only that we are serious about this issue but that, most of all, we have a shared interest in it. We were also keen that there was the opportunity for the issue to be debated in the House so that parties that are not part of the Executive could also indicate their support. I am glad that that has happened today. That shows the importance of the issue, the strength of feeling about it and the unity of purpose. We have to get this right.

The First Minister has laid bare some of the challenges at the heart of the Government's financial offer. I do not want to repeat that, but I will echo what the First Minister said. We have had much discussion about a promise of a fiscal floor, but we know that, as it operates currently, it will be more of a fiscal ceiling. That needs to be addressed. We absolutely welcome that there is some short-term support, but we really need the long-term stability that we can get from fiscal guarantees. Frankly, the concept of charging hard-pressed families here more for poor or poorer services is not something that we will accept.

## 2.00 pm

We have other fundamental concerns in relation to the financial offer, as set out in the detailed letter. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister took the time to visit yesterday because it provided an opportunity for us to speak to him directly. We took that opportunity to make the case, directly and robustly, that we need that additional support. I welcome the constructive

engagement that we have had from the Prime Minister and others on the financial issues. I welcome in particular the fact that we secured, through significant hard work, an additional £3.3 billion. That is £3.3 billion more than we would have had without those hard discussions. I welcome the fact that some in the Chamber who perhaps made reference to that being a significant bribe or a huge amount of money seem to now recognise that everybody can tell that this is insufficient for what we need to do. However, we accept that we are £3.3 billion better off compared with where we were. That is welcome. That will support many families and communities. It will go a long way in supporting public-sector pay claims.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the deputy First Minister for giving way. Does she also agree that we are not just £3.3 billion better off than we were but £3.3 billion better off than we would have been had we followed the negotiating strategy of Mr Allister?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I thank the Minister for her contribution.

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

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I just want to respond to the Minister of Justice first.

In relation to the point that has been made, it will be for the public to judge what has been secured. It is certainly not a sufficient amount of money. It is better than where we were. We took the opportunity. It is important to say that all the parties involved took the opportunity to emphasise at the time that we had concerns in relation to some of those proposals. We indicated strongly that we would continue to make the case for additional support. We are not asking for anything that is unfair. We are not saying, "Write us a blank cheque, and let us do whatever we want." There is a strong commitment to reform, but that reform needs the right resources. We have made progress, but there is more to do.

I will take an intervention from the Member.

**Mr Allister:** Before this rewrite of history goes much further, can the deputy First Minister remind us whether it is not the case that Sinn Féin, Alliance, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP were all, for many months if not years, urging a return to the Executive without a financial package?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I thank the Member for his contribution. The record shows that it is indeed

the case that there were many parties willing to go back in. Nevertheless, today is about moving forward with consensus. I welcome the recognition of the hard work that went into achieving this significant amount of money, but, as I have indicated, today is about showing joint purpose and unity. It is not, in my view, about political division. This is about sending a clear message to His Majesty's Treasury and to the Government that we want and need to secure sustainable fiscal guarantees to enable us to do the reform: the longer-term and multi-year budgets and the type of reform that is required. The reality is that we have to keep our public services going while we invest in reform, and that requires investment. We need the tools to do that.

That is why we ask for three things from the UK Government. The first is a genuine fiscal floor where the funding reflects the independent evidence of need from the Fiscal Commission. I want absolutely to emphasise that this is an independent commission. It is not just our opinions: "We want a little bit more money because we do not want to make difficult decisions." I believe that every member of the Executive is up to making the difficult decisions required to put our public services onto a sustainable basis, but we need a recognition that there is additional need.

That is why I refer to the Independent Fiscal Commission. It did a very important piece of work that recognises that we are not currently funded on the basis of need, and that requires additional support. The financial package will address the issue in large part in this financial year and the next, although there will still be challenges, but it does not provide us with a longer-term fiscal guarantee on the funding formula. That is what we seek from the Government.

Secondly, we need funding for stabilisation to halt the decline in our services, to repair the harm that has been done and to give us a firm foundation on which to plan transformation. Every one of us has had constituents walk through our doors with all types of issues and challenges around public services. As I referred to in my initial speech, it could be parents seeking to get the right special educational needs support for their child or trying to get their child into the appropriate education setting. It could be people on waiting lists and their families who are desperately worried and seeking help and support. It could be people who see potholes and other things that we need to get fixed. Fundamentally, we have all kinds of issues that require public finances from the everyday things that we see all about us to the

huge issues of infrastructure and structural reform in health and education. That requires additional funds and the right tools for our Ministers to be able to invest and deliver.

Thirdly, as mentioned, we need funding for transformation. I know that all of us around the Chamber talk a good game about transformation, but we in the Executive have a determination to move forward with genuine transformation. That must mean having a focus on delivery and outcomes. It is not just about speeches and buzzwords. We are genuine about that. As I said to the Member for North Antrim, it is not just about holding out our hands and asking for money without condition from the Government; it is about making a clear case that we are prepared to do transformation in a timely way. We want our public services to be transformed so that they work for every person. For us to do that, however, the Government need to work with us, not against us. Give us what is necessary for us to deliver for every person whom we represent in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** I now call Mr Daniel McCrossan to wind on the amendment. You have five minutes, Mr McCrossan.

**Mr McCrossan:** I take the opportunity to congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your new role and wish you well. The same goes for all the new Ministers and Chairs and Deputy Chairs of Committees.

One of the greatest privileges of my life was being elected to the Assembly as a voice for the people of my constituency of West Tyrone. It is an honour. I am sure that that view is shared by every Member of the House. Our first priority should always be to the people whom we represent. We should ensure that, at all times, we articulate their needs in the right places to ensure that we ease the burdens and pain that they are suffering or going through and, most importantly, improve their lives.

We support the motion in the spirit of goodwill, as my colleague and leader of the Opposition, Mr Matthew O'Toole, outlined. Our amendment today goes into the specifics: it asks for costed plans to be outlined by Ministers and presented to Westminster and the Treasury to ensure that the appropriate funds go to where they are needed. It is disappointing that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister indicated whether they would support the amendment, but I hope that, in the spirit of goodwill today, they will. There is nothing to fear from the amendment. It goes into the specifics of the challenges that we have discussed today.

Make no mistake: those challenges are great. The public are sick of manufactured crisis in this place. They are sick of excuses. They are sick of politicians going into hiding when they should be on the front line, defending the interests of all our people. This place is designed so that we work together to resolve our problems. That is why I hope that, in the spirit of goodwill, the Executive will work collectively. We, as the Opposition, will work constructively with them to find solutions to the problems that our people collectively face, and those problems are vast. Waiting lists are in a serious situation and are worsening by the day. Behind those numbers is real human suffering, including, on a daily basis, people who are dying because they do not have access to the treatment that they need or deserve. Older people's care is at its worst state in the history of this place because, as was rightly pointed out by my colleague from the Alliance Party, people cannot get access to domiciliary care packages to ensure that they can be cared for at home.

Has any MLA visited an A&E department over the past couple of months? It is the most unfortunate, depressing and difficult place to be. In what is supposed to be a place of care and support for people are a lot of people suffering and sitting for endless hours. Let us resolve that problem together by ensuring that we have a plan for waiting lists and a properly funded and resourced health service that will reward our staff who are working tirelessly, the same staff whom we have stood with, shoulder to shoulder, on picket lines over the past number of months. They are not looking for a pay rise; they are looking for the pay that they are rightfully entitled to. Let us be clear about that.

Special educational needs provision is in a dire state. Children and families are suffering incredibly as a result of the failure of this place, but, again, let us now look beyond that and try to find solutions so that we can alleviate the pressure on those families and those children to ensure that no child is left behind by a system that should be there to support them, deliver for them and offer them the opportunities that they deserve and need.

There are huge challenges. Another is infrastructure. After two years, it would be remiss of me not to mention in the House the A5, which is a critical piece of infrastructure that, I hope, will be delivered soon. People are dying every year on that dangerous road, and there is a desperation not just for the infrastructure but for the safety of the constituents whom I represent that that road be delivered.



It is important that, as we sit and stand here today, we recognise that there has been political failure at great cost to us all, in particular to the people whom we represent in our communities. When the going gets tough this time, please stand together and try to seek out solutions to the problems for the people whom we collectively represent. When it comes to it, it does not matter whether someone is unionist or nationalist or anything else, because the problems are the same. Our people are united in crisis and in their suffering, and we, as the Assembly, as one, collectively, must work together to alleviate that pain and pressure and deliver for every one of them.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Kellie Armstrong to make a winding-up speech. Ms Armstrong, you have 10 minutes.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I congratulate you on taking your role as Speaker. I look forward to working with you and the Deputy Speakers as we go forward for the remainder of the term. I also congratulate the Members who made their maiden speech. Working a maiden speech to the clock is difficult, so congratulations to Phillip Brett, Eóin Tennyson, Diane Forsythe, Danny Donnelly and Nuala McAllister. I chickened out of doing that and did my maiden speech during a debate on legislation where I was not timed. Well done for doing that today.

To the SDLP, thank you very much for your contribution today as Opposition. Constructive opposition is welcome. We all know from being on Committees together in the past that working together and being critical and supportive of a Minister are some of the better ways of working, so thank you for that. My party will support the SDLP amendment because, while you have asked for a plan and a costing of that delivery, that is the natural step for what we will have going forward, particularly as we look towards a Budget.

Today, we have heard from many Members from across the House, and one thing that we can agree on is that everyone has a shared call for support from the Westminster Government to fund this place in a way that will meet need. A key theme that has been put forward today has been public-sector pay, and a number of Members have made it clear that, while £3.3 billion is a huge amount of money, it will give people public-sector pay security for one year: one year, not for ever. That is why we ask not for a ceiling on the ambitions of the fiscal responsibilities of Northern Ireland but for a fiscal floor that we do not go below. We do not need to put a cap on our people being

supported and how their need will be met. As some Members mentioned, sporadic allocations are sticking-plaster amounts, and it is not enough.

Childcare has been mentioned often, and I am delighted because my party has worked hard on childcare, especially with Kate Nicholl MLA, to put children first.

In doing that, we can support families and the community, and we can help people to be in employment, have their own money and not be so dependent on the Government.

## 2.15 pm

Health has come up time and time again, and, whether it is domiciliary care or the waiting lists, it is time for us to resolve those issues. However, as the First Minister and deputy First Minister have mentioned, we can only do that if we have enough money to take forward transformation and reform. The £3.3 billion is a first-day help, but it will not take forward the sort of reform that Prime Minister Sunak is asking us to take forward.

Others have mentioned, as part of the key themes of today, reform of this place to ensure that we have a sustainable Government that is not going to collapse whereby we cannot change and move things forward because we are not in this place. It is time that we think about that and ask the other Governments to step in and help if we are not able to do it. There is a requirement in the Good Friday Agreement to consider ways forward. It is time that we think about the nature of that agreement, how that agreement has helped us so far and how we can use it moving forward.

My knowledge of this place has come from working with the Committee for Communities and the former Minister for Communities. I want to highlight one of the differences that we have in Northern Ireland, and it comes back to the Levelling Up Fund. In the last term of the previous working Assembly, we had a housing strategy agreed, and we were going to put out so many new house builds. We have not been able to do that, and, in fact, that strategy has not been met because we do not have enough money to build those houses. In Westminster, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 enshrines into law Westminster's long-term commitment to regeneration through the speeding up of the planning system and the removal of bureaucracy to enable the building of new homes while undertaking a series of major reforms across the built and natural

environment. Here, in Northern Ireland, according to figures provided by the Northern Ireland housing bulletin, we have 45,500 people in housing stress. We have 2,605 people who are deemed as homeless. That is not something to be proud of, but it is something that we need money to help resolve.

Without capital investment here — the lack of enough capital investment is outlined in the letter from the Executive to the Prime Minister — Northern Ireland Water's limitations in respect of our water and sewerage system will be an impediment to house building. None of us can forget, "No drains, no cranes". Why is this so important? Without appropriate housing, children do not achieve as much in education, people live in poverty and people have poorer health and well-being outcomes. We have a society that is struggling with the cost of living. We have people who are heading towards extreme poverty because 30% of their income is being spent on rent. That is only one of the problems that we have as a collective House.

I remind the House that, while we know all of that, we also know that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Michael Gove MP, handed money back to the Treasury because he could not spend it. In 2022-23, his Department underspent on the affordable housing programme by £600 million. What could we have done with that money had we been included? That is why we say this to the Westminster Government: £3.3 billion is a fantastic starting point — thank you so much — but we need a realistic fiscal floor that can meet the needs of people here in Northern Ireland. If we do not get that, is the Prime Minister saying that people here are not worth it? We are. We deserve better. Our people deserve better. We deserve not just pay parity but equal societal parity with people who live elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Many Members who have spoken today have made the argument very strongly, and I thank them all for that. It is important to say to the public that, yes, we have not been in this place for a very long time, but I hope that you take heart from this collegiate approach of parties that are committed to coming together to make a very strong and clear message to Prime Minister Sunak that we need support and we need investment. We will take forward transformation and we will make reforms, but we need him to come to the plate. We also need his party to realise just exactly how important people in Northern Ireland are and to meet their needs.

To that end, I reiterate the call of the motion:

*"That this Assembly endorses the letter sent to Prime Minister Sunak by all Executive Ministers"*

— and it has been signed by our official Opposition —

*"calling for our public finances to be placed on a sustainable footing and for the Executive to have the resources that it needs to deliver effective public services."*

That is the clear message from the whole House. Prime Minister, I ask you to come back with a response that shows us that you respect people who live in Northern Ireland as much as you respect your constituents.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank Members for their contributions.

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

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

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly endorses the letter sent to Prime Minister Sunak by all Executive Ministers calling for our public finances to be placed on a sustainable footing and for the Executive to have the resources that they need to deliver effective public services; and calls on the Minister of Finance to work with all Executive Ministers to produce and publish costed plans for revitalising public services and addressing immediate priorities, including public-sector pay awards, hospital waiting lists and delivering affordable childcare in line with a comprehensive Programme for Government.*

*Adjourned at 2.21 pm.*