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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 May 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Members' Bills: Arrangements

Mr Speaker: Before we commence today's business, I inform the House that I am writing to all Members today to publish the arrangements for Members' Bills for this mandate. The focus of the arrangements is on ensuring that conducting effective scrutiny and producing quality legislation are at the heart of our legislative process.

Since the Assembly returned in February, I have taken time to reflect on lessons from the previous mandate, including the review that was conducted by the Committee on Procedures and agreed by the Assembly in March 2022. Key points of that review included the following: support for Members' Bills should be retained and the Assembly Commission should continue to allocate them appropriate resources; policy proposals in Members' Bills should be narrow and specific; there should be a final deadline of the end of June of the penultimate session of the mandate for a Member's Bill to be introduced to the Assembly, which, in this case, is June 2026; and there should be minimum procedural requirements for all Members' Bills, whether they are developed with Assembly support or drafted by Members themselves.

In facilitating Members' Bills, the new arrangements provide an opportunity for Back-Bench Members from any party to develop proposals for legislation that are of the appropriate scope for a Member's Bill. The process can give voice to debate and help to shape the law positively if done properly. However, the provision of resources cannot be a blank cheque. Members will have to comply with a number of requirements to ensure that legislation is well developed. The arrangements work within the framework of Executive business having priority in our procedures, which is in recognition of the mandate that the electorate has given to the parties to appoint Ministers and bring forward legislation. The

resources and expertise available in Departments also mean that Ministers are best placed to propose large-scale legislation. Members' Bills are not designed to be an alternative form of government and cannot be resourced as such.

In the previous mandate, one third of Bills that were brought to the Floor were Members' Bills. That is a significant imbalance compared with what would be expected in any legislature. A core concern of mine will be to ensure that the number of Members' Bills that come forward does not flood the system in a way that undermines the ability of the Assembly and Committees to conduct effective scrutiny of Executive and Members' legislation.

My letter sets out the main features of the arrangements for Members' Bills for this mandate. I will briefly highlight a few points. The submission window for Members' Bills proposals will open on 13 May 2024 for eight weeks and close on 5 July 2024. I have authorised the Members' Bills development unit to give particular regard to advising Members on keeping their proposals narrow, specific and confined to a scale appropriate for a Member's Bill. If the scale of a Member's Bill is likely to consume a disproportionate amount of the available resources, I am unlikely to grant access to the drafting budget.

The requirement for public consultation on Members' Bills is now extended from eight to 12 weeks, which is in line with the requirement on Ministers and Departments. An extended period of eight weeks is now provided for engagement between a Member developing a Bill proposal and a relevant Minister. I will emphasise to all Ministers the importance of their engagement on Members' Bills. I have written to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in relation to the Executive's legislative programme so that the Business Committee and I will be better informed of the Assembly time available for Members' Bills. I am issuing a separate ruling to require that Members who operate outside of the supported Bill development process by submitting a privately drafted Bill are equally

required to undertake consultation and engage with the relevant Department on their Bill before it can be submitted.

Developing a Member's Bill is a good opportunity to address issues in our community, but it is a considerable time commitment and a significant responsibility. Members should therefore be prepared to commit significant time early in the mandate to develop their Bills before the time available for them reduces. Members are no less accountable than Ministers for the law that they seek to introduce. Therefore, the proposal for a Member's Bill should not be brought forward lightly. In line with those arrangements, it is for the Assembly and every Member to take responsibility for the scrutiny of a Bill and the decision to put in on the statute book. It is, arguably, our most serious role. How legislation is developed and scrutinised is crucial to building confidence in the Assembly.

I believe that the arrangements published today strike the right balance between enabling Members to bring forward Bills and ensuring that it is done in a way that seeks to achieve effective scrutiny and quality legislation. I encourage Members to read the detail of the handbook published today.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: The usual rules apply.

Cuan Mhuire: 40th Anniversary

Ms Kimmins: Sadly, addiction continues to plague our communities and destroy lives. Drug and alcohol addiction does not discriminate, and children and young people are getting involved with substances at a much younger age. Statistics show that alcohol and drug misuse is increasing every year across Ireland. The latest NISRA report in January stated that there have been over 600 deaths as a result of drugs and alcohol, two thirds of which were men.

On 29 June 1984, Kerry-born nun Sister Consilio Fitzgerald opened Cuan Mhuire addiction centre on the Armagh Road in Newry. In the 40 years since it opened, the Cuan Mhuire centre has supported individuals and their families through the turmoil of addiction. Sister Consilio and her dedicated team have helped to restore hope and to change the lives of many thousands from across the North. When she arrived in Newry in 1984 with her small group of dedicated supporters, little did she realise the impact that Cuan Mhuire would have. Sister Consilio and the staff of Cuan Mhuire are hugely respected and appreciated by families and communities from all traditions and backgrounds. In 2012, Cuan Mhuire left the Armagh Road and opened a new state-of-the-art facility on the Old Dublin Road at Killeen.

On Sunday, well-known Camlough man and former resident of Cuan Mhuire Pat McGinn ran the Belfast marathon to mark Cuan Mhuire's 40th anniversary celebrations this year and to raise much-needed funds for the facility. Reflecting on the transformational impact that Cuan Mhuire has had on his life and his gratitude to all involved with the charity, Pat described how he and many others entered Cuan Mhuire as broken human beings and left it with renewed hope and the support to change their lives for the better.

We undoubtedly owe a lot to Sister Consilio and her small group of dedicated and committed helpers who, with her, founded the Harbour of Mary/Cuan Mhuire in Newry. Many local people were so good to Sister Consilio in those early days and over the years, and she deeply appreciated that. We mark the 40th anniversary of Cuan Mhuire in Newry, and I know just how huge the facility's impact has been. I celebrate it with everyone involved in Cuan Mhuire and pay tribute to them.

Abbey Villa Football Club

Mr Dunne: I want to record the wonderful success of Abbey Villa Football Club (FC) from Millisle in winning the league title this season. Abbey Villa secured the division 1A title on Saturday in the Northern Amateur Football League, winning promotion back to the premier division. Abbey Villa last won division 1A in the 2008-09 season, so its success this year is all the more special and worthy of being commended. I formally congratulate the chairman, Mr Gary Pitman, the management, coaches, players and the many dedicated volunteers who have all played a very important part in that magnificent success this season. Abbey Villa Football Club, like many local clubs, is a very active club. It has a great history and is right at the heart of the community in Millisle and the surrounding areas. It has many active youth teams of all ages, and I wish them well for the season ahead in the premier division. Well done indeed.

I also congratulate Holywood Football Club, who play at Spafield Park, on winning division 1B of the Northern Amateur Football League, securing promotion to division 1A. Holywood FC was founded in 1983. It has had an excellent season this year and very much deserves that promotion. I wish it every success for the year ahead in division 1A. It is a fantastic achievement to have two football clubs from North Down winning their league and securing promotion at the top end of the very competitive amateur league that we have across Northern Ireland. It reminds us that sports clubs like those make such a valuable contribution week in, week out, day and daily to promoting health and well-being and so much more across many generations and the grassroots in every corner of Northern Ireland. They really deserve our support.

Bushmills: Assault

Ms Mulholland: I rise to condemn the barbaric and horrific attack in Bushmills, in my constituency, on Saturday night/Sunday morning. There is simply no justification for that type of behaviour in 2024. We are 26 years post-Good Friday Agreement. The community is saying that enough is enough. A young man has been left with life-altering injuries. Tourists in a car park on a busy bank holiday weekend witnessed something significant and traumatic: our first responders from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) having to cut a man from a fence. The medical teams in the hospital had to deal with the aftermath, as did a close-knit and welcoming community. I was

there all day Friday with the community association visiting the community garden and touring some of the new developments on the main street, and all that I was met with was a warm community that is so focused on making lives better in Bushmills.

I have had contact from parents in the village who are really worried about how they tell their children about what is on the news and why their town is on the news. How do they stop the conversations that will, no doubt, happen in the playground this morning and the rest of this week? How do they protect another generation of children from the trauma that has happened in that village? Is this where we are? Is it where we want to be in 2024? It is time for those players to move off the stage. This is not wanted.

As we enter the busiest sporting week in North Antrim and on the north coast, I make it clear that North Antrim and Bushmills are still open for business. I was in the town yesterday. It is still busy, and you will see thousands of people flock to the north coast. We need to send the message that that event is not indicative of that community or of North Antrim.

Finally, I praise those who came to the aid of that young man, whether they were volunteers or those whose job it was to be there. I thank them, and I hope that the young man and those who experienced the significant trauma of that event will recover quickly.

Irish Passports

Mr McGuigan: In February, I raised and highlighted the need for an Irish passport office to be located in the North. I was disappointed to hear last week, in response to questions from my colleague and TD from Donegal Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, the Tánaiste respond by saying that such an office is not needed. I disagree.

10.45 am

There is a massive need for an Irish passport office to be located in the North. Around 20% of adult first-time passport applications are made by citizens living in the North, many of whom come from my North Antrim constituency. According to the most recent figures, over 45,000 passport applications have been made from the North in the first few months of this year. I expect that number to grow considerably as we enter the summer months. As the number of applications increases, so will the number of issues that arise and problems that occur with applications. Delays, backlogs and

difficulties in obtaining information cause panic and worry for individuals and families as their travel date gets closer.

It is not good enough that those Irish citizens cannot speak to someone over the counter in a local passport office to discuss their application, should a problem arise. The Tánaiste implied that a low number of issues was raised through the new MLA portal and that there was therefore no issue and no need for an office in the North, but he used figures from the first three months of this year. He will know that, historically, those months do not provide a good example.

I will detail my experience. My office or I used the MLA portal on behalf of constituents nine times in the first three months of this year, but I have used it 39 times in the past five weeks. I have used it four times this morning already. If the experience of the past number of years is to be repeated, assisting constituents with passport applications by raising queries about delays on their behalf will be the greatest issue that my office will deal with every week over the summer between now and September.

I am currently dealing with passport applications that were submitted at the end of January — over 14 weeks ago — but have not been processed. The delays and worries for applicants are getting bigger. Whilst I appeal to people to apply for their passport in good time, I see, every year, families and children in particular miss out on dream holidays — in my view, needlessly — over issues that could have been dealt with.

I can tell the Tánaiste that I use the MLA portal, that I contact the passport office online and by phone and that I email his office, but I know that, if we had an office in the North to which applicants could go to make their applications or deal with issues as they arise, those problems would arise less often or be resolved much more quickly. The whole process would therefore be streamlined and become more efficient for everyone.

I do not agree with the assessment of the Tánaiste. We need a passport office in the North, and we need it sooner rather than later.

Bushmills: Assault

Mr Frew: I condemn the assault in Bushmills at the weekend, when a man was nailed to a wooden fence with a nail through each hand. Two vehicles were set alight, bringing further risk to the general public, including residents,

visitors and tourists. It was a sinister attack of atrocious violence and brutality, perpetrated against an individual who, like every other member of the public, has the right to live free from the threat and impact of violence. Such criminal behaviour must be condemned universally and unequivocally. The community of Bushmills has been left reeling, having woken up to that brutality. Businesses are fearful, not only after the sinister attack itself but with the tourist season just about cranking up.

I thank the blue-light services personnel and members of the public who attended the scene to administer first aid and make the area safe. I, like other Members for North Antrim who are in the Chamber today, condemn the attack. With one voice, we say this to the people of Northern Ireland: Bushmills is a safe place to visit and to live in, and it is a beautiful tourist destination. More people should visit the area.

Supporting People

Ms Armstrong: I make a plea to the Minister and the Department for Communities to allocate their budget wisely to ensure that some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland are prioritised. I appreciate that the budget will be incredibly challenging for Communities this year and that it will require difficult choices to be made. One option that the Minister may consider is to cut the Supporting People programme budget. That would be a mistake. The Minister has described Supporting People as a fantastic programme, and he is right. Supporting People provides invaluable housing support to people in need across this society. As the response to a question for written answer that I tabled illustrated, the baseline budget for Supporting People has been held flat over the past decade. Inflation has eroded the value of the fund year-on-year.

A survey sent to the Committee for Communities by the Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISPP) illustrated that many Supporting People-funded providers are deeply concerned about their financial situation. If services feel that, due to a lack of funding, they have no option other than to hand back contracts or reduce the vital services they provide, that will have consequences that will be borne by the people who need those services and by the Housing Executive. Cutting the Supporting People programme will be a false economy that will only exacerbate problems in other statutory services such as education, health and justice. The truth is that the Supporting People

programme is in real need of additional funding to meet rising inflationary needs.

When the Minister for Communities is considering where to make allocations, he needs to prioritise meeting need and ensure that the Supporting People programme has the resources it needs to deliver for the most vulnerable in our society. It is vital, when taking difficult budget decisions, that the Minister for Communities and all Ministers ensure that decisions are compatible and do not result in people who are homeless, who have disabilities or who are suffering the most from poverty carrying the consequences.

Kieran McKenna

Mr Elliott: I congratulate Kieran McKenna and his Ipswich Town football team on reaching the English Premiership. It is a great achievement for Kieran, a Fermanagh man. He came through the ranks of Enniskillen Town United youth and Ballinamallard United youth before being spotted by a Spurs scout and brought to Tottenham Hotspur to play there for a short time until he got a bad injury and had to retire from football at the age of 22. He then went on to coach at Spurs. He managed the under-18 team at Spurs before going to one of their rivals, Manchester United. He was then second in command to Mourinho at Manchester United before making the bold move to Ipswich Town, a team that was not going well at the time in League One. After his first half-season there, in the second season he got promotion to the Championship and then, this year, secured a back-to-back promotion to the Premiership.

That is a huge achievement, and I congratulate Kieran and his family. The McKennas own the Manor House Country Hotel in Ballinamallard, and they are a hard-working and dedicated family, just as Kieran himself is dedicated to football and now to Ipswich Town. I look forward, in the time ahead, to maybe seeing him go back and manage Tottenham Hotspur, which is my favourite team, or maybe even coming back here to manage Northern Ireland in the years to come.

Migration

Mr O'Toole: I want to talk today about a subject that, in one sense, we never stop talking about, but, when we talk about it, we should be careful with our language: the border on the island of Ireland. That is a border that many of us worked hard to ensure remained as open and as soft as possible in the years following Brexit. I do not wish to reopen all the debates around Brexit

and its consequences for this island, which were divisive, particularly in this Chamber and elsewhere. I want to point out, however, that many people in the Chamber, on this island, on the island next door, in Brussels, in Washington and elsewhere worked hard to build a coalition that included not just people who were traditionally nationalist but many unionists who wanted to remain in the European Union and many unionists who cared about a soft border on the island of Ireland. People, as I said, who were supportive of our peace process and supportive of an open and soft border on the island of Ireland worked hard to ensure that, post Brexit, that soft border remained, without prejudice to the future of this island. Obviously, I and my party aspire to, at some point, remove the border.

The reason that I have given all that preamble is to say that I am deeply disappointed by some of the language that has emerged from certain actors around what only amounts to irresponsible talk about open borders on the island of Ireland. It is important to be careful in our language. There is only one open border on the island of Ireland, and that is the border that we all want to remain open and soft. Most of us want that border to remain open and soft, whether or not we want a united Ireland at some point in the future, so it is deeply concerning to hear the leader of the Opposition in Dáil Éireann — the leader of Sinn Féin, Mary Lou McDonald — say that Sinn Féin is not for open borders. If the leader of Sinn Féin is saying that she supports tougher migration controls, she should be honest with people about what exactly she is talking about and what the consequences of increased migration checks at or away from the border would be for people on this island, including the impact that they would have on the operation of the all-island economy. After all the work that has gone on over almost a decade to ensure that we retain a soft and open border on the island of Ireland, it is profoundly irresponsible that, as a result of politicking by Tory right-wingers in Westminster, political debate on this island has been pushed quickly into a dark and damaging place that could have consequences not just for the people who are fleeing war and worse but for those of us who want to retain an open, soft border on this island. I therefore caution people with influence and power, including the leader of Sinn Féin and other politicians —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — to be careful about the language that they use.

Mark Allen

Mrs Cameron: I take the opportunity on my behalf, that of South Antrim and of the people across Northern Ireland to pay tribute to Mark Allen — Antrim's snooker superstar — on achieving the world number-one ranking position this week. It is a remarkable and well-deserved achievement, given Mark's incredible performances and tournament wins over the past few seasons. We are all proud of him. It is surely only a matter of time before Mark lifts the world title. I know that he would also want me to congratulate Kyren Wilson on his fantastic and emotional victory yesterday. Mark Allen is the latest in a long line of sporting greats to come from this amazing little corner of the globe, and he offers further proof that we have world-beating talent across all sectors of sport and culture of which we can all be proud. Congratulations, Mark. I look forward to watching many more successes in the years to come.

Hope Macaulay

Ms Sugden: I wish to highlight the incredible achievement of my constituent Hope Macaulay following her inclusion on the world-renowned 'Forbes' "30 under 30" list for retail and commerce. The list includes entrepreneurs, leaders and creators under the age of 30 who have made a significant impact in their field. Hope, from Portstewart, hand-knits clothing, bags and accessories and has created a local cottage industry, employing 20 hand-knitters on the north coast to create her unique range of products. She has developed a distinctive style of knitting, using her signature chunky wool, which is ethically and responsibly sourced. Her style and unique way of using skills handed down by family members has created products that have been recognised globally. Hope's work has been worn by tennis sensation Naomi Osaka, actors Jennifer Hudson and Billie Piper, and singer-songwriter Halsey.

Hope is a star in her own right, with her work appearing on numerous magazine covers across the world. Her ambitious community- and family-minded business approach took her creations from the north coast and Ulster University to the attention of the world in just a few short years after graduating in 2018. Her creations now appear in global clothing chains, such as Anthropologie and Free People, and are available in more than 80 countries worldwide, having been created in a workshop in Coleraine. The success of someone so young — just 27 years old — and of a local artist and designer with such a clear and widely

appreciated talent deserves not just inclusion on such a prestigious list but the recognition and pride of everyone in Northern Ireland. To have built her company and brand in such a short time is a testament not only to her artistic talent and skill but to her business mind that made it happen. It also stresses the need to acknowledge, appreciate and support the talented people whom we have here in Northern Ireland so that they, like Hope, have a chance to showcase their work to the world. With the right support, we could see many other designers, musicians, sportspeople and entrepreneurs take the world by storm and show that dreams and ambitions can be achieved, even from relatively modest beginnings in a small town in Northern Ireland. 'Forbes' has recognised that, and rightly so. Hope has the world at her feet. I invite Members to join me in congratulating her and in wishing her nothing but the best for a bright future.

South Down: Social Housing

Mrs Mason: The harsh reality is that young people and families across South Down and the North are being locked out of having a home of their own. The prospect of, one day, owning or living in a home in the community in which they grew up is becoming increasingly unlikely. Rural communities across South Down need access to affordable and social housing. As of March 2023, there were just under 3,900 on the social housing waiting list in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area. Housing is a human right, and we must work to deliver safe and decent social and affordable housing as a priority.

We need creative solutions to develop affordable and social homes in Downpatrick, Castlewellan, Newcastle and across South Down. Working with housing organisations and other groups is key to building more affordable and social housing. We must do all that we can to help housing associations like Clanmil Housing to transform the old Downe Hospital site into much-needed family homes right in the heart of Downpatrick. We also need to see the urgent revitalisation of the Housing Executive, in order to enable it to begin building at scale.

11.00 am

I am asking the Minister for Communities to publish the housing supply strategy at pace, and to work to deliver the Executive's commitment, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach, to ensuring that every household has

access to a good-quality, affordable and sustainable home that is suitable to its needs.

A5 Fatalities

Mr T Buchanan: This day last week, the First Minister and deputy First Minister presented a report to the House on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. During the deliberations on that report, I, along with other West Tyrone Members, asked questions about the proposed A5 project, which has been ongoing for over 15 years. Little did anyone in the Chamber know that before the clock would strike 12.00 last Tuesday night, to usher that day into eternity, two more young teenage lives would be lost on the A5 just outside Omagh.

Today, again, I want to tender my deepest and heartfelt sympathy to the families of both victims and to their work colleagues and friends. Those two families have been left heartbroken. We can never comprehend the pain and sorrow of a broken-hearted mother, or a father's heart that has been torn apart by such a tragedy: an empty chair, a silent voice, a void in the home that no words can fill. We may never know the cause of that accident, but the one thing that we do know is that two more young lives have been lost and have been added to the list of fatalities on the A5 — a road that is no respecter of persons. The young have been cut off in their prime; the middle-aged have been torn away from their families; and the elderly have been taken.

With the increased volume of traffic on the A5, from slow-moving vehicles to heavy articulated lorries and all the other smaller vehicles that use the road, I urge all road users to exercise extreme care and caution because of the dangers that can occur on it. Today, I urge the Infrastructure Minister, whom I know has a keen interest in taking forward the proposals for the A5, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to seek to make improvements and safety on the A5 a priority, so that, together, we may see improvements for the good of all who use the road, and I urge them to seek to do all that they can to stop the carnage of lives lost on the A5.

Bright Sparks Preschool, Crawfordsburn

Ms Egan: I rise to talk about a very important issue in my constituency of North Down. Last Thursday, Bright Sparks Preschool in Crawfordsburn received the devastating news that the preschool building's registration had been removed, deeming it, therefore, as not fit

for purpose or safe for pupils to be inside. That is of extreme concern to the entire school community. Bright Sparks is a brilliant preschool, which values independent and inquisitive learning, and its inspection reports have continually highlighted the brilliant care and attentiveness that the staff provide for the children.

The timeline of how this happened and how it was deemed that the building was not fit for purpose raise real questions for the Education Authority (EA) and the Education Minister. Bright Sparks is a preschool in a voluntary, non-statutory setting and it has been ignored for far too long by those in our education systems. The management committee and governors of Bright Sparks have continually raised concerns for years about the building in which the preschool is based. It is owned by the EA, and concerns have been raised for years to no avail. So much so, that in June 2023, 11 months ago, a building condition survey and report was commissioned. What that report revealed to the EA were deep concerns about the dangers of electrical failure and fire potential, marking it completely unsafe. Why, then, did it take 11 months from the survey being done for the school to have notice of that? That raises extreme concerns. Of course, the management committee acted swiftly and arranged an urgent meeting with the local health and social care trust to discuss the building's certification. Late on Thursday evening, it was deemed to be unsafe for pupils.

Bright Sparks inhabits part of the Crawfordsburn Primary School site. The management committee and governors of Crawfordsburn Primary School have worked together to put the children first and ensure that they could continue their education in the library of Crawfordsburn Primary School. The school cares for and nurtures its pupils. It is extremely concerning that they were in that building for 11 months between the survey being done and the building being closed down. Why did it take that length of time?

We talk a lot in this place about putting children first and at the heart of our work, early intervention and the importance of early education. We need to work together to ensure that the children at Bright Sparks get the best future that they can in facilities that are fit for purpose and reflect the excellent teaching and provision in their setting. They need a new building. The school needs certainty now and for future pupils of the preschool.

Bright Sparks Preschool, Crawfordsburn

Mr Easton: I, too, want to raise the issue of Bright Sparks Preschool, which is a feeder preschool for Crawfordsburn Primary School. Last Wednesday, the Education Minister visited Bright Sparks to hear about its excellent work and see all the pupils in the preschool. He was made aware of all the issues; the electrical issues and the fact that parts of the building were in danger of collapsing. He went away giving the guarantee that he would contact the Education Authority. Come Thursday, we heard the devastating news that the Bright Sparks management committee had decided that it had to close the building and make alternative arrangements due to health and safety issues.

My annoyance is that I have met the Education Authority with Bright Sparks many times over the past several years, and there has been a lack of effort by the Education Authority to find a solution for a building that it owns. My message to the Education Authority is that it must act quickly and do something to help Bright Sparks. I ask the Education Minister to use his influence to get the Education Authority to do something to help.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the time available for Members' statements. We will now move to the update on the East-West Council. Members may take their ease momentarily while the Principal Deputy Speaker assumes the Chair.

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

Ministerial Statement

Inaugural East-West Council Meeting

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. Before I call the deputy First Minister, I remind Members that they must be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate or long introductions.

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): The East-West Council was established as part of the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper published by the UK Government in January 2024 ahead of the return of the Executive. It is a unique new forum, bringing together key representatives from government, civil society and business to identify opportunities for deepening connections in areas such as trade, transport, education, sport and culture.

There are statutory structures already in place to facilitate cooperation between the United Kingdom Government and the Irish Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, and all the jurisdictions across these islands. It is important to remember that the Council's role is not to replicate those already well-established arrangements, but, rather, to complement them. There is significant potential in strengthening the cooperation between Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England, so that we can address shared challenges, grasp shared opportunities and improve the lives of people here.

The East-West Council will raise the profile of the opportunities that Northern Ireland offers by supporting connectivity between business, skills, trade and innovation within the UK. It will act in an advisory function to drive east-west engagement and to develop and share existing clusters of excellence, and will seek to raise the profile of Northern Ireland in decision-making across business and Governments.

The Council's work will be driven by targeted "missions", outlined in the Command Paper, that are designed to tackle some of Northern Ireland's most challenging issues. Those include economic inactivity, east-west institutional connectivity and trade flows as well as international investment.

The inaugural Council meeting took place in Dover House, London on 26 March. It was chaired by the Secretary of State for Levelling

Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, Michael Gove. Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris; Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Steve Baker; and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for levelling up, Jacob Young, were also in attendance. The Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, and the Communities Minister, Gordon Lyons, accompanied the First Minister and me.

The first meeting focused on the Council's strategic direction and governance. We stressed the need to boost economic, educational, sporting and cultural opportunities in Northern Ireland. We highlighted the importance of enhancing the links across the UK so that we can work together on a wide range of issues to deliver real benefits for everyone here. We want to see more connectivity between business, skills, trade and innovation across the UK, and we want to find solutions to shared challenges. We also want to raise the profile of the opportunities that Northern Ireland offers to investors as well as support export and import markets in key sectors. In addition, we must not lose sight of the opportunities presented by maximising trade within this United Kingdom. While bodies exist for the facilitation and promotion of the UK's international trade, we also discussed opportunities that a new body, InterTrade UK, could bring to promote trade and unlock barriers within the United Kingdom.

As well as discussing governance and strategic direction, the Council endorsed £150 million for the new enhanced investment zone in Northern Ireland, which will provide targeted incentives and interventions to encourage investment and boost growth. In addition, we welcomed the announcement of awards totalling more than £17 million from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which will be used to support adult numeracy and business innovation here. As part of that, an award of £11.2 million will go to Invest Northern Ireland to boost the take-up of new technologies and innovations and develop and grow important sectors, such as manufacturing, health and life sciences and agri-food.

The Council also recognised the positive impact of the community ownership fund here, which reflects our strong and vibrant charitable, community and voluntary sector, and endorsed the third and final round of funding for the initiative. That will help bring spaces back to life and enable communities to take ownership of important community assets. Those projects are examples of the UK Government and the

Executive cooperating to address the needs of people and businesses in Northern Ireland.

The East-West Council is expected to meet regularly. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations will sponsor the Council and chair when in attendance. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will act as co-sponsor and deputy chair. The secretariat for the Council will also engage directly with Departments via their respective private offices on specific matters to be discussed at future Council meetings. Ministers will continue to bring specific issues to the Executive as required and ensure that the Assembly is kept informed as appropriate.

I trust that Members will view the creation of the Council as a catalyst for positive change. By bringing together the collective experience, knowledge and expertise of its members, the Council will be a vehicle for overcoming obstacles, seizing opportunities and harnessing the immense potential that Northern Ireland has to offer for the benefit of all who live, work and do business here.

Mr O'Toole: While no one would doubt the importance of discussing matters of common interest such as trade and cultural exchange, it is important to be clear that this is not an institution that was set up under the Good Friday Agreement. It has no statutory underpinning, so, as an Opposition, we are clear that it does not have the same status, either in law or under the agreement, as either the North/South Ministerial Council or, indeed, the British-Irish Council.

At the start of the statement, you said:

"There is significant potential in strengthening the cooperation between Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England".

That is certainly true, and I do not dispute that. Why, then, were there no representatives from the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales? Have they given any indication that they wish to participate in this forum?

11.15 am

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. The forum was an initiative that came out of the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper, which is an agreement that came from negotiation between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom Government. The initiative

came out of those discussions, and that is why the inaugural meeting focused particularly on engagement between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom Government. It was made clear, though, at the meeting and, indeed, in the press afterwards that other jurisdictions would be invited to participate. Indeed, we have had correspondence from the Scottish Government in relation to the matter. It is a forum for all of the United Kingdom in strengthening relationships across and within the United Kingdom, so I think that there will be interest from others to take part.

It is important to point out that there is also benefit in cooperation with other regions. For example, there are matters where farmers in Northern Ireland will have more in common with farmers in Yorkshire than farmers in Yorkshire may have with those in London. There is good reasoning for cooperation across the regions, not just the devolved areas in the UK.

Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Thank you, deputy First Minister, for your statement. There are two parts to my question. First, you talked about maximising opportunities for trade. Did you talk about the opportunities arising from dual market access? Secondly, there was a delay in Levelling Up Fund payments arriving in Northern Ireland. Did you discuss how those delays will be mitigated and how the drawdown of funding will be improved?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. The meeting focused on the strategic objectives for the way forward and the potential for the new body, so it was at a higher level. However, I believe that everybody around the table was excited about the opportunities that the body could bring. It focuses primarily on internal relationships, improving cooperation and relationships across not just the political but civic, educational and business groups and their potential. That was the primary focus of the meeting. Of course, growing our economy and trade will feature, particularly as the UK Government proceed with the development of InterTrade UK.

The issue of delays in Levelling Up Fund payments was raised to ensure that Northern Ireland has a more meaningful say at all stages of policy development, including the delivery and roll-out of that. I am a great believer that, to help that, those relationships and the strengthening of those relationships, including through this forum, will be of benefit.

Mr Middleton: I thank the deputy First Minister. I welcome the first meeting. This is a vehicle that can be used to strengthen each constituent part of the UK. Deputy First Minister, how do you see the Council progressing, and what opportunities may there be for civil society to become engaged in this very useful Council?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Touching on some of what has already been discussed here, this is not a body that currently has a statutory basis. Therefore, it is not rigid with parameters that perhaps limit opportunity, and there is a good opportunity for us all now to look at where this body can be of most benefit. We would not want it to be confined and rigid. It is important that it is flexible and agile and can respond to needs and issues as they arise.

There is absolutely no doubt that there are many shared challenges across this United Kingdom, but there are also opportunities to look at solutions that have been found elsewhere that can be of help to us here. The sharing of that knowledge is critical, but that is not at just a political level. We know that many of the solutions are based in the civic and community sector, as is the delivery of those solutions. Therefore, building relationships between the civic and community sector across the United Kingdom is a huge opportunity for us; an opportunity that, I believe, will be of significant benefit to everybody in Northern Ireland.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for the statement. We always say that more engagement is good. I will ask a simple question. What is the difference between the East-West Council and the intergovernmental relations framework, a three-tier system of engagement between the UK nations, also chaired by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: My understanding is that the origin of the body lies very much in the fact that, while there are a number of key bodies for supporting North/South, British-Irish and all-island communication among the structured institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, there was nothing that focused particularly and specifically on the UK internally.

You referenced the interministerial governmental structures, so you will be aware that there is a transition. That transition happened because of decisions that the UK Government took that arose from the review of the bodies that existed prior to that, which were

the joint ministerial councils and the sectoral bodies. Those bodies tend to be structured, specific in their sectoral responsibilities and, it is fair to say, frustrating for some at times.

The body is designed to have engagement at a political level that is agile and flexible and that can respond to building those relationships. We have seen much good work in building North/South relationships through civic, business and political engagement, yet, for decades, we have not had that across the UK. We have not had that cooperation within the United Kingdom. Rather than looking at the specifically governmental issues that those other bodies deal with, through the new body, we have a real opportunity to talk about strategic issues across a whole range of sectors for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland and across the UK.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, the fourth paragraph of your statement states:

"the Council's role is not to replicate these already well-established arrangements, but rather, complement them."

How will the Council's work complement that of existing structures, such as the BIC and the interministerial group (IMG)?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Given my response to the previous question, I believe that the Council will be important to building relationships between Ministers from all jurisdictions when looking at, as I indicated, exciting initiatives and opportunities with the civic, business, educational and university sectors. That will be to the benefit of funding applications and trying to problem-solve at an earlier stage. There is no doubt that we have structures, but there is also no doubt that, at times, there have been frustrations about an inability to get some of the issues resolved. The body gives us the opportunity, first of all, to look strategically at what is not working right and to have a forum that, as I said, is agile enough to respond to emerging issues. It gives us the opportunity to have some exciting initiatives and to build on the best practice of those other bodies not by replicating them but by complementing and supplementing them by taking some of the really good projects that we have seen elsewhere that work well through collaboration and by bringing those forward to the benefit of our university, civic, business and political institutions across this United Kingdom.

Ms Egan: Thank you, deputy First Minister, for the update. I note your comments about the

body being solely about internal UK matters and trade. I want some reassurance that we are not missing out on other opportunities. Trade does not exist in a vacuum; it links into other opportunities in areas such as higher or further education, housing and public health.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. She is absolutely right. That is the great benefit of the Council. We can shape it. As a concept, it is fundamentally based on building better relationships and having a key forum that will meet at least three times a year, so we know that there will be opportunities then to raise grievances, problems and challenges and to ask for shared support in finding solutions to some of those.

You are absolutely right. In the announcements that are coming out of the inaugural East-West Council meeting about looking at investment through the Shared Prosperity Fund, initiatives on educational underachievement and adult numeracy, and additional funding for investment in businesses, green technology, R&D and other areas, you can see that there is potential for not only discussing those important strategic objectives but urging announcements and securing commitments to real actions against those objectives.

I am very excited about the opportunities for the East-West Council. It is for us to shape and build it and make of it what we can. We should all be focused on ensuring that we maximise the potential of this exciting new body.

Mr Brooks: Does the deputy First Minister have any insight to share into what will be discussed at future meetings of the Council? Will education form part of those discussions?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. It was quite a wide-ranging conversation. It was fortunate that the Under Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Jacob Young, was present, because he is involved in many of the levelling up-type projects, which reach across education and community investment. The community ownership scheme is a good example of that: communities in Northern Ireland have benefited from it more than those in any other place in the United Kingdom. It takes assets in a community, such as buildings or facilities that may be a blight or are not being used, into community ownership for the benefit of the community. That has been hugely positive, and there has been significant interest in Northern Ireland.

It was a good conversation and covered many of those elements, but we also had a conversation about educational underachievement. We recognised that the challenges that we have with educational underachievement, particularly for those in receipt of free school meals, are common across many areas in Scotland, England and Wales. Some really good projects with proven outcomes have been rolled out in those areas, and it would be positive for us to examine whether they are suitable to be rolled out in Northern Ireland. An interesting stream of work can definitely be taken from that initial meeting.

Ms Forsythe: I will build on the question from the leader of the Opposition on participation in the Council by colleagues from the Scottish and Welsh Administrations. In your work with them so far, have they proposed any matters that they would like to discuss at the Council?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. As I indicated, the Council came out of the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper, which was primarily about relationships and issues between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. There is no doubt, however, that this is about building relationships across the United Kingdom, not just between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. It often strikes me that we do not collaborate enough across Departments, civic and business organisations and community and education bodies with our counterparts in Scotland, Wales and England, but there are huge commonalities in challenges and opportunities between the regions of the UK. Farmers in Northern Ireland have similar challenges and issues to those of farmers in Yorkshire, Devon, Cornwall and parts of Scotland and Wales. There is huge benefit in getting people together to look at solutions, including on green technology, innovation in business and how we support communities in that regard, not just in the other devolved regions that have shown an interest in this — and they have — but in the regions within those devolved Administrations.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, your statement mentioned £150 million for a new and enhanced investment zone that will provide targeted incentives and interventions. How targeted will the incentives and interventions be? Will regional balance form a significant part of the decision-making process in any investment coming into Northern Ireland? Will there be any democratic accountability for the Executive on those targets and incentives?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware that when we have discussed the prosperity agenda and growing the economy in Northern Ireland, we have always been careful to highlight the fact that we want that to be across and throughout Northern Ireland and not just for one part of it. My understanding of the enhanced investment zone is that it is a particular vehicle designed for Northern Ireland. It builds on the investment zones that have been rolled out elsewhere in the UK.

It will have flexibility within that, including on some tax incentives, but also other incentives, potentially on National Insurance and around supporting companies.

11.30 am

My view is that it is a comparatively early stage, and, again, we can shape what the enhanced investment zone will look like. One of the issues that I raised is the need for a big infrastructure piece. We know that there are big challenges and issues in, for example, water, sewage and energy. Those things are absolutely necessary for economic growth and to support companies to both expand and set up here. There is potential, but I can advise the Member that it is at an early stage. It is being led by the UK Government, but of course the Executive, and particularly the Department for the Economy, will feed in to shape it and make sure it is fit for purpose and benefits all throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Kingston: I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers so far. It is very positive to see the East-West Council up and running and flowing from the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper. Will the Minister agree with me that the East-West Council is an important and useful tool for shared learning between the central Government and the devolved regions of the United Kingdom?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, for policy development, the design of interventions, the way that they are rolled out and even how we measure the effectiveness of interventions with outcomes-based accountability, indicators and evaluation — all those things have developed significantly over the past number of years. There are really good examples of that being rolled out elsewhere across the United Kingdom and the globe.

Northern Ireland is a small place, and there is no need for us to constantly try to reinvent the

wheel and solutions to the challenges we face, because very often they are common. We have the ability to look elsewhere and say, "What is an intervention that has worked in education underachievement? How has a particular region significantly improved its economic inactivity figures?" We can identify those types of solutions, check to see whether they are fit for purpose in Northern Ireland, and tailor them if needs be, but that accelerates the solutions to the big challenges that we face. Of course, shared learning is essential. We have so much in common across this United Kingdom; let us try to find shared solutions to some of the big challenges and maximise our shared opportunities.

Mr Allister: According to the statement, trade flows are one of the interests of the East-West Council, yet I find not one reference to the greatest impediment to those trade flows, namely the partitioning Irish Sea border, of which the DUP now has ownership. Why is that?

Secondly, it is a body without a secretariat or a budget, and all the funding announcements are not its announcements but the product of other developments. Is it not the truth that it is just a talking shop to provide the DUP with a fig leaf for its somersault into being protocol implementers?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. It will be an important body to build those relationships, tackle those shared challenges and maximise those shared opportunities across our United Kingdom. It is the first time that we have had a truly United Kingdom-level body arising from all the other bodies that did not deal with the internal and exclusive issues of the United Kingdom from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

On trade flows, I will use the example of the many, many services issues across this United Kingdom where, if people are applying for something, seeking insurance or having other issues, they will proceed through that, only to be told that it does not apply to Northern Ireland. Services have not been impacted by the Windsor framework or Brexit, yet everyone in Northern Ireland will know that, for many years, services have not applied equally here. There has always been an issue about "it does not apply in Northern Ireland", and that needs to be addressed. There needs to be a better understanding.

Of course, the UK Government must be held to account to fulfil the promise of unfettered and free-flowing internal trade in the United

Kingdom with zero checks. It is clear that some businesses do not understand the procedures, and that needs to be tackled. We have put it to the UK Government that they must take action — InterTrade UK will have an important role in this — to ensure that businesses in Great Britain are fully aware of what they can do in internal UK trade and do not unnecessarily prevent goods from going to Northern Ireland by saying, "Northern Ireland cannot get those goods" or go through unnecessary procedures. That will work in a number of ways. InterTrade UK will both promote awareness among businesses in the private sector and enable us to hold the feet of the UK Government to the fire on fulfilling the commitments that they have given to the people of Northern Ireland to ensure free-flowing and unfettered internal UK trade.

Mr Carroll: Given the sabre-rattling towards, scaremongering about and scapegoating of our asylum-seeking and refugee brothers and sisters, particularly in recent weeks, what commitment can the deputy First Minister give that, at the next East-West Council meeting, TEO Ministers will make clear their support for the freedom of movement of people and their opposition to any hardening of the border and to any deportation of people from here to Britain, Rwanda or anywhere else that they do not want to go?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Immigration is an excepted matter. It is therefore a matter for the UK Government. We, of course, liaise with them on the issue, because immigration has a significant impact on, for example, the public services that are rolled out through Northern Ireland Departments. It is therefore in our interests to ensure that we have a close working relationship with the UK Government on the matter.

We have heard many times about the challenges of getting the right education, the right support and the right housing. There is no doubt that the pressures on available housing are giving rise to significant concern and consternation. I will repeat what I said about last week's events. Our information is that a significant number of those who come to Northern Ireland come through the Republic of Ireland route. We have heard a different narrative from the Republic of Ireland Government. It is clearly a complicated issue that requires conversation, discussion and solutions. When housing and public services throughout Northern Ireland and Ireland are under pressure, it does not help the current situation. What is now required is for people to take the heat out of the issue and to have

sensible conversations about this complicated issue in order to get to the bottom of exactly what is happening and what needs to be done.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes —.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. It would be good to get your advice on this matter. During proceedings, the deputy First Minister said, with, I am sure, the best intentions, that the 'Safeguarding the Union' paper was negotiated between the UK Government and Northern Ireland. I am sure that she will want to correct that. It is not true: it was negotiated, as far as I understand it, between the DUP and the UK Government. No other parties in Northern Ireland, or, indeed, the Irish Government, were involved in negotiating 'Safeguarding the Union'.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As far as I can tell, that is not a point of order. You have it on the record, however. What I will do is refer it to the Speaker and his officials, and they can address it.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I heard the deputy First Minister state that immigration has an impact on public services. I do not believe that that is a correct or truthful comment, so I ask that your office review that point as well.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Again, that is not a point of order, but you have it on the record. I will refer it to the Speaker and his officials. If there are no other points of order, I will move on.

Executive Committee Business

Hospital Parking Charges Bill: Final Stage

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the Final Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill [NIA Bill 02/22-27] do now pass.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Swann: Today's Final Stage concludes the legislative process for the Hospital Parking Charges Bill in the Assembly. The debate on the Bill has been useful and informative, and I thank all Members for their contributions to the process. I express my gratitude once again to the Health Committee for working within difficult time frames and for supporting the Bill's receiving accelerated passage.

It is clear just how many important issues the Bill touches on and how important it is that we get it right. What we are talking about here today will have an impact on staff, patients and visitors. As I have stated repeatedly during the passage of the Bill, although I remain entirely sympathetic to the intentions behind the Hospital Parking Charges Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, delays to the operational implementation of the traffic management system to control parking once charges are abolished meant that the original commencement date of this weekend was simply no longer within reach. Compared with the uncertain position even a number of weeks ago, I can now confirm that the traffic management system contract to control parking, preserve blue-light routes and protect designated spaces once charges are abolished was awarded on 1 May. However, due to the technical realities of implementation, which include, for example, assessment of the infrastructure required and locations at each site, delivery, installation and testing of equipment, and any necessary communication and engagement with members of the public and staff, the system will not come online until the autumn at the earliest, which is after the new law comes into effect on 12 May.

Many colleagues supported the current legislation because of the benefits to staff, patients and visitors. Therefore, as I have said, as fair recognition of the hard work and

dedication of the staff, and to allow the Executive to deliver some of the intent of current legislation, staff parking permits will be free of charge from 12 May.

Many Members will be aware of the traffic issues at hospital sites. Indeed, many may have personal experience of them. They will therefore understand why I am concerned that a delay in bringing into operation an effective traffic management solution will make the situation significantly worse for patients and staff by adding unmanageable demand for spaces and by adding further pressure on trust staff who are already dealing with huge challenges. In particular, I am informed that this would have had a significant impact in the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts, which, regionally, have the highest number of charged-for parking spaces and offer many regional healthcare services.

If Members do not pass this Bill, the stark reality is that hospitals will have no means to control parking or, importantly, to protect the ability of emergency vehicles to come and go unimpeded. I hope that Members recognise that such an outcome creates an unacceptable risk of traffic chaos in and around critical hospitals, bringing those associated risks to staff, patients and the public.

Whilst the delay in introducing free hospital parking has, in this instance, been driven by other factors, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the financial context for the Department of Health has worsened considerably since the original Act was passed just over two years ago. Car parking charges are currently used to help meet some of the expenditure associated with the operational upkeep and management of car parks. No additional capital or revenue funding has been made available to my Department for the implementation of the legislation and, in the light of the 2024-25 Budget settlement, the loss of that revenue, combined with the ongoing requirement to maintain the car parks, would only add to the significant pressures that my Department faces.

My Department therefore proposes to use the deferral period to fully implement the infrastructure required to manage free car parking and work towards funding the implementation of free car parking after the deferral period. It will also allow the trusts more time to explore how car use can be reduced — that is a fundamental point and not just because of our responsibilities to climate change — because, at present, demand for car parking spaces significantly exceeds capacity on some

hospital sites. Therefore, increasing that demand by abolishing all charges is not without risk.

During the deferral period, trusts are also committed to increasing capacity by exploring off-site parking sites and incentives such as park-and-ride facilities; reviewing and extending the current free parking eligibility where the duration and/or frequency of visits leads to significant charges for patients or their families; and also, as we committed to, increasing awareness of free parking eligibility and the travel cost recovery scheme by, for example, advertising the details of that on patient appointment letters.

My primary concern is to protect access to hospitals for appropriate users. I therefore seek agreement to the Bill to defer the removal of charges for two years, and I hope that the Bill will receive Royal Assent as close as possible to the operational date of the current Act.

I urge all Members to support the Bill.

Ms Kimmins (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Final Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill 2024. I will make some brief remarks on behalf of the Committee before speaking as Sinn Féin health spokesperson.

The Bill has been through the accelerated passage process, and I highlight that the Committee is disappointed that the Bill is required. The Committee understands why the Department needs time to bring the necessary systems into place to ensure that those who need access to hospital car parking spaces can access them. However, it is disappointing that, even now, we hear real-life experiences of people missing important appointments as they are stuck in a line, waiting to get into a car park.

Recent figures that the Committee received from the trusts outline that people can wait for over 90 minutes in a queue to get access to car parking. That shows that more work needs to be done by the trusts and the Department to improve parking capacity at congested sites. We look forward to seeing future plans and proposals to increase capacity and provide additional public transport and park-and-ride facilities to take pressure off those sites.

11.45 am

As I mentioned at Second Stage, the previous Health Committee undertook the Committee

Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill. The issues that were raised during evidence in 2022 are as relevant today as they were over two years ago. Those issues include inequity in charging within and across trusts, financial issues for staff having to pay for parking and inconsistencies in the approach to providing free parking to patients and their families. We still hear of staff having to pay around £11 per day to access safe parking at Belfast City Hospital. Some of them are the lowest-paid staff who work difficult shift patterns and have no easy access to public transport.

During discussions with the Minister and the Department, the Committee received assurances that the permit scheme for staff was being redeveloped with new criteria. It would be good to receive an update on that today and confirmation of when that process will be completed across all the trust sites. The Committee is also keen to ensure that the patients and families who are entitled to free parking are provided with parking passes. We encourage all trusts to ensure that eligible patients and families are made aware of and provided with passes at the earliest opportunity.

The Committee heard about the difficulties that there have been in appointing the contractor to deliver the traffic management scheme. It is welcome that that is now moving forward; the Minister stated that a contractor is now in place. The Committee has written to the Department to get updates on the progress of the scheme every two months. The Committee will seek to ensure that free parking at hospitals is brought forward as soon as practicable and that we are not in the position in two years' time of having to come back to seek further extensions.

I thank the Minister, his departmental officials and officials from the trusts for their engagement with the Committee before the introduction of the Bill. I hope that we continue to work collectively to improve the services that are provided to people in our communities.

I now speak as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. At each stage of the Bill, we have repeatedly emphasised the need for the legislation to be implemented as soon as possible. I reiterate my disappointment that it has not been completed in the time frame agreed in 2022. We must now ensure that there are no further delays. I welcome the Minister's update today about the contract having been awarded, but, as I mentioned, we will monitor the progress of the implementation of the scheme very closely. It is essential that a serious effort is made to deliver the work fully so that we can fulfil the Assembly's promise to the hard-working staff in

our hospitals and to patients and their families, who continue to feel the financial burden daily, particularly as they deal with the impacts of a cost-of-living crisis.

We have highlighted on numerous occasions the serious workforce issues facing our health service. Making it more difficult for people to afford to come to work is not exactly an incentive in attracting or retaining staff. We must do better. I look forward to seeing real progress on the removal of hospital car parking charges well in advance of the two-year deadline.

Mr McGrath: We are where we are. We have got to the Final Stage of the Bill, and I have no doubt that it will progress today. I am disappointed that none of the suggestions that we made about speeding up the process was accepted. The news today is that a company has been appointed to make the installations. That speeds things up. There was an opportunity to implement a process in between times. There are still barriers on all the car parks that are likely to be oversubscribed. Some sort of control system could have been put in while we retrofitted the new technology.

The delay of two years is simply too much. The Bill was promised at the time of an election. It is simply not doing what it said that it would do. Patients will be let down as a result, as will staff. Every extra day that they have to pay is one too many. Of course, the general thrust of the Bill was that staff would get free car parking. However, when we get down into the detail, it feels as though that will not be the case; only some staff will get free car parking. There will be a lottery-type system with guidelines. That means that many staff will lose out and will not get access to free parking. Nor will they have the capacity to park at all at their places of work, which will bring significant difficulty for many of them.

As a result, I feel that the process has been a shambles. It shows what happens when people try to electioneer a few weeks before an election and curry favour with the electorate by making all sorts of promises. When we get to delivery, however, it works out that, had the groundwork been done properly, we could have been updated on the fact that it was not simple to implement. We can complain about the delays, but it is entirely different to do so and then walk through to vote for those delays. There is an inconsistency there that does not make too much sense.

Whilst I kind of appreciate the Minister's predicament, the legislation has been poorly

implemented by the Department. That is simply because of the fact that the wrong process was used, which resulted in a judicial review that was upheld. That added a full two-year delay to the implementation of the legislation. Had we run the processes properly, we would not need the two-year delay. I hope that the Minister is able to find out from the Department exactly what caused that and that lessons can be taken so that, when the will of the House is presented to any Department, the officials take it on board and implement it correctly. That will mean that we are not left with such a long delay, because, ultimately, it is the people — those who elect us and whom we serve — who are let down. The delay is too long, and, on the basis of the advice that we were given, implementation could have been done more quickly. On that basis, sadly, we cannot support the delaying Bill today.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Colin. I call Paula Bradshaw.

Ms Bradshaw: I was not on the list to speak.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. Gerry, if you are ready to speak, you are next.

Mr Carroll: Thank you. I am always ready to speak.

I will not repeat verbatim what I said at the Bill's previous stages, but I will oppose the Bill. As with many promises that have been made by the Executive parties, the Minister and the Executive are rolling back on something that they promised and voted through. They sought votes from and campaigned on the policy and then U-turned and went into reverse gear when they got into the Executive and back into office.

The parking charge is a tax on those who work in our health and social care sector and those who need to avail themselves of those services. I repeat: it is one rule for MLAs and Ministers up here with their free parking and another for everybody else who works in or relies on our Health and Social Care (HSC) services. The Minister mentioned alternative forms of transport — active travel and the like: that is important, but it is not available or accessible to everyone. I urge the Executive to allocate proper resources to infrastructure for cycling, walking and other forms of active travel.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that social workers are due to begin strike action tomorrow because they are overworked and underpaid. The very people who are equipped for early intervention cannot intervene early,

because they have too much work to do with too few workers. There is a vacancy rate of almost 50% for family support services in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area. It seems that the money that should go to those workers will not be made available in the Budget. To add insult to injury, they are also being asked to pay for parking again. What a shame.

During the early stages of the Bill, I raised scepticism about the delays and technological issues that the Minister had cited as the main reason for this Bill's introduction. He has now revealed that the technological issues have been more or less resolved. That confirms my suspicion that it was always about resource: raising money and putting the burden on workers and the public, which was stated by the Minister and in the explanatory memorandum. For those reasons and for the many others that I have previously stated, I oppose this regressive and unfair Bill.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I now call the Minister for Health, Robin Swann, to conclude the Final Stage.

Mr Swann: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. I will make a few comments on their contributions. On behalf of my Department's officials, I thank the Chair for her commitment and support. I guarantee that the Committee will receive the regular updates that it has asked for on the delivery of the legislation and the intention to develop the eligibility criteria.

I have stated previously that the current free parking eligibility is for patients who may have a number of outpatient appointments over an extended period; patients who may benefit from lengthy or frequent visits from relatives or friends; and patients who are outside the prescribed treatment categories but will make lengthy and/or frequent visits. As I said in my opening comments, a commitment was given in the Chamber at the Bill's other stages, and we are now looking at including the eligibility and how patients can access those free permits in appointment letters. That is being explored across all trusts.

I thank Mr McGrath and Mr Carroll for their comments. Both raised issues that were covered during the debates at earlier stages of the Bill around the legal challenges and the appointment of a contractor. How that can be covered and how it came about and occurred was covered at those earlier stages as well.

Many of us are aware of the traffic issues at Health and Social Care hospital sites. Again, the Chair of the Committee raised that with regard to information that the Committee received about patients often waiting for 90 minutes to access a hospital. I am concerned that, owing to the delay in being able to implement the traffic management solution, the current legislation, although clearly well-intentioned, will potentially make things worse for patients and staff by adding to the demand for spaces, which will add further pressure to trust staff, who are already dealing with huge challenges.

I know the value that Assembly colleagues place on private Members' Bills. Therefore, I do not make the proposal to postpone the operation date of the Act lightly. I do so to protect access to hospital sites for service users and because Health and Social Care no longer has the resources to deliver its services.

Acknowledging that, I remain entirely sympathetic to the intention behind the legislation. We have a fundamental problem to address. I am conscious that I am asking the Assembly to take a difficult decision today. Unfortunately, given the budgetary challenges facing all Departments, there will be more difficult decisions to come. I know that Members supported the current legislation for the best of motives. It reflected a genuine desire to show solidarity with health service staff, patients and patients' families. However, if Members do not pass this incredibly important Bill today, the stark reality is that hospitals will have no means to control parking, preserve blue-light routes and protect designated spaces. I hope that it is clear to Members from what I have said that, in our view, it creates an unacceptable risk of traffic chaos in and around critical hospitals with the associated risks to staff, patients and the public.

Proper consideration needs to be given to how we manage and control the limited capacity in hospital car parks and to how provision and maintenance will be funded when parking charges are abolished. I therefore urge all Members to support the Bill today. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 65; Noes 11.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms

Bradshaw, Mr Brett, Miss Brogan, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mr Dunne, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Elliott, Ms Ennis, Mrs Erskine, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Miss Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Honeyford, Mr Irwin, Ms Kimmins, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr Andrew McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Miss Reilly, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Aiken and Mr Chambers

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Carroll, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Ms Hunter, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole, Ms Sugden.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Carroll and Mr McGrath

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Final Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill [NIA Bill 02/22-27] do now pass.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Youse can all take your ease.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Committee Business

Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA: Complaint

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges): I beg to move

That this Assembly, having considered a report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges from the last Assembly (NIA 208/17-22), notes its conclusion that this Committee on Standards and Privileges should recommend a sanction be imposed on Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA, and imposes upon Dr Aiken the sanction of exclusion from proceedings of the Assembly for a period of two sitting days, beginning on the first sitting day after the resolution.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allocate one and a half hours to the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The complainant, Mr McHugh, will have 10 minutes to speak, should he wish to do so. The respondent, Dr Aiken, will have 10 minutes to speak, should he wish to do so, and he may choose to speak immediately after the complainant has spoken or before the winding-up speech on the motion. All other Members who wish to speak will have up to five minutes for their contributions. Before we begin, I urge Members to confine their remarks to the matters dealt with in the report and the sanction recommended by the Committee and to be mindful of the requirement to demonstrate courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect in the Chamber. If that is clear, I call the Chairperson to open the debate on the motion.

12.15 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker.*] I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on the motion from the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The purpose of the motion is clear: to seek Assembly approval of the Committee's decision to impose on Dr Steve Aiken the sanction of exclusion from the proceedings of the Assembly for a period of two sitting days. If the motion is approved, Dr Aiken will be unable to participate in plenary proceedings on 13 and 14 May. He will also be unable to table any business or attend any Committee meetings if they happen to be scheduled to take place on those days.

Before outlining the previous Committee's conclusions on the complaint against Dr Aiken, I will explain the timeline of the case. On 4 May 2021, the independent Assembly Commissioner for Standards received a complaint from Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA, alleging that, during a meeting of the Finance Committee, Dr Aiken had breached the Assembly code of conduct by disclosing both the fact and the contents of a complaint that Dr Aiken had made against Mr McHugh. The commissioner's investigation of the complaint concluded in February 2022, when she sent her report to the previous Standards and Privileges Committee for consideration.

In undertaking its adjudication, the previous Committee received a briefing from the commissioner; a submission from Dr Aiken in response to the commissioner's report in which he criticised the investigatory process; a robust and factual rebuttal from the commissioner of the criticisms made in Dr Aiken's submission; and detailed legal advice on the case. Following deliberation, the previous Committee published its conclusions in a report on 25 March 2022, which, incidentally, was the last day of the previous mandate.

Although the previous Committee's report has been in the public domain for over two years now, I will briefly remind Members of some of the key findings of the case. At a meeting of the Finance Committee on 4 November 2020, Dr Aiken, as Chair of that Committee, disclosed publicly that he had submitted a complaint to the commissioner relating to a member of the Committee, Mr McHugh. The disclosure included both the fact and the detail of his complaint against Mr McHugh, which was the allegation that Mr McHugh had failed to declare an interest while the Committee was receiving evidence on mispayments by Land and Property Services (LPS) of the COVID-19 business support grants.

The public discussion of Dr Aiken's complaint in the Finance Committee, which Dr Aiken initiated, facilitated and participated in, lasted 27 minutes. It was also reported in the media on 5 November 2020 that, following investigation and adjudication, Dr Aiken's complaint had not been upheld and that Mr McHugh was found not to have breached the code. On the back of Dr Aiken's disclosure, Mr McHugh submitted a complaint against Dr Aiken, and it is that complaint that forms the basis of today's debate.

Following investigation and adjudication, Dr Aiken was found to have breached two rules of

conduct, namely rule 12 and rule 16. By way of reminder, rule 12 states that a Member:

"shall disclose confidential or protectively marked information only when ... authorised to do so."

Rule 16 states that a Member:

"shall co-operate at all times with any investigation"

by the Assembly commissioner. On rule 12, the previous Committee highlighted the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of live complaints in order to safeguard the fairness and integrity of the process and to avoid any unnecessary reputational damage to any of the parties involved.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry, but I have a lot to get through. I am sorry about that.

On rule 16, the previous Committee pointed to the importance of all Members recognising and respecting the vital role that the independent commissioner plays in the Assembly's ethical standards regime. The Committee concluded that Dr Aiken's failure to cooperate at all times with the commissioner's investigation was misconduct that undermines the office of the commissioner and, consequently, the Committee and the wider Assembly. Moreover, the previous Committee concluded that that was an egregious breach of the code, given that, as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges at the time, Dr Aiken should have been leading by example in that regard. It was also found that Dr Aiken's conduct was inconsistent with both the respect principle and the leadership principle of the seven principles of public life.

As the previous Committee was able to publish its report only at the very end of the last mandate, it called on the next Committee to recommend a sanction in this mandate. The current Committee has proceeded with the case as quickly as possible. In reality, it has brought the motion within eight operational weeks of the report being published, leaving aside the time when the Assembly was not fully functioning. The Committee carefully considered the particular circumstances of the case against the range and scale of sanctions available.

It is a serious matter. The code of conduct sets out the standards required of Members. It is clear that, in this case, Dr Aiken's conduct was,

indeed, an egregious breach of the rules, and therefore the Committee believes that the recommended sanction of excluding Dr Aiken from Assembly proceedings for a period of two sitting days is appropriate and proportionate. I commend the motion.

Mr McHugh: I want to point out that the whole affair was a stressful time in every respect, particularly for my family. I welcomed the support that I got from many MLAs in the Chamber. I think in particular of one person on the other Benches who was supportive towards me at the time and helped me through a difficult period in my life.

That stress, when it is trial by media, in a sense, was compounded when the Chairperson of the Finance Committee, of which I was a member, declared openly at a meeting of the Finance Committee, whilst it was being broadcast, that I was being reported to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. I thank the Standards and Privileges Committee for the good work that it did. I was exonerated in every respect of any allegations that were made against me. By the same token, I respect the work that it carried out with regard to said Member, not that I take any delight at any Member being sanctioned one way or the other. In fact, it emphasises to every one of us in the Chamber that we have a responsibility to one another in the language that we use and, in particular, that we adhere to the code of practice. In any role that a Member has, not only as an MLA but when they take on the role of, let us say, Speaker or the likes of that in the Chamber, they should know exactly what I am alluding to and how important it is to implement the code of practice and respect it in every way.

I thank those who supported me at the time. I feel vindicated in going forward with that recommendation of the Committee on Standards and Privileges on the Member. I compliment the Committee on the good work that it has done.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Chair of the Committee and, indeed, Mr McHugh for their remarks so far and the respectful tone that we have had.

I will make a few short remarks in response to my colleagues' statements. As a previous member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, I take its deliberations seriously. I respect its judgements and accept the outcome of its deliberations. I have no wish to have the vote contested. I will not restate the case that I made to the then Committee over 30 months ago. Members, if they wish, can read my arguments in the record.

Members will be aware that there is no right of appeal or independent review of decisions made by the Committee or the commissioner, and I do not believe that further continuing to argue my position, several years after the events, would be in anyone's interests. I do, however, wish to make some other comments that may be pertinent.

The first is an apology: an apology to my staff. Members may recall the period in 2021 when these events occurred and the investigations continued. The evidence in the COVID inquiry is highlighting the uncertainty and turmoil of those times. My constituency team was dealing with the effects of the COVID pandemic; the fallout from the recent Bobby Storey funeral; my stepping down from the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party; an MLA, namely me, who had cracked two ribs and was not resting as he was told to; family illnesses; and, of most concern, the ongoing security threat to my team and family caused by loyalist paramilitaries. Regrettably, far too many MLAs have had that call to their house by the PSNI at 23:00, the visit the next day of a protection officer who points out all the important needs for enhanced personal and physical security, and the follow-up call from the Northern Ireland Office to say that it will not provide any of it. In 2021, all those events and more were swirling around at the time of the commissioner's investigation, and I freely admit that her investigation was not my number-one priority. It is perhaps an understatement to say that my family and the great team who work with me were under considerable strain during that period. I placed the factors mentioned above in mitigation to the Committee for my actions. The Committee, as is its right, did not believe them to be germane to its deliberations.

Then came an additional factor. Members will be aware that I was reported to the PSNI. The PSNI conducted its enquiries diligently, utilising a detective inspector and sergeant. Unlike in other inquiries that I could mention, it had a full set of records to examine. Those records included many months of my emails, call logs, work diaries and interviews with my staff and many others such as Simon Hoare MP, the then Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, all to verify details in my diary. My staff observed that we were under a direct threat from loyalist paramilitaries, and that we had had three to four hours of direct police time to reassure us. They also pointed out that many more hours were spent on the investigation of what was, in essence, a case of non-delivery of a recorded letter to me. Those interviews and questioning, coupled with the markedly different approach to dealing with the threat to us,

proved traumatic for some members of my staff, who had to seek medical support.

Members will be aware that, at the end of 2021, a full report was sent by the PSNI to the PPS, which responded quickly, in January 2022, that there was no case to answer. I place no criticism on the PSNI, which is doing its job in difficult and trying circumstances, but one may legitimately ask whether this was an appropriate use of its time and resources. I raised that issue with the Committee on receipt of the PPS's letter and asked that an apology be forwarded to my staff for the trauma and upset that had been caused by that investigation. That apology, as has already been reported, was not forthcoming. Therefore, I now put on record my personal apology to my great constituency team and thank it for all its support through that trying time. I further say to all MLAs how lucky we are to have the unstinting support of our underpaid, under-resourced and hard-working staff. To my team, I cannot thank you enough.

I also wish to make a comment about more recent events. After an investigation that occurred 30 months ago, with the last communication from the Committee to me coming in March 2022, I was contacted last Tuesday and given 45 minutes' notice that this motion was to come before the Business Committee. During that very short time, I had to inform my Chief Whip, my party leader and our press team and reach out to my family about what would obviously be something of media interest. I had to quickly reach out to those who had suffered previous trauma, as it would obviously be upsetting. There was little or no time to talk to them or adequately explain what was going on. Beyond a short call with the Clerk, there has been no communication. There has still been no communication.

As a previous chief executive, Chief Whip and commanding officer, I have sat on many industrial tribunals, held many disciplinary meetings and been involved in many HR-related issues. Giving 45 minutes' notice of action on something that happened 30 months ago, with potentially far-reaching reputational consequences and obvious media interest, would not be accepted in any other forum, and it should not be here either. We may, as MLAs, be seen as being unpopular and less valued, but we should still be entitled to the same basic rights and respect that are given to other workers, including on notification.

12.30 pm

In the short time that I had to view the documentation last Tuesday, I was caught by a reflection of a particularly sad event: the passing of a much-esteemed colleague, Christopher Stalford MLA. Christopher was the Deputy Chairperson of the Standards and Privileges Committee and had not been replaced when the investigation was occurring. As those who knew him will confirm, he was, above all, a determined advocate for good practice, the rights of MLAs and, in particular, the Assembly, and he was a sage voice on the Committee. I believe that he would have corrected the erroneous view in the report against me, and reported in the media, that it was in some way strange for a unionist MLA's office to be shut for the 12 July fortnight. However, I rather hope that he is looking down on us and having a quiet laugh as I am sure that, rather than recommending my suspension for two sitting days for my egregious behaviour, he would have pointed out that being exiled to St Helena with Paul Frew for a week was probably punishment enough.

I look forward to returning to the Assembly on 28 May. If Paul and I can escape from St Helena, we will escape Napoleon's fate as well.

Mr Kingston: I speak as a new member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Since being appointed to that Committee, I have found that all its members are aware that they have a solemn and impartial duty to perform. That is how all the meetings that I have been present at have been conducted. As we have heard, this report relates to two complaints that were made in the previous mandate. The recommendation before the House has been agreed by the members of the new Committee.

The previous Committee's report on the matter is in the public domain and has been for over two years. Therefore, I do not need to repeat what the Committee Chair set out, but I do want to highlight some matters. The complaint by Mr McHugh was upheld by the commissioner. One of the most significant things detailed in the report is the lack of cooperation by Dr Aiken in the commissioner's investigation. That very much exacerbated the issue, represented a further breach of the MLA code of conduct and resulted in the Committee's recommendation. The report states, at paragraph 44:

"the Commissioner's finding that Dr Aiken's lack of co-operation with her investigation was inconsistent with the following two principles of conduct:"

those of respect and leadership. The Committee agreed with the commissioner's

findings that Dr Aiken's conduct was inconsistent with both of those principles.

That lack of cooperation is detailed in the report, and it includes the failure to respond to two letters inviting him to attend for interview and failure to attend for interview twice under formal notice to attend. Dr Aiken did provide a written submission, which was considered by the Committee, along with a detailed response from the commissioner.

Paragraph 47 of the report states:

"the Committee noted that a recommendation of an apology to Assembly [sic] may not be a suitable option because there has been no indication from Dr Aiken's responses to the complaint and investigation that he would be minded to apologise (on the contrary, Dr Aiken has sought an apology from the Commissioner) and there is a risk of such an apology to the Assembly not being made in a full and unequivocal manner."

I recognise the public service of all Members of the Assembly, the personal sacrifices that people make and how their role comes to dominate their lives, and, indeed, the lives of many of their families. It is regrettable that the matter has got to this stage. I note Dr Aiken's comments today and the fact that he has tried to bring a different tone to the matter. However, it is important that there are formal procedures in place to decide on complaints and to uphold the standards and the code of conduct of this —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kingston: I am coming to a close. If the Member wishes to make his own speech, I am sure that the Speaker will bring him in.

Regrettably, but in the view of the Committee, including me, rightly, the Committee has reached the recommendation of a sanction of a two-day exclusion from the proceedings of the Assembly for the Member.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion, as do my Alliance Party colleagues. If we are to uphold the highest standards of public office in the Assembly, investigations by the standards commissioner are essential. The code of conduct for Members of the legislative Assembly has been defined and encoded in order to ensure that those who vote for us are assured that our behaviour will be professional, fair and consistent across all areas of our work.

Where there is a query over that, it is incumbent on us all to engage properly with the work of the standards commissioner. It should go without saying that it is also incumbent on us to maintain the confidentiality of any information that we are privy to as MLAs. It is extremely disappointing that it was brought up on this occasion. That is clearly laid out in the code of conduct.

The allegations against Dr Aiken are unprecedented given his position as Deputy Speaker. I am not aware of any such breach being committed by anyone in such a role in another legislature anywhere in the UK or Ireland. It was therefore particularly concerning to learn that, when confronted with the allegations, Dr Aiken was obstructive and did not engage properly with the process. I do, however, welcome some of the clarification that he provided today about his engagement in the process 30 months ago.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: I have a lot to get through, thank you.

As far as I can see, the standards commissioner conducted her investigation with the utmost diligence and professionalism. The sanction that was agreed by the Standards and Privileges Committee seems balanced and proportionate. However, Dr Aiken will need to consider his position as Deputy Speaker, given the issues raised around not just his conduct but his engagement with the investigation. I support the motion.

Mr Allister: Despite the magnanimity of Dr Aiken, there are matters about this report that need to be highlighted. The report is inherently contradictory and riddled with procedural errors. The Committee correctly rejected allegation 1. In fact, it rejected both the allegations made by Mr McHugh, but it rejected allegation 1 on the basis that no complaint had been deemed admissible at that point. The first allegation was of a breach of rule 17, which says:

"You shall not disclose details in relation to ... an investigation".

The Committee concluded that there was no investigation, because the complaint had not even been acknowledged — it was not acknowledged until 13 November 2020 — and that, therefore, there could be no breach of rule 17. The same Committee concluded, about the same complaint and on the same date, that

there had been a breach of rule 12. What does rule 12 say? It says that you shall not:

"disclose confidential or protectively marked information".

The exact same information that caused rule 17 not to be breached was then held to breach rule 12. That is the point that I wanted to ask the Chair about, but she would not even take an intervention. Explain that contradiction. Why is it that information that does not breach rule 17 breaches rule 12? It is not rational. I will take any intervention from members of the Committee to explain that. There is no rational explanation for that.

There is then a gross breach of due process. Dr Aiken's single response was given to the commissioner for comment, but what she returned to the Committee was concealed from Dr Aiken. He was given no right to know what the commissioner said in response or to respond to that.

We end up in a situation in which the Committee had three separate inputs from the commissioner, one input from Dr Aiken and a denial to him of the right to know what the commissioner had said in rebuttal of him. How is that due process? How would any Member, if they were before the Committee, like to be treated like that? Yet that is exactly how the Committee treated Dr Aiken. It is a denial of basic fairness and natural justice, and the House should not endorse it.

We see that there is a further error when we look at paragraph 26, which states that Dr Aiken's role as Chair of the Finance Committee is a "key consideration". No, it is not: Dr Aiken is entitled to be treated exactly as any other MLA would be. It does not matter whether he is a Deputy Speaker or a Chair of a Committee. There is not a higher standard for him as a Chairman of a Committee than for him as an MLA, which is the basis on which he was being pursued. We are then told that the fact that he had previously served on the Standards and Privileges Committee made it an "egregious" breach. No, it did not. Again, that treats him differently from how any of the rest of us would be treated. He should not have been treated differently because he was the Chairman of the Finance Committee or because he had previously served on the Standards and Privileges Committee; he was entitled to exactly the same standards but was denied them by the Committee. Then, in a breathtaking procedural breach, the Committee says about the tariff that will be imposed, "Oh, we will not consider an apology, because he wouldn't

apologise". How dare the Committee presume what a Member would or would not do? It had no right to presume that Dr Aiken would not apologise and therefore no right to up the ante.

The manner in which the Committee treated Dr Aiken was appalling in both the procedural unfairness and the outcome. It prejudges an issue and says, "He would not apologise, so we will not give him that option. We will suspend him instead". Would any one of you want to be treated in that way? That is what you will vote for today. Shame on the Committee.

Mr Dickson: In winding up the debate, it is my duty to remind Members of the importance of ensuring that the Assembly's standards regime is and is seen to be robust to maintain and enhance public confidence in the political system.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No. I will make progress at this stage.

There is an onus on each of us, as MLAs, to be conscious of and abide by the ethical standards reflected in the principles and rules of the Assembly's code of conduct. It is also essential that there is accountability and that the House takes breaches of the code seriously. I particularly welcome the contribution of our Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, in providing the Assembly with a professional and, importantly, independent investigation service for complaints against MLAs and Ministers. The complaints that land at her door are varied and can range from frivolous, vexatious or, indeed, unsubstantiated allegations to complaints of a serious nature. She does not have an easy task to assess, investigate and conclude on what can often be complex and sensitive matters. That task is far more difficult when a Member fails to maintain the confidentiality of a live complaint, which risks prejudicing the proceedings, and then fails to cooperate at all times with the commissioner's investigation.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No. I will make progress.

Mr Allister: There is a contradiction.

Mr Dickson: I will address Mr Allister's point in a moment.

Members will be particularly mindful of the rules on the matter, so I will make a number of

remarks on the issues that are in front of us and specifically on Mr Allister's comments on rule 17 and its relationship to rule 12. He made the point about the relationship between those two rules. By way of information, rule 17 applies to investigations after admissibility has been decided; rule 12 applies to complaints after they have been made and to protectively marked documents. Previously, the Committee had received legal advice on all its deliberations and all the steps that it had taken.

12.45 pm

I turn to the remarks that Mr Aiken made today. I appreciate that he took us through his personal circumstances at the time surrounding the events. However, while he spoke to the House in conciliatory terms that explained the circumstances that he was in at the time, it is regrettable and somewhat disappointing that, once again, there was no apology to the Committee, the commissioner or, indeed, the House.

We find ourselves in new territory today. As the Chairperson pointed out, the particular circumstances of the case have been set out. The specific rules of conduct that Dr Aiken breached were significant, and that, combined with other factors, included his unwarranted criticism of the investigatory process and his lack of contrition or understanding in that regard. The previous Committee noted that, rather than offer an apology, he sought an apology from the commissioner.

Dr Aiken's conduct has been inconsistent with two of the seven principles of public life. As a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee at the time of the breaches, he would have been aware of all the rules, and they should have been clear to him at that time. That left the previous Committee in no doubt that his actions and behaviours were "egregious", in the words of the report, and breached the code of conduct and that such a glaring and flagrant breach of the code required a proportionate sanction. The Chairperson has explained how the current Committee arrived at its recommendation in that regard.

If the motion is passed today, it will mark the first occasion on which the Assembly has decided to exclude a Member from proceedings. While it is regrettable that it is necessary, the Assembly's approval of the motion will put down a marker that there is accountability and that such breaches of the code will be taken seriously by the House.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order to ask the Speaker to shed some light, before we proceed to a vote on the matter, on how it can be that something that does not breach rule 17 breaches rule 12, when, in fact, the complaint was not deemed admissible until three months later? How can the same comments breach rule 12 but not breach rule 17? How is that even possible? That is the basis on which we are asked to vote.

Mr Speaker: It is not a matter for the Office of the Speaker; it is a matter for the Standards and Privileges Committee. It set out its case, you set out your case, Mr Allister, and, thereafter, it is for Members to vote on the motion. I accept that you made your case well, but Members now have the opportunity to vote.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Allister: No.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and only one No, the Ayes have it.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, having considered a report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges from the last Assembly (NIA 208/17-22), notes its conclusion that this Committee on Standards and Privileges should recommend a sanction be imposed on Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA, and imposes upon Dr Aiken the sanction of exclusion from proceedings of the Assembly for a period of two sitting days, beginning on the first sitting day after the resolution.

Private Members' Business

All-Ireland Tourism Strategy

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of tourism to our economy; acknowledges that tourism is one of six areas of cooperation on the island of Ireland, as set out in the Good Friday Agreement; further acknowledges the untapped potential benefit of all-Ireland tourism to our local communities; notes that, in 2019, the Wild Atlantic Way tourism experience generated €1.9 billion and attracted 3.4 million overseas tourists to the nine counties that it currently covers; acknowledges that extending the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands would create significant opportunities for our local tourism sector; and calls on the Department for the Economy to work with Tourism Ireland, Tourism NI and Fáilte Ireland to extend the major tourism brands across the island, and to work with local communities to develop sustainable tourism that enhances and protects the local environment and natural heritage, supports local businesses and creates jobs and prosperity. — [Mrs Mason.]

Motion not moved.

Mr Speaker: The motion is not moved. Therefore, we move to the next item of business.

Ms Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will have seen that, before Dr Aiken left the Chamber, he approached my colleague, touched him on the shoulder and said:

"I don't hold that against you".

He then turned to me and said:

"But I do hold it against you".

Mr Speaker, I am entitled to make my comments in the Chamber. I think that that was in relation to what I said about him needing to consider his position. I would like you to make a ruling on whether that was appropriate language in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I will look at that in due course.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, to leave

of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next item of business will be questions to the Minister of Finance and the first Member to speak will be William Irwin.

The sitting was suspended at 12.51 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

Flooding: Financial Support for Farmers

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any discussions she has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on a financial assistance scheme for farmers affected by flooding. (AQO 381/22-27)

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance):

During my discussions with the AERA Minister, prior to the setting of the Budget, the Minister indicated that he had written to the Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs seeking a meeting around the need for short-term financial support for farmers and growers in light of the ongoing wet weather conditions. I am not yet aware of the EFRA Minister's response to that request.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she accept that farmers and growers suffered horrendously due to the flooding? Many lost very heavily. They see businesses being compensated, but there is no help for them. Does the Minister understand their frustration?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for that and, yes, of course, I understand the concerns of farmers and growers. Obviously, there has been persistent wet weather over the past number of weeks. This is a matter first and foremost for the AERA Minister, and he highlighted in his discussions with me that he has raised the issue with the EFRA Minister. I am happy to continue to engage with the AERA Minister on these matters. Now that the Budget for the incoming year has been set, it will be for Ministers to prioritise within their budgetary allocations. However, I will support the AERA Minister in any ongoing negotiations that he has with Ministers in Whitehall.

Ms Ennis: I previously raised with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs the issue of a support scheme for the farming

community recently impacted by the flooding. As the Minister said, what individual Ministers do with their funding envelope is for those Ministers. However, the Minister has previously supported other financial schemes for those impacted by flooding and other issues. Maybe she can give us a flavour of those previous schemes?

Dr Archibald: The Member is aware of the financial support that was allocated prior to the Assembly's coming back. Some £15 million was made available at that point. Funding totalling £10.5 million was allocated to the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for the Economy received £2.3 million and the Department of Health received £250,000, while £1 million of rate relief was provided to business premises impacted by flooding events. Obviously, there will be opportunities in-year for Ministers to bid during monitoring rounds. I am open to considering bids made by any Minister in respect of that.

Mr Tennyson: Financial assistance after flooding is one side of the equation. Will the Minister outline any engagement that she has had with the Minister for Infrastructure around flood prevention and alleviation schemes?

Dr Archibald: The Member is quite right. Obviously, we have to deal with the outworking of flooding, but a number of Departments have responsibilities in respect of dealing with flooding and flood prevention. I have had conversations with the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. One of the things that the AERA Minister is keen to emphasise is the need for the environmental improvement plan to be agreed by the Executive so that we have a direction of travel that we can all work on together. I hope that that will happen in the coming weeks.

Mr McGrath: I ask the Minister to use every effort to get a cross-Executive response to this. Farming is a business, and those businesspeople are suffering as a result of the flooding, yet other businesses were helped and assisted. It seems that farmers have been left to fall between the cracks. Will the Minister undertake to work with other Ministers to see whether we can help farmers?

Dr Archibald: I can indeed undertake to work with other Ministers. I am from a rural community so I understand the impact on farming and rural communities and the benefit and input that they have locally. I will therefore certainly continue to work with all Ministers. As I

said, the AERA Minister has corresponded with the EFRA Minister about a potential financial assistance scheme for farmers. I am happy to support him in that.

Baby Loss Certificates

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the introduction of baby loss certificates. (AQO 382/22-27)

6. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on a baby loss certificate scheme. (AQO 386/22-27)

Dr Archibald: With the Principal Deputy Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 2 and 6 together.

As Members will be aware, I am keen to see the scheme be taken forward as quickly as possible so that bereaved families have the opportunity to have formal recognition of their loss. Initial discussions have taken place between officials in the Department of Health and the General Register Office (GRO) on how the baby loss certificate scheme might be developed. A further meeting will take place towards the end of May. Officials in the Department of Health and the GRO will meet the managers of the baby loss certificate scheme from the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England in mid-May. That ongoing engagement will provide important lessons for the development of a scheme here.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that there is a real need for the scheme to be delivered at pace in order to avoid any additional unnecessary pain for parents who have lost a baby? Is there a timescale for the roll-out of the scheme? When will it be in place?

Dr Archibald: I am on record as saying that I want to see the scheme move forward as quickly as possible. It is important that parents here who suffer that horrendous loss have it recognised. We need to work through a number of steps to ensure that the legislation, the resource and the delivery plan are agreed and in place. It is likely that consultation will be required to determine the best way of meeting the needs of those who require the service. I am keen to see the scheme be taken forward as quickly as possible, but we need to go through those steps in order to give bereaved families the opportunity to have their loss recognised.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her quick action in taking forward the scheme. The motion that we tabled was passed less than a month ago. It is therefore really good to receive that update.

Minister, will you confirm whether the General Register Office will engage with women who have been impacted on by baby loss, as well as with bereavement organisations, including Sands, throughout the scheme's development? It is very important that their voices be heard.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for her comments. There are some fantastic organisations that provide invaluable support to help families through their loss. Those organisations bring a wealth of experience and expertise that we, as policymakers, want to use to ensure that the scheme meets the needs of bereaved parents. Officials are considering options for how the scheme could work and have identified many areas in which the views of the public and bereavement organisations will be very welcome.

Fiscal Framework

3. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Finance to provide an update on her discussions with the Treasury on a fiscal framework. (AQO 383/22-27)

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on her discussions with the UK Government on a new fiscal framework. (AQO 384/22-27)

Dr Archibald: With the Principal Deputy Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 3 and 4 together.

I have pressed the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the importance of putting in place a fiscal framework as quickly as possible that includes funding us properly, based on need. That is essential if the Executive are to be able to deliver sustainable quality public services here. My officials are engaging with their Treasury counterparts on the application of the needs-based adjustment factor that was included in the financial package, on the necessity for the Executive to be funded at an agreed level of need going forward and on the development of a wider fiscal framework. Those discussions are ongoing, and I will meet the Chief Secretary later this afternoon to press for progress on those important matters.

Mr Gildernew: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. [*Translation: I thank the*

Minister for her answer.] Minister, will you outline how we can get a fiscal framework that provides a fair level of needs-based funding in order to allow us to provide services into the future?

Dr Archibald: It is critical that a new fiscal framework provide clarity on our long-term funding model. As the Member will be aware, the financial package is for two years. Concerns have been outlined in that regard. We must ensure that we are funded to our level of need in order to enable the Executive to deliver the high-quality public services that people expect and deserve and for us to have sustainable public finances. The current approach is unsustainable. Recent reports from the Fiscal Council and the NI Affairs Committee have reflected what I have been saying, which is that the North is not receiving the funding that it needs. Both raised concerns about the financial cliff edge that we are facing and stated that our funding should be adjusted based on need from the start of the current spending review.

The Fiscal Council has made the point that we are the only devolved Administration being asked to deliver public services whilst being funded below our level of need. In my view, these assessments reaffirm the position for the British Government to secure an urgent long-term solution to ensure that public services are sustainably funded. Any new fiscal framework will be key to achieving that.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagraí go nuige seo. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for her answers so far.*] Minister, you have had the overwhelming support of the Assembly to negotiate a fiscal framework that reflects our needs, and you have outlined those. However, it has been three months and there does not seem to be any sign of change in the UK Government's position. If the UK Government do not change their position, what is the plan B, or is there a plan B?

Dr Archibald: I have been consistent in setting out that engagement is continuing. So far, it has been constructive. My officials are engaging with Treasury officials. I have met with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on a number of occasions and am meeting her again later this afternoon. We need to see urgent action from the British Government to ensure that we are funded appropriately based on our level of need and that we do not face that financial cliff edge in two years' time. I have stressed that with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on my previous

engagements with her, and I will continue to do that.

Despite the short-term uplift for our public finances due to the financial package, the current situation would see us effectively trapped below our level of need for a number of years, which would create a fiscal ceiling rather than the fiscal floor that all parties have been united in asking for. We are not asking for special treatment here. We are asking to be treated the same as Scotland and Wales and for our funding to be needs-based. Scotland and Wales are funded above need, and that will be denied to people here. That is not a tenable situation.

There are a number of other areas that we think any new fiscal framework should cover to help us to sustainably manage our public finances. These could include a new fiscal reserve, increased borrowing powers and increased devolved fiscal powers. That is part of the ongoing engagement.

Mr Allister: Is the Minister still committed to raising £113 million of resources? With the Secretary of State's gazumping of some of the functions and powers of the Department with the iniquitous Irish Sea border, is there a knock-on financial consequence or will all those costs still come out of the block grant? How do her accounting officers deal with that situation?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, there were several questions there. Answer whichever you deem fit.

Dr Archibald: Thank you. Obviously, as part of the financial package, the British Government indicated that there should be revenue-raising of £113 million, which is tied to the write-off of the £559 million overspend from last year. The Executive do not accept that that should be a condition, given that the overspend accrued because we were being funded below our level of need. As a Finance Minister, I do not want to be in the position next year of losing £559 million from our block grant. In making the case to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that we had limited levers to raise revenue, that period has been extended to 24 months.

On the issues around the funding for the Windsor framework, Departments make bids to us and then to Treasury, so Treasury pays for the arrangement. Up until now, the arrangement is that Treasury funds the elements of the Windsor framework. We anticipate that that will continue and that we will see that in the June monitoring round.

Dr Aiken: On the level of the fiscal floor, has any modelling been done on the figure of 124% or is there a new figure that you think would be suitable for us to take forward? Have we come to that conclusion yet?

Dr Archibald: The Member will be aware of some of the work of the Fiscal Council around the fiscal floor. He will be aware that the Executive do not accept that 124% is the level of need and also that some additional modelling has been done by the Fiscal Council to take account of other factors, such as policing and justice, which could, potentially, see that factor of need being higher.

We want to build on that. We are engaging with Treasury on the actual level of need and ensuring that that level of need is baselined into our Budgets so that we are in a position to deliver high-quality public services and have more sustainable public finances.

2.15 pm

Lough Neagh

5. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance to outline how Budget allocations reflect the Executive's priority to protect and better manage Lough Neagh. (AQO 385/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The protection of Lough Neagh and the surrounding environment is a key priority for the Executive. The Executive agreed to allocate the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs £1.6 million of capital departmental expenditure limit (DEL) funding in June monitoring to support actions relating to Lough Neagh. Now that the Budget has been set by the Executive, it will be for Ministers to consider their departmental priorities and allocate funding accordingly within their budget. Departments can highlight any further funding requirements in relation to Lough Neagh as part of the in-year monitoring process. Any bids will be considered in the context of the available funding, competing budgetary demands and the Executive's wider priorities. It will then be for the Executive to allocate the available funding.

As the Member is aware, we were faced with a very challenging Budget for this financial year. I would have liked to be able to do more across a number of Departments. Addressing the issues of Lough Neagh is a priority for the Executive and will be considered as such in the monitoring rounds.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that reply. Given that — if we face it — the allocated sums that have been outlined are likely to fall woefully short in comparison with the scale of the problems of Lough Neagh, and recalling earlier comments about cross-Executive responsibilities, as the catchment area of Lough Neagh extends to and includes parts of the Republic of Ireland, is she willing to work with the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister to try to secure resource from the Shared Island Fund to help deal with those issues?

Dr Archibald: The Member will be aware that, recently, prior to the official plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Taoiseach and Tánaiste had a conversation about Lough Neagh. It is clearly a shared priority across the island, and the issues to be addressed are cross-jurisdictional: the issues impacting on our environment, climate and biodiversity do not recognise borders, so it is important that we have a joined-up collaborative approach. I will certainly be happy to work with the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister in any engagements that he has on the Shared Island Fund or any other funding that may be available to him.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, when Members, including those in your party, all voted for a Lough Neagh rescue plan motion some weeks ago, the most modest estimate of its cost was well north of £100 million of investment. It is disappointing to see parties repeatedly vote for motions but, when it comes to aligning —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Is there a question in there, Matthew?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, there is. Did the Infrastructure Minister make any bid to you for waste water investment specifically related to Lough Neagh recovery?

Dr Archibald: I do not have the bids from the Infrastructure Minister in front of me, although I know that significant funding, in the region of £330 million or £350 million a year, is invested through NI Water in our water infrastructure. That would, obviously, impact on Lough Neagh and on much wider areas. I am aware of that, and I would be happy to write to the Member about any additional bids.

Miss Brogan: Will the Minister outline the next steps in tackling algae blooms in Lough Neagh so that that vital economic asset is protected, le do thoil? [*Translation: please?*]

Dr Archibald: I understand that a draft set of evidence-based recommendations to tackle the toxic algae in Lough Neagh and secure longer-term improvement in water quality is being refined and finalised by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and that the recommendations for Lough Neagh will be brought to the Executive for consideration and discussion in due course.

I am also aware that the AERA Minister has brought the draft environmental improvement plan to the Executive for consideration. It sets out actions relevant to supporting water quality across the North to secure longer-term improvements. There is clearly a need for collective action across government and the public, private and community sectors to tackle the issue of water quality. Additional investment will clearly be required, and that will need to be considered in line with the Executive's priorities and competing budgetary pressures.

Mr Carroll: Minister, £1.6 million is a paltry sum given the scale of the crisis. Will you confirm whether the AERA Minister submitted a plan to you or to the Executive to save the lough, including acquisition of the lough and establishing an environment protection agency, beyond the £1.6 million figure that you mentioned?

Dr Archibald: As I said in response to the previous question, I understand that a draft set of recommendations to tackle the issues relating to Lough Neagh will be brought to the Executive for consideration in the near future.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been answered.

Climate Change Targets

7. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance to outline her Department's responsibilities in relation to meeting climate change targets. (AQO 387/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I am committed to doing all that I can to contribute to meeting the emissions targets in the Climate Change Act. My Department plays a central enabling role in providing the frameworks and guidance, and Departments need to consider climate change in their decision-making and procurement processes. In addition, my Department has a number of specific responsibilities, which include taking forward a programme of uplifts for building regulations; managing the Civil Service office estate to reduce its carbon footprint; and implementing a hybrid working

policy to support new ways of working that also deliver environmental benefits.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her answer. On some of the things that she has detailed and other things, how will tackling climate change be reflected in the Budget?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will be aware, the 2024-25 Budget was agreed by the Executive on 25 April. Since devolution was restored, we had been really clear that that Budget would be very difficult, and the stark reality is that the demands on our finances far outstrip the funding that we have available. No Department, therefore, has received the level of funding that it bid for.

Under section 52 of the Climate Change Act 2022, all Departments are required to exercise their functions in a manner that is, as far as possible, consistent with achieving emissions targets and carbon budgets. While some Departments submitted bids for climate change, given the constrained financial position, I did not ring-fence any allocations specifically for that purpose, and I did that to provide Departments with the maximum flexibility to manage their own budgets. As climate action is so far-reaching, it should be a consideration right across spending in Departments, and I encourage my Executive colleagues to consider their statutory obligations in the Climate Change Act when prioritising expenditure within the funding envelopes provided to their Departments.

Mr Mathison: Has the Minister considered formally incorporating the concept of green budgeting into the Budget process, drawing on the experience of other jurisdictions such as France?

Dr Archibald: As I said, there are a number of statutory obligations that Departments already have in respect of their budgets. I have had a number of propositions put to me about specific types of budgeting. I am establishing a new budget sustainability team in the Department. It will look at a number of things, and that is something that can be considered alongside those.

Mr McNulty: In the Civil Service office estate, how many buildings are lying derelict and empty? How do they impact on your responsibilities in meeting climate change targets?

Dr Archibald: I do not have the details that the Member specifically asked for in respect of

buildings that are vacant. My Department is progressing a programme of work to reduce its footprint through the Department of Finance office estate by around 40%. That gives us the opportunity to reduce costs and energy use and supports us on the journey to net zero. I am happy to write to the Member with further details on what he asked about.

City and Growth Deals

8. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Finance to provide an update on the implementation of city and growth deals. (AQO 388/22-27)

Dr Archibald: There has been significant progress across the four city and growth deals. Positive milestones have been achieved this year already, with more to come. The Belfast region city deal is in delivery phase. Legally binding contracts for funding have been signed for nine projects, with a further six due in coming months. Planning permission has already been granted for some projects, and construction has started on the advanced manufacturing innovation centre in Newtownabbey. The Derry City and Strabane District Council city deal is preparing for deal-signing in summer 2024; the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal signed heads of terms last week, and will begin work on outline business cases to progress towards deal-signing; and the Mid South West growth deal is working towards the signing of heads of terms in autumn 2024.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her response. Will the Minister outline some of the specific benefits of the city and growth deals, and how many jobs she anticipates might be created?

Dr Archibald: The £1.3 billion investment in the four city and growth deals will support significant shifts in many of our indicators, such as improving regional balance, creating employment opportunities and increasing productivity. Across the four deals, there are around 50 projects. At full business case stage, each project will specify the benefits to be realised from that project. Identified benefits will include job creation, where appropriate. Once all projects in a deal have reached full business case, each deal will be able to clearly identify the benefits of its overall investment at deal level, and once each of the four deals has completed that stage, we will be in a better position to understand the extent of the combined benefits of the overall investment.

Rate Collection: High Street Businesses

9. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Minister of Finance for her assessment of the method used for collecting rates from businesses on high streets in towns and villages. (AQO 389/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I believe that the method used for collecting rates is effective, given that Land and Property Services collected a record amount of £1.5 billion of rates revenue in 2023-24 to provide funding for vital public services. The method used for collecting rates is the same for all ratepayers, regardless of whether they are domestic or non-domestic and regardless of location.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister will be acutely aware that our hospitality industry and, indeed, small businesses on the high street are suffering. One of the issues is high rates. Has the Minister looked at any ways in which we can combat that for those who are in the most dire of circumstances?

Dr Archibald: The Executive provide extensive relief within the rating system. Over 75% of all business ratepayers are awarded some form of support, which amounts to something in the region of £247 million a year. That support includes the recently extended small business rate relief scheme, which will provide in the region of £21.5 million of assistance to almost 30,000 small businesses receiving a reduction of between 20% and 50% on their rate bill for this year.

My Department has also made and laid legislation to reintroduce the back in business rate support scheme, which will help businesses in that category. I believe that that will be before the Assembly next week. If agreed, it will provide businesses with a 50% rate discount for up to two years if they move into premises that were previously used for retail purposes and have been unoccupied for 12 months or more.

The Member will also be aware that I am considering the responses to the consultation on rates for revenue raising. That is something that I will be looking at over the coming weeks and months.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Cathy Mason for a quick supplementary question.

Mrs Mason: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* The Minister has outlined some of the supports available, but will she provide an overview of the main supports that are available currently to assist businesses here?

Dr Archibald: I do not have the full list of rate reliefs in front of me. I have just outlined to the Member who asked the substantive question some of the most relevant supports available for our retail and hospitality sectors and small businesses on the high street. That includes, for the most part, the small business rate relief scheme, which, as I said, is awarded to 30,000 small businesses each year. If agreed next week, we will have the back in business rate support scheme back in place. We will also be bringing to the Assembly, next week, the rural ATM rate relief scheme, which, I hope, Members will support.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mark Durkan; there is one minute left.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* Can the Minister tell us how many rate-paying businesses have had to close their doors permanently since the restoration of devolution?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Very quickly, Minister.

Dr Archibald: That is not information that I have in front of me. I am happy to write to the Member if we are able to provide that information. I am not sure that it is something that we would have, but I am happy to clarify that with him.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: We are bang on time. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

2.30 pm

RHI Inquiry: Implementation of Recommendations

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance whether, following its publication of a progress report on recommendations from the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry, her Department should revisit the green rating that it awarded itself in March for its implementation of

recommendation 28, which refers to improving the culture and practice of record-keeping, in light of the fact that, in the past couple of weeks, the COVID inquiry has uncovered routine wiping of phones by senior officials and Ministers, with it taking seven attempts to get the minutes of a critical Executive meeting. (AQT 251/22-27)

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Minister. I caution Members about asking questions in light of the Inquiries Act 2005 and any legal proceedings, as those questions could be about a matter that is sub judice. I caution Members and Ministers about saying anything that would be in contempt of the inquiry or a court. With that in mind, Minister, please continue.

Dr Archibald: The COVID inquiry is ongoing and taking evidence. Clearly, while that inquiry's important work continues, I do not want to get into a running commentary about specific evidence. That was, obviously, a very challenging time for everyone, but it was particularly traumatic for those people who lost loved ones. I fully support the inquiry's work and hope that it will help those people to come to terms with the devastating impact that COVID had on their life.

Budgets and resources have been reprioritised in my Department in order to meet our statutory responsibilities to the inquiry, and it is important that we learn lessons from the events that are being examined to make sure that we are better prepared for and can respond to a similar global health emergency, should it ever arise in future.

Mr O'Toole: With respect, Minister, this is not simply about the COVID inquiry; it is about culture and practice in the Civil Service, which your Department has responsibility for and on which we spent many millions of pounds reviewing in the Coghlin inquiry. Quite apart from the COVID inquiry, I ask that your Department revisit and re-examine its culture and practice of record-keeping, given that it marked its own homework in March and said that it was doing just fine on record-keeping. It appears, from what we have heard in the past couple of weeks, that we certainly are not.

Dr Archibald: My Department developed new guidance for the Civil Service in June 2022 for official information that is held in non-corporate communication channels. That guidance sets out when non-corporate devices or communication channels may be used for official business and how any official information, including WhatsApp messages,

should be handled. The guidance will be translated into policy and disseminated across Departments by 31 May 2024. As I mentioned, it is each individual's responsibility to ensure that all relevant information is retained on Content Manager, which is an official repository for Civil Service documents and record management. That is clearly set out in the overarching Civil Service record-management policy and NI Executive codes of conduct.

Manufacturing Sector: Support

T2. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance to detail how her Department is supporting the manufacturing sector during the current difficult economic crisis. (AQT 252/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The Executive are providing £71.5 million of support in 2024-25 through industrial derating for over 4,400 local manufacturing properties. That measure is not provided in England, Scotland or Wales. The recipients are by no means all large companies; in fact, over 2,500 recipients of industrial derating fall under the £15,000 net asset value (NAV) threshold that is utilised for small business rate relief.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. [*Translation: Thank you, Minister.*] What engagement have you had with the sector since taking up your post?

Dr Archibald: I have undertaken detailed engagement with the manufacturing sector since taking up post. I have met sectoral representatives at round-table meetings on business rates generally and in meetings that have focused on the sector. Over the past two weeks, I have visited manufacturers in the factory environment in order to get a sense of the challenges and opportunities that are in that sector. Last week, I met representatives of the wider manufacturing and logistics sector to look at the issues that are of strategic importance to them and at what they require from the Executive to support a sector that accounts for over 89,000 jobs, with many of those in indigenous businesses.

Junior Doctors' Pay

T3. **Mr McReynolds** asked the Minister of Finance, with strike action looking set to continue, to outline the engagement that she has had with the Minister of Health about junior doctors' pay. (AQT 253/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I have engaged with the Health Minister, as I have with all Ministers, in the Budget process. Obviously, the Health Minister raised the issue of pay, the challenges that would be faced in year and the ongoing challenges that would be faced in respect of junior doctors, who, clearly, need to have their demands looked at favourably, given their importance to the health service and the importance of the role that they play in that service, often under challenging conditions.

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she raise junior doctors' pay in her discussions with Treasury? Does she believe that multi-year budgeting is an important tool in stabilising industrial relations?

Dr Archibald: I will raise the huge challenges that face the Budget when I meet Treasury. I have impressed upon Treasury and the shadow Secretary of State the need for the Executive to be in a position to set a multi-year Budget. Obviously, that is dependent on the spending review period that the Westminster Government choose. We are not, for example, able to set a multi-year Budget this year, because it is the final year of a spending review. I would very much like to see us in a multi-year spending review from the next financial year. That is not within our gift, but I will continue to make those representations. Departments would be much better able to plan strategically in order to meet challenges.

Childcare: Budget

T4. **Mrs Mason** asked the Minister of Finance to outline how the 2024-25 Budget will support the improved provision of quality, affordable and accessible childcare. (AQT 254/22-27)

Dr Archibald: It is important to say that we need to get childcare right. It plays a vital role in the economy. We need to support childcare providers, workers and families. Affordable childcare is particularly important in facilitating women's access to the labour market. I am keen to see work on the new childcare strategy progress as quickly as possible. Childcare is a priority for the Executive. As you know, Ministers are committed to prioritising it. It was important to reflect that in the Budget. The Executive have agreed to earmark £25 million to support a childcare strategy. That is to fund new and additional actions that are above and beyond those that Departments have undertaken within their childcare remits, and they should not be seen as the limit of our ambitions for childcare. Hopefully, we will be able to add to that funding in year.

Mrs Mason: I thank the Minister for that answer. How does the Civil Service, as a large employer here, support working parents?

Dr Archibald: The Civil Service is committed to being a diverse and inclusive employer. It is important that the Civil Service is an example. It has a range of supports and family-friendly policies in place, including alternative working, which allows for alternative or flexible working patterns in the Civil Service. That includes flexible working times and reduced hours, such as part-time hours and job sharing, and compressed or personalised hours. There is also hybrid working, which offers a mix of working from home or remotely and working in the workplace. It aims to promote a flexible work choice that meets the needs of the Civil Service and employees. There is special leave, which provides up to two weeks' paid leave for bereavement, including bereavement due to miscarriage. There is also provision for paid and unpaid time off for a range of issues that affects families, such as time off for dependants and to facilitate practical arrangements as a consequence of domestic or sexual abuse. There is, obviously, maternity leave, adoption leave, paternity leave, shared parental leave and the ordinary parental leave that is expected to be taken in the same way as statutory leave.

The Civil Service continues to run the former HMRC childcare vouchers scheme. That legacy scheme is available only to those who were already in the scheme. Other than that, the Member will be aware that HMRC now runs a tax-free childcare scheme under which staff can get up to £500 every three months. If a member of staff receives tax-free childcare, they can set up an online account for their child. For every £8 that they pay into that account, the Government will pay £2 to the childcare provider.

Climate Change: Budget Bids/Allocations

T5. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Finance, in the recent Budget exercise, to outline how much each Department bid for and how much was allocated to them for climate change initiatives. (AQT 255/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I am not sure that I have the information in front of me on the bids that were made for the Budget, but I am happy to write to the Member on that point.

Mr Elliott: Thank you. Can the Minister indicate how much her Department of Finance bid for to

see through climate change for the period of the Budget?

Dr Archibald: Again, I do not have that information in front of me and I do not know the figure off the top of my head, but I will be happy to share it with the Member.

Public Procurement: Social Value

T6. **Ms Á Murphy** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the impact of social value in the public procurement process. (AQT 256/22-27)

Dr Archibald: Social value in public contracts can make a real difference, particularly to the lives of some of the most disadvantaged people in society. Embedding social value in public procurement provides a significant opportunity to meaningfully contribute to economic, environmental and social outcomes. To date, some of the positive outcomes since the introduction of the procurement notice include 3,500 people who were long-term unemployed or disadvantaged in the labour market who have gained employment; more than 75 social enterprises that are now part of government supply chains; 2,700 hours of volunteering with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector; 6,500 hours of skills development activities; 2,800 weeks of work experience; over 3,500 hours of environmental awareness initiatives; and 2,400 hours plus of health and well-being initiatives.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, in your opinion, how is social value making a difference to the lives of people here in the North?

Dr Archibald: People who often encounter barriers to employment, people with learning disabilities and people without educational qualifications who have faced barriers in their education journey can benefit from the employment and training opportunities that are provided by social value in public contracts. The impact on those individuals' lives cannot be overstated. The invaluable work experience that they provide can help build confidence and set those people on new career paths. The policy on social value supports the Executive's commitment to being a living wage employer by mandating that all workers involved in delivering public services through government contracts be paid at least the living wage. That is a major step forward in ending pay poverty.

Financial Transactions Capital 2024-25

T7. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance to state how the remaining allocation of financial transactions capital (FTC) will be used, given that under half of it is yet to be allocated for 2024-25. (AQT 257/22-27)

Dr Archibald: Obviously, Departments will have an opportunity to bid in year for additional money, including financial transactions capital, and I encourage Departments to come forward with bids for financial transactions capital. It is an area where we sometimes face challenges in spending, and obviously we want to see full utilisation of the money that is available to us.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she have plans to improve the strategy for spending FTC, given the underspends that have occurred in previous years?

Dr Archibald: I am certainly keen to look at that, but you will be aware of some of the restrictions around the use of financial transactions capital. Therefore, we are dependent on Departments coming forward with their ideas for what they would like to spend it on and working with other organisations on being able to do that. I am certainly happy to look at that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: We have one minute left. Go for it.

Towns and High Streets: Business Incentives

T8. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Finance to outline what her Department is doing to bring local businesses back to our towns and high streets. (AQT 258/22-27)

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Very quickly, Minister.

Dr Archibald: Given the positive impact of the back in business scheme, I am glad to advise that legislation to restore it was made by my Department at the end of March. That has been cleared by the Finance Committee, and the Assembly will debate it, I believe, next week. I hope that the Chamber will support the reinstatement of that scheme. When the back in business scheme was last in place during 2022-23, 101 businesses benefited from the 50% rate reduction, and the majority of those were small independent retailers. It helped businesses to

get started, supported jobs and got long-term vacant units back into use.

Reinstating that popular scheme is now more important than ever in order to help new businesses emerge.

2.45 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Well done.

Dr Aiken: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Ms Bradshaw made a complaint for referral to the Speaker. I feel that some of my remarks may have been misconstrued. Ms Bradshaw, I therefore apologise.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sweet. *[Laughter.]* OK. I ask Members to take their ease before the next item of business.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Gaza: Immediate Ceasefire

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns the ongoing genocide in Gaza that has left more than 35,000 people dead, most of them women and children; further condemns the actions of Hamas on October 7, which left 1,300 people dead and many families searching for loved ones; abhors the killing of international humanitarian aid workers seeking to deliver vital supplies to the civilian population on the brink of famine; rejects plans for a ground assault on the city of Rafah, with a refugee population of more than one million Palestinians sheltering with nowhere safe to go; regrets the failure of the international community to act decisively in the interests of peace; affirms its support for a two-state solution and the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine; calls for an immediate ceasefire in the region and the release of all hostages; further calls for an end to arms sales and transfers to Israel while the genocide continues; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to write jointly to the UK Prime Minister in pursuit of these objectives.

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

Mr O'Toole: In every generation, there come international events of such horror and such moral import that to remain silent is impossible. The burning moral question of this age — this moment — is the plight of the people of Palestine, particularly the nearly two million people in Gaza who have suffered months of bombardment, the killing of tens of thousands of innocent people and the virtual obliteration of large parts of civilian life, including hospitals, schools and the most basic infrastructure.

The bombardment began as a response to the actions of Hamas. On 7 October, Hamas launched a series of coordinated atrocities in Israel, claiming the lives of more than 1,000 people, and took hundreds of hostages, including children and the elderly. That act was an outrage that no moral person could support

and that no true supporter of the Palestinian cause could think was in the long-term best interests of the Palestinian people. It is vital to state clearly, as our motion does, that there is no contradiction between opposing and condemning the acts of Hamas on 7 October and opposing the shocking, grotesque response of Israel.

To say that Israel's response has been disproportionate would be a grotesque, shameful understatement. The response has been limitless, unrestrained and repeatedly and brazenly in violation not only of international law but of the most basic moral imperatives that we should all live by, including the imperative to protect innocent civilian life. The destruction of hospitals and schools demonstrates contempt for human life.

That has been made worse by the distortions and dissembling of Israeli Government spokespeople, up to and including the appalling Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. I will not list all the distortions, lies and obscenities that have been spoken by Israeli Government spokespeople over the past number of months, because those have, at times, been truly shocking, and I would use up all my time were I to do so. Those spokespeople have sought to shift the blame for innocent civilian deaths and to tell what amount to lies.

As we know, powerful Western allies have not just armed Israel but have too often — as they have over the past 60-plus years — sought to protect Israel from the consequences of its actions, including through the use of repeated vetoes of UN Security Council resolutions. Such actions do not just threaten the prospects for peace in the Middle East; they undermine the ability of Western democracies, which claim to support and uphold human rights, to have meaningful credibility when they talk about human rights. They undermine their ability to robustly challenge truly heinous actors, such as Vladimir Putin, by tolerating the depths of inhumanity that Israel has inflicted in Gaza.

Our motion is clear in both moral and political terms. Some people will ask why we have specifically used the word "genocide" in the text of our motion. In March, the UN special rapporteur said that she found:

"that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the threshold indicating Israel's commission of [the crime of] genocide is met".

In January, the International Criminal Court (ICC) said that there was a "plausible" case that

Israel should take action to prevent a genocide. While it is correct to say that the court has not yet made a specific finding of genocide in a legal case, I ask Assembly Members to reflect on whether anyone could honestly and sincerely argue that they believe, in the four months since that ICC judgement was rendered, that Israel has made any serious attempts to prevent a genocide.

The definition of a "genocide" is the deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group, with the aim of destroying that nation or group. More than 35,000 Palestinians have been killed since October, and, as we speak, 1.5 million are sheltering in the border city of Rafah. To put those numbers into context, that is nearly the population of Northern Ireland — the region that we represent — sheltering, beleaguered and hungry, in one city. They are hungry, beleaguered and, in many cases, injured or suffering. They are injured from the conflict — from munitions that are manufactured in Western countries — or suffering from diseases that have not been treated properly because of the Israeli bombardment and destruction of medical facilities.

We do not know exactly when or whether Israel will begin a full-scale invasion of Rafah, but we know that, if it does, the consequences will be grave. That would inevitably and unavoidably lead to the further large-scale killing of one particular national group: the Palestinians. It will be, as it has been repeatedly over the past months, a collective punishment. Collective punishment is specifically outlawed in international law, but that is what is being meted out to the Palestinian people. The wrongs that were committed by Hamas on 7 October — they were profoundly wrong — in no way justify, legally or morally, what has been visited on the people of Palestine since. That is why our motion uses the phrase "ongoing genocide".

It is important not to make trivial comparisons between our experience here and conflicts elsewhere. I wanted to make that point. I hope that the debate will be mature, albeit grave. I am sure that strong opinions will be expressed, but I hope that we can do that in a mature way. It is important not to draw trivial comparisons between Northern Ireland and other parts of the world. That is true of what is happening in the Middle East; it is important not to draw facile comparisons. In the past seven months, as I said, 35,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel. That is 10 times the number killed in 30 years during our conflict. Indeed, on 7 October, 1,200 or 1,300 people were killed; that is more

than a third of the total number killed in our Troubles. None of us can imagine the scale of the suffering being experienced in Gaza, but we in the Chamber know that, at some point, however deep the feelings of injustice are and however real the historical sense is of a wrong that needs to be righted, violence and vengeance need to be replaced by politics and, yes, by peace.

Even if the current ceasefire proposals are accepted by Netanyahu's ultra-nationalist Government — we must all hope that they are and that international pressure is brought so to bear very quickly in the days to come — the people of Palestine and, indeed, those in Israel affected by the events of 7 October will live with decades of pain and trauma caused by the conflict. Young children suffering now with lost limbs and lost parents will carry their pain until the end of this century and beyond, long after all of us are gone. Nothing that can be said or done now, in the Chamber or anywhere else, can undo the trauma of those children or the loss experienced by ordinary Palestinians or, as I said, the Israelis who lost family members on 7 October.

The other day, a representative of UNICEF, after his journey through Gaza, said of what he saw:

"The depth of the horror surpasses our ability to describe it".

Nothing we say now can undo the horror that has happened in the past seven or eight months, but there can be an immediate ceasefire. Politics and peace can replace violence and vengeance. Given our experience and what we have learned in a different context, we should all be willing to stand over the motion, express our solidarity with those who have experienced unimaginable pain, trauma and loss in the past number of months and say that now is the time, finally, to move beyond violence and vengeance and towards peace. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Ms Sheerin: Obviously, I support the motion. I say that it is obvious, because Sinn Féin has been unequivocal in calling for an end to the trauma that is being inflicted on the people in Gaza. We have been unequivocal for decades in our support for the Palestinian people.

Words, really, are hard to find to describe what we are seeing. We are now almost desensitised to the violence. If you click on Instagram, you see a story from a friend who is updating you about their running journey and then, boom, there is another graphic picture of something

that is happening in Gaza — babies on life support machines, with the hospital being bombed around them; journalists being murdered for speaking the truth; people fleeing on advice, only to be bombed again — and the next story is about a competition for a spa break or somebody who is out at the weekend. The conflict is being live-streamed; we have been watching it for seven months.

We know the statistics. We hear them: 35,000 people murdered; 10,000 people missing; 15,000 children killed since October; over 80,000 people injured in Gaza alone. This is just the latest phase. It has been going on for decades. Those people have been oppressed, forced to move and living in open air jails for decades, and the world has watched on. The world has endorsed it. That should bring shame to us all.

It is a humanitarian disaster.

3.00 pm

We woke this morning to news of another missed opportunity: Israel has rejected another opportunity for a ceasefire. We know that that is because Israel does not want a ceasefire; Israel does not want peace. We know that Israel wants to continue this, and that is why it is incumbent on us, why there is a moral duty and an obligation on all of us to bring them to that space, force them to do the right thing and put enough pressure and shame on them to make them do what is morally correct and stop the slaughter of innocent civilians.

In Ireland, we know what colonial oppression does. We know what occupation does. We had forced starvation in this country, and they called it "famine" here too. We know the intergenerational trauma that that has left us with. The mothers with empty arms and the children without their parents: what does their future look like? Even when this is finished, they will maintain the scars for the rest of their lives. It does not bear thinking about.

We have to stand in solidarity and call for an immediate ceasefire without any considerations. We must see an end to this. There is a duty and an obligation on us to call for that, put pressure on the western Administrations who fund and support this and make people see what is right. Palestine will be free, and we in Ireland send our solidarity to the people of Gaza.

Mr Kingston: Every loss of innocent life is appalling, and that applies equally to innocent

Israeli civilians, members of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Palestinians. There can never be any defence for the loss of innocent life.

The motion before us is poorly worded and factually inaccurate. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) was asked by South Africa to consider whether Israel had committed genocide and did not find that to be the case. The ICJ instead ruled that Israel should follow the Geneva convention on how military actions should be conducted. On that basis, we cannot support a motion that is, essentially, inaccurate; in fact, Mr O'Toole accepted that inaccuracy in his speech. The motion rightly condemns Hamas but then wholly fails to acknowledge that the heinous and barbaric actions of Hamas on 7 October last year, when it massacred around 1,200 people in Israel and took more than 240 people hostage, would rightly demand a response from Israel. Hamas set out to provoke that reaction through a murderous onslaught that included extreme cases of sexual violence against women and girls.

The motion affirms support for a two-state solution but fails to recognise that one actor in the conflict, namely Hamas, will not accept a two-state solution. Hamas has, in its charter, the position that the state of Israel should not even exist. The motion calls for a ceasefire and for the release of hostages. The sponsors of the motion must be aware that, on 20 December last year, Israel proposed to stop fighting for a week in exchange for 40 hostages still held by Hamas but Hamas refused. The motion further fails to recognise that taking civilian hostages is a war crime and is explicitly prohibited by the Geneva convention. The sponsors and supporters of the motion fail to show any cognisance of the fact that Hamas, acting in a way that is completely contrary to the Geneva convention, is using the civilian people of the Gaza Strip as human shields. That is not conjecture; it has been accepted and reported by media organisations around the world and is fully supported by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, which has stated:

"the strategic use of human shields by groups like Hamas hinges on exploiting Israel's aim to minimize civilian casualties and the sensitivity of Western public opinion."

The United Nations Secretary-General has also categorically stated:

"Hamas and other militants use civilians as human shields".

While civilian deaths in Gaza are appalling and deeply regrettable, it is Hamas that is responsible for many of them, because it has no regard for the safety of the population.

It is regrettable that the motion was not intended to unite opinion in the Assembly. Instead, it was worded in such a way that it would divide the Assembly at this time, when talks continue towards the goal of a permanent end to hostilities.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion and do so in recognition that self-defence and legitimate requests for peace never begin with inflicting on a small population a death toll that is at least double that in the London Blitz. We may debate the exact terms used to describe it, but it is worth noting that the International Court of Justice has instructed Israel to prevent its military from committing acts that might be considered genocidal and to:

"prevent and punish ... incitement to ... genocide".

What we are witnessing is the appalling impact of civilian deaths in Gaza. It is not just beyond immoral but serves no purpose other than to create yet another generation coping with loss, grief and trauma. It is therefore difficult to find the words to express how horrified and dismayed I am that the disgusting Hamas attacks occurred in the first place and that the collective punishment of Palestinians continues to this day.

The motion identifies the events of 7 October as the immediate starting point for the current loss and destruction and identifies the need for the release of all hostages taken on that day of terror. No one in the Chamber should line up alongside or legitimise Hamas.

The motion highlights that international aid workers were among those killed. That speaks, at best, to a failure to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches a terrorised population on the brink of famine. Such a failure is not the act of a Government claiming to be operating on behalf of a democratic country. Those engaging in the indiscriminate murder of civilians, including aid workers, on that scale lost the right long ago to use the word "civilised".

It is easy to align ourselves with one favoured group or another for the purposes of political affiliation, and we do that very well in Northern Ireland. What we should be doing, however, is aligning ourselves with humanity. Consider this direct quotation from the 'Voices from Gaza' blog in April 2024:

"In the last six months, I have been displaced 13 times. I won't move again. There are only three options left for me – either I will be killed, I will flee to Egypt, or this war will end. I am now sheltering in Rafah, where there are more than one million people. It is extremely overcrowded here. The streets are always full of people. If an Israeli military invasion goes ahead, it will be an absolute catastrophe."

Listen also to the voices of those now warning of the consequences of starvation as a weapon of war. UN agencies have reported that 70% of the population of Gaza face hunger, as we speak, and that 5% of babies are acutely malnourished. Save the Children confirmed that, by the end of March, 27 children had died from dehydration or malnutrition in northern Gaza's hospitals. That is Palestinian suffering; it is human suffering. Governments should not meekly stand by and allow it.

In that context, the motion rightly refers to arms sales to those causing that suffering. Here, I am afraid, the UK Prime Minister is operating a shameless double standard, when you compare his response to this with his response to war crimes committed by Russia, for example. As well as facilitating war crimes against Palestinians, he is undermining the rules-based international order, which is now more important than ever.

Mr Kingston: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Yes.

Mr Kingston: I listened to what the Member said about arms sales and support for Israel. Does the Member think that the RAF was wrong to join in the defence of Israel when 300 rockets were fired at it from Iran and other states?

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for your intervention.

Mr Speaker: The Member gets an extra minute.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you. We will always support interventions to save lives. My son served in the RAF. I very much value its contributions in such efforts around the world, but they always have to be for the purposes of saving lives, not destroying them.

As I said, the Prime Minister's predecessors helped to create the international order. If there is any hint of hope emerging from these appalling atrocities, it is in remarks by the

Foreign Secretary, who talked of "a political horizon" so that Palestinians:

"can see that there is going to be irreversible progress to a two-state solution".

He also said that we should begin at least:

"to set out what a Palestinian state would look like".

That is the route to peace. We must do more to stop turning a blind eye to those who wilfully ignore that route.

In conclusion, I repeat my party's call for a ceasefire now. I support the motion and am disappointed that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister is in the Chamber to respond to it. What the motion calls for is the least that they can do.

Mr Delargy: Last night, amid hopes of a ceasefire, we saw Israel raining bombs on 1.5 million Palestinians who had fled, in the hope of shelter, to Rafah. They had fled Israeli war crimes in Gaza City and been driven from north to south, with people being indiscriminately killed all the while. Rafah has been described as "a city of children", and it has been described as that because those children's parents have been murdered by the Israeli state. Entire families have been killed by the Israeli Government, and those children now seek refuge in tents in Rafah, where Israel continues to bomb and indiscriminately kill them.

There is an onus on all of us here to act, move heaven and earth and do anything that we can through these institutions to ensure that the genocide cannot continue; to make the voices of Palestinians heard in every room and every political chamber that we enter; and to employ leaders around the world to follow the example of South Africa and refer Israel for its war crimes to the international courts to show that we will not be silent in the face of atrocity. Many of our councils have now adopted an ethical procurement policy. Many organisations have begun to look at divestment, and, in motions in councils across Ireland, we have called on Israel to desist and ensure that ceasefire continues. We need to stand united in order to ensure that those diplomatic efforts continue.

Why is today important? It is because we can show international solidarity and the need for a unified voice for peace, for a ceasefire and for humanity so that we can tell Israel, "Stop bombing children. Stop targeting hospitals. Stop

forcibly starving an entire population." What in that is controversial? Those are not defensive actions. They are war crimes committed while the world watches, and blocking humanitarian aid is not defensive either. Killing humanitarian aid workers is certainly not defensive.

In 2014, during yet another Israeli bombardment of Gaza, I, along with others in Derry and across Ireland, helped to establish the Gaza toy drive. For months — it was for over a year — much of that humanitarian aid failed to reach Gaza and the people who were in need, because the Israeli state blocked it.

However, it reached them eventually. It reached them with a message of solidarity and hope: in your darkest days, Ireland will always stand with you.

3.15 pm

Future generations — your children and your grandchildren — will ask you what you did when Palestinians were being indiscriminately murdered. You can stand silently today, or you can stand with them. Every Member in the Chamber today has that choice. Will you say that you stood with them, or will you say that you sat in silence while western Governments orchestrated and funded the killing of Palestinians? Today, we stand at a critical juncture. We have an opportunity for our voices to resonate with others across the world that are calling for an end to the genocide and for a ceasefire. Today, I call on every Member to join that call to end the violence, the apartheid, the genocide and the occupation. *Ní saoirse go saoirse na Palaistíne. [Translation: No one is free until Palestine is free.]*

Mr Harvey: I will speak briefly on the motion. It is a timely reminder of the terrible ongoing conflict in the Middle East, as has been acknowledged. All life is precious, and every loss of innocent life is a terrible event, regardless of the circumstances. Just as was the case throughout our troubled past, there can be no defence of the loss of innocent life, regardless of the perpetrator. Sadly, there are those in local politics and across the international stage who have been all too eager to create mischief and politicking around the ongoing trouble across Israel and Palestine. With that in mind, it is important that we stick to the facts and avoid conjecture as we consider the motion today.

As the motion rightly refers to a ceasefire, we should acknowledge the efforts to achieve a ceasefire over recent months and the lack of

interest that the terrorist organisation Hamas has had in reaching a ceasefire with Israel. On 1 November, Hamas stated that it would repeat its 7 October attack:

"time and time again until Israel is annihilated".

In that context, it is no wonder that Israel stated on 3 November that no ceasefire would be agreed until all hostages were released. A temporary ceasefire between Israel and Hamas-led Palestinian militant groups in the Gaza Strip took effect from 24 November to 30 November 2023. On 20 December, Israel proposed a further cessation of hostilities for a week in exchange for 40 hostages still held by Hamas. In response, Hamas declined the offer, asserting that the release of Israeli hostages would not be considered unless a ceasefire was put in place first. Such a situation is deplorable. Hostages should be released now to allow for a lasting ceasefire to be enacted.

The motion also refers to a two-state solution. For a two-state solution to be possible, both parties must be willing to adopt it. Mr Haniyeh, a senior political leader of Hamas, said that Hamas rejects ceasefire agreements by which Gaza would become Singapore, preferring to remain at war with Israel until a Palestinian state is established from the river to the sea. He recently stated:

"We will not recognize Israel, Palestine must stretch from the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea."

Furthermore, Hamas, in its founding charter of 1988, which was revised in 2017, calls for the state of Israel to no longer exist. It certainly does not recognise Israel or the Jewish nation in any shape or form. Sadly, there is not much hope for a two-state solution when one state cannot bring itself to acknowledge the existence of the other.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is a cause of grave sorrow to us all, as were the horrifying events that unfolded on 7 October when whole families and communities were butchered at the hands of Hamas or carried away as hostages into Palestine. The war that ensued has continued that pain and has touched and changed thousands of lives. I trust that, soon, we will see the release of the innocent hostages and the cessation of hostilities.

Ms Egan: My heart breaks for every person impacted by the atrocities in Gaza without

exception, and I support the motion. It should not cause controversy to stand in the Chamber and clearly state that we need to see an end to the horrific violence in Gaza. The grave war crimes go beyond any sense or reason in this world. I condemn the Israeli Government's depraved collective punishment of Palestinians and Hamas's grotesque attacks on 7 October. I support calls for the release and safe return of all hostages. There must be an immediate ceasefire and mediation to implement a two-state solution, creating lasting and cooperative peace across the region. This cannot go on. When we sit and see the posts on social media, on our phones or on our TVs, it can feel distant, and we can feel disconnected from the atrocities, but this is reality, and it is happening right now. Look at the devastation hitting Rafah: hundreds of thousands of civilians being forced to flee the city — a city already overcrowded and with a dire lack of food, water and medication — in fear for their lives. Where do those people go? We must call out Israel's collective punishment of the people of Gaza. It is shameful that the UK Government facilitates the devastation by removing funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which is responsible for getting the essentials for survival to those in Palestine.

The ongoing and horrific violations of international law have led to mass death and, with that, mass grief. Communities who, just like you and I, have hopes of building a better life for their children and younger generations and those around them in their communities are experiencing immense suffering, unlike us in the Chamber today, who, after going back and forth with our words and motions, will go home to our warm beds and hot showers while they fight for their lives in apocalyptic conditions, cramped into rooms with dozens of others, unable to access sanitised water and facing extreme nutritional deficiencies. We cannot stand silent over the devastating cycle of violence and genocidal acts. The atrocities are innumerable in so many ways and to so many people. All of it is despicable.

I hope that this is not an issue for politicking; these are people's lives. I genuinely thank the SDLP for tabling the motion in a way that a lot of people, I hope, will support. I also pay tribute to Sinéad, as chair of the all-party group on UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security. As chair of the group, Sinéad coordinated a letter with other members. We wrote to the president of the UN Security Council, the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, and Micheál Martin TD. A lot of people in our communities want to see us doing

something and having our voices heard. I was happy to stand with that, with others, when the Assembly was not sitting, to try to make the case for lasting peace and ceasefire and to highlight the horrendous treatment of women and girls in the region and the violence that they are experiencing.

This should not be a debate. We should always, in every instance, call for peace, safety and security. Our commitment to a two-state solution reflects our belief in the principles of self-determination, mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence. When we look at what has been allowed to occur to the Palestinian people over the last decades and months and even the past weekend, we know that something has to give. Where does all the death and destruction end? In Northern Ireland, we often pride ourselves on being kind, helpful and neighbourly to those in our towns and cities. We must extend that internationally to help secure a just future for every Palestinian and Israeli so that they can live in peace, safety and dignity, with equal rights.

Mr Beattie: "Only the dead have seen the end of war" is what they say. War is not a video game, although, when you listen to some people, you know that, to them, it is nothing more than "Kill TV". In reality, when you are dead, you do not get a second life: you are dead. When you are maimed, you are maimed for life. When you are psychologically damaged, it will take years to rectify the issues. In some cases, they will never be rectified. War is an absolute abomination; it really is. One thing is absolutely true about war: the people who suffer are, time and time again, the innocent civilians, be they Israeli or Palestinian.

The Gaza conflict is devastating, but so is the conflict in Sudan, with 15,000 dead and two million internally displaced, and so is the conflict in Yemen, with over 350,000 dead, including 85,000 children starved to death and four million people displaced, and not a peep out of anybody. There are conflicts in Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Chad, Congo and Ukraine: nothing. As I will tell you in a minute, Ukraine has a lot to do with what we see in the Middle East.

I will make three points — they are not necessarily related — in the hope that they will provide a bit of balance. First, I have concerns about the motion. It seems to gloss over Hamas, which is a terrorist organisation; Hamas, which throws men off the top of buildings because they are gay; Hamas, which uses rape as a weapon of war; Hamas, which kidnaps and abuses children; Hamas, which strips out water infrastructure to create missiles

to fire at Israeli cities; Hamas, which has a stated aim of the total destruction of Israel. That is not innocent Palestinians' fault.

My second point concerns the assault in Rafah. That will be devastating for the innocent Palestinians who live there. You simply cannot put a 120-millimetre, high-explosive shell from a Merkava main battle tank through a kitchen window to kill a terrorist without affecting the family in there. You simply cannot drop a tower block with a 500-lb joint direct attack munition (JDAM) and call it "proportionality". A full-blown engagement in Rafah will be devastating. Israel has a right to defend itself, but it must do so within the laws of armed conflict: necessity, proportionality, distinction and humanity. It is absolutely clear, without a doubt, that Israel has, at times, gone beyond those laws of armed conflict.

My last point is about arms sales. The UK's arms sales to Israel are limited. They are very small; in fact, the vast majority of them are navigation systems for some of Israel's aircraft and radar systems. Those radar systems are needed to defend against the rockets that come in, and we now say that we want to take them away. Whether we like it or not, Israel is surrounded by hostile nations. We have all ignored Iran's malign influence in the region through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah in the Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in the Yemen, all of which are linked to the Russian Federation via organisations such as the Wagner Group. It is the same in Syria and in Iraq. It is really difficult to stand here and say that there should be an arms embargo, but maybe the question about arms sales is an ethical one. That is a different question, and we have to look at it in the round, but it is difficult to isolate one country when it is surrounded in such a way.

I know how the debate will end up. It will be a case of, "You didn't support the motion, so you don't support peace". That is how it will end up, so let me summarise and make it clear that we support an immediate ceasefire. We support the immediate release of all hostages. We support an increase in humanitarian aid. We support an international response, with an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-type organisation drawn from the regional countries.

We support a two-state solution, as per the Oslo agreement. We support de-escalation in the area. However, we cannot support the motion, which is naive at best and misses so many points.

3.30 pm

Mr Middleton: I dedicate my short remarks to all the hostages who remain under Hamas control in Gaza.

On 6 October 2023, in Israel, many Jewish families were preparing for their special weekend holiday and religious celebrations. Many family members travelled home to be with their parents and loved ones, including many members of the security forces, who were unaware of the murderous plan that lay ahead. At 6.30 am on 7 October, Hamas terrorists launched more than 2,000 rockets into Israel in the space of just 20 minutes. Families were woken from their beds and forced to take shelter in safe rooms as the deadly terrorists reached the border to carry out their attacks on civilian neighbourhoods. The Hamas terrorists entered these very peaceful communities on a murderous rampage, going from door to door killing, raping and burning alive men, women and children.

Just a couple of weeks ago, in the kibbutz Be'eri, just a few kilometres from the Gaza border, I stood in what was left of the home of Vivian Silver. Vivian was a 74-year-old Canadian-Israeli peace activist and a women's rights activist. She worked in the kibbutz to organise programmes to help Gazans, such as with jobs training and fair pay for Gazan construction workers. When she retired, she founded Women Wage Peace and volunteered with Road to Recovery and Project Rozana to transport patients from Gaza who were travelling to Jerusalem for treatment. On that dark day of 7 October, her home was found burned and gutted when first responders arrived. With no signs of a body, it was assumed that she had been abducted. It was not until five weeks after the attack that her remains were identified through DNA. More than 100 of Vivian's neighbours were murdered that day, with many more taken hostage. Children were prised from their parents' arms, senior citizens were pulled from their beds and babies were lifted from their cribs and driven into the deep, dark depths of the Gaza Strip.

Just a short distance away, another massacre was taking place as young people were enjoying the Supernova music festival. A total of 364 innocent people were gunned down — murdered, some raped, some then burnt. Some had taken cover in bomb shelters only to have grenades thrown into the shelters by Hamas. When I visited that site, it was heartbreaking to see the hundreds of memorials set up by family members of those who had been killed. In just a matter of hours, over 1,300 people were

murdered and many more wounded. As Vivian Silver knew, no good could ever come from war. There was a ceasefire prior to 7 October 2023. Twenty thousand citizens travel daily from Gaza into Israel for work, and many friendships were built. I visited the crossing and saw how open it had been.

It is a sad reality for the people of Gaza that they have suffered for far too long over the years from the actions of Hamas. Whilst Hamas leaders siphoned off funding for their lavish lifestyles and the building of their terror tunnels, ordinary Palestinians were being deprived of basic needs that their neighbours enjoyed. Hamas must be held accountable for its actions. We will always stand for democracy in the Middle East and against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, who want to bring instability to the region.

I want to put on record that every effort must be made to bring about peace, protect civilians and provide aid to those who need it. We stand too in condemnation and anger at all the innocent lives that have been lost — Palestinian, Israeli and all those who strive for peace. We have no problem, on these Benches, saying that. Hamas will never be content until Israel and all Jews are destroyed. Hamas does not abide by laws or agreements and, in its thirst for death, uses hospitals, playgrounds and every method that it can to use its own people as shields.

I want to see peace and stability in Israel and the Middle East. That must involve the immediate release of hostages and an end to attacks on its closest neighbours.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: Yes.

Mr Brooks: Does the Member agree that it has been inappropriate in the past but that it would be even more grotesque in the future should parties in the Chamber choose to indulge in relationships with Hamas, see Hamas speak at their events and so on, as Sinn Féin has done in the past?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Middleton: I agree with the Member. As I bring my remarks to a close, I must point out that, as a society, we cannot allow the radicalisation of our citizens by professionals who want to spread hate and bring discord to these shores. It is important that that dangerous rhetoric is challenged, because it will have disastrous consequences. Unfortunately, it is

being led by people who cannot even point out Gaza on a map. That needs to be challenged. The Chamber should be united against violence, as my party has been, not only here in our Province but across the world.

Ms Nicholl: You do not have to travel very far in Northern Ireland to realise that people have different views on Israel and Palestine: it is hung on lamp posts for people to see. However, I had hoped that, today, we could be united in our humanity. I have watched on in horror at Israel's treatment of Palestinians in Gaza and at the UK's refusal to call for a ceasefire, which Alliance has advocated for since October. My colleagues have already set out, unequivocally, that we condemn Hamas as a terrorist organisation. Firing rockets, kidnapping and summary executions constitute clear war crimes and crimes against humanity. I think of all those who are being held hostage and of how terrifying that must be for them and their families.

What is happening in Gaza is not self-defence. Israel's seizure of Gaza, forced expulsion of over one million Palestinians from northern Gaza and indiscriminate bombings of civilians and civilian infrastructure is not self-defence. It is collective punishment. It constitutes a war crime, and it has to be condemned by all, as should be the broader acceleration of illegal occupation and intensification of the subjugation of Palestinians in recent years. Consecutive right-wing Israeli Governments, especially the current Netanyahu Government, have intentionally accelerated the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory, pushed annexation and dispossession of Palestinian homes, incited hatred against Palestinians and normalised settler violence. Since 2021, Human Rights Watch, some Israeli human rights organisations and human rights experts have said that those actions are so severe that they amount to crimes against humanity.

I want to pick up on one thing before I go on to my next point. It relates to Doug Beattie's point about how there are other conflicts going on in the world and there is silence on those. That is true. I have been working a lot with Iranian women and members of the Sudanese community. I was at a rally relating to the appalling events in Sudan. That is where I met Mohammed Samaana and Sue Pentel. They were standing in solidarity. Supporting this motion is not saying that there are not other conflicts happening in the world — of course there are — but it is important that we focus on what is happening and on the impact that it is having on people who are here. People care so deeply about it. Palestinians in our community

are so concerned. I think that Masoud is here today. There are people in our community who have been doing so much to raise awareness, so I welcome the opportunity to have this debate and discussion and to raise awareness of what is happening.

My party deputy leader, Stephen Farry, who leads on foreign affairs for the party, has worked with human rights groups to advocate for the rights of Palestinians in the region under international law. He has repeatedly called for the UK Government to hold the Israeli Government accountable and warned of the dangerous potential consequences of these war crimes. Accountability is essential to prevent further recklessness and destruction. We are looking at what is happening in Rafah right now. I was struck by something that Save the Children said:

"For children in Gaza, this offensive could be the deadliest and most destructive chapter of the conflict yet. They need actions, not words."

"The UK must do everything in its power to stop the incursion from happening, including suspending arms sales to Israel, and demanding an immediate and definitive ceasefire."

Save the Children also said:

"People in Rafah have nowhere safe to go."

It is deeply concerning.

I made my very first Member's statement on this matter, when I talked about Hind Rajab. I keep thinking about that girl, who was six years old. I think about her every day. She was six years old, and she was sitting in a car with her relatives around her who were dead. She was talking on the phone and asking for someone to come and get her soon, because she was scared of the dark. She was saying, "Please come and help me", and you just think of a six-year-old child. They are not statistics: they are human beings. There is a problem in the media with the dehumanisation and — I think they call it — adultification of children in Gaza. What is the number? On 4 April, Save the Children reported that nearly 26,000 children — just over 2% of Gaza's child population — have been killed or injured in six months. Children are dying from starvation and disease at the highest rate that the world has ever seen — the highest rate that the world has ever seen.

Ms Egan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Nicholl: Yes, go ahead.

Ms Egan: Does the Member agree that that is an absolutely harrowing statistic, which only reinforces the need for a ceasefire?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you for that. I completely agree. Especially as parents, you just cannot get your head around how it is being allowed to happen and the international silence and hypocrisy around it.

We stand by a two-state solution. There is a mountain to climb, but there is no sustainable alternative that respects human rights. Alliance wants a just future for every Israeli and Palestinian, and for them to live in peace, safety and dignity, with equal rights. We have the opportunity to send a message from this Assembly. I support the motion.

Ms Hunter: I welcome that we have the opportunity today to talk about this incredibly important issue. I will struggle immensely to fit in my thoughts and feelings in articulating the horror and the level of atrocities that have been carried out over the past few months in Palestine, but I will certainly do my best.

Many here today, and outside the Chamber, will question why Assembly time has been devoted to international affairs when there are other pressing local matters. However, the scale and relentless nature of the war crimes that are being perpetrated by the Israeli Government represent such a horrific disregard for human life that we in this Chamber, I feel, are morally obliged to raise them, to ask for an end to the suffering of the Palestinian people and to join in the international calls for an immediate ceasefire. I want to thank the vast number of my constituents who have been in touch on this issue, some of whom have hosted and held rallies and have spoken so passionately about it.

Since October last year, Israel's brutal offensive has seen the slaughter of at least 34,735 Palestinians, wounded at least an additional 72,889 people and devastated the lives of countless thousands more. For people in this part of the world, the memory of conflict, albeit on a far smaller scale, still looms large. We would do well to consider the pain and trauma that will, undoubtedly, harm the people of Gaza for generations to come. Numbed and appalled, in this part of the world we have watched in sheer disbelief at the terror of bombing civilians and the wholesale destruction of schools,

hospitals and places of worship. One of the worst things that I have seen is the complete denial of aid — fuel, food and water — to the civilian population, which is struggling to survive and has nowhere to turn. Members, when future generations look back at this moment and our debate on this motion, they will surely wonder why so many of us were so slow to act when newborn babies and pregnant and breastfeeding mothers were being denied basic meals. It is absolutely unthinkable.

As 'The Washington Post' tag line states, "Democracy Dies in Darkness". Whilst the reputation of Israeli democracy is evermore in tatters, surely this week, with the attack on Rafah, it is at a new low. On 15 May 2021, the IDF levelled the al-Jalaa building in Gaza, toppling its 11 floors with just half an hour's notice. The building housed the Al Jazeera and the Associated Press offices. Little more than a year later, the IDF murdered the Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in cold blood, a crime for which no one has ever been held accountable.

Just last week, a Bill was passed to end the full operations of Al Jazeera in Israel. The philosopher and holocaust survivor Hannah Arendt once said that, if you cannot say something, you are living in a tyranny. For Al Jazeera, nothing at all can now be said inside the state of Israel. The concerted and systematic targeting of the Middle East's most prominent journalistic organisation is indicative of Israel's increasingly undemocratic tendencies and highly revealing of a state that has scant regard for the rights, dignity and political aspirations of the Palestinian people.

3.45 pm

Recently, a UN representative on human rights said that Israel had violated at least three of the five acts listed under the UN genocide convention. So regular are such atrocities that the acronym WCNSF — wounded child, no surviving family — has become a medical first, unique to Gaza. Surely that compels all those with a voice to condemn the genocidal campaign by Netanyahu and his supporters. Whilst we all share the pain at the atrocities of 7 October and urge the immediate return of the hostages, it is pressing today that we in the House call for a total ceasefire and immediate recognition of the state of Palestine and plead with the international community to renew all efforts to achieve lasting peace and a two-state solution. What in God's name is divisive in asking the House to condemn war crimes, the starvation of innocent children and the bombing

of hospitals, where people are injured and cannot get up out of bed to flee? I ask every elected representative in the House to truly dig down deep, ask their conscience, take a long, hard look in the mirror and support the motion. If you do not, I am really concerned about your morals, frankly.

Mr Frew: *"You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilisation from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Satan."*

That is an extract from a 1916 novel named 'The Power-House'. It illustrates perfectly what war is. We can take peace so much for granted, yet there are people all over the world who are suffering war. Currently, there are 35 armed conflicts in Africa, 21 in Asia and seven in Europe. I suggest that some of us would struggle to name them. There are six armed conflicts in South America and Central America. As has already been mentioned, according to the UN, since 2014, over 150,000 people have been killed in Yemen and an estimated 227,000 people are dead as a result of ongoing famine and lack of healthcare facilities due to that war. That is what war is.

Of course, every one of us here should call for the ending of war. Just as 9/11 changed everything for the US and, indeed, the world — remember that we sent troops — 7 October changed everything for the Israeli people. That is a stark comparison that must be made.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will give way once I have made progress.

Israel must have the right to defend itself. How it conducts the war should be tried and tested at the highest levels of court in the world, not, I suggest, by the SDLP through its motion, which is flawed. It grieves me that my party cannot support a motion that calls for the ending of war. Who are the SDLP Members or anybody else in the House to decide what is genocide and what is war? The motion states that 35,000 people are dead: where did they get that figure? I am not disputing it; I am asking where they got it. If it comes from the Ministry of Health, it is from a terrorist organisation called " Hamas ", so we have to be careful.

The sound bites and coverage that we all see on social media have been mentioned today. A lot of that cannot be attested to, so where do we get our information? We all have to be

careful about what we view and what we see, because we live in a new age of technology.

I will give way now.

Mr O'Toole: The Member has said a few things since I asked him to give way that I could respond to, but I appreciate his giving way. He is always open to debate. He said that everything had changed for Israel on 7 October. I acknowledged that 7 October was appalling and unjustifiable, but will he accept that the logic that he is using is, effectively, an eye for an eye, meaning that Israel can kind of do whatever it likes? The equivalent could be said for Palestinians, who could say that the actions of the last seven months have changed everything for them and therefore, by that logic, justify any response from Hamas or, indeed, any other violent actor. Is it not the case that, ultimately, you need to de-escalate and scale violence down?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: Yes, we are in the midst of war. How do we de-escalate that war? The Israeli state tells us — I have no love for the Government of Israel — that there are two objectives. The first is to bring home the hostages who are still underneath the ground in those tunnels, and the second is to completely destroy Hamas. How can we say that we want peace in the Middle East and that we want a two-state solution when one of the greatest barriers to that two-state solution is Hamas? How can we not see that and not add it to a motion?

Millions of pounds were sent into Gaza, but the Government of Gaza — Hamas — did not use it the concrete and steel to build hospitals and schools; they used it to build a network of tunnels so sophisticated that it compares to the underground network in New York. War is not the only thing that brings humanitarian crises and consequences to people; bad government does too. Therefore, we cannot and should not judge from here, seeing only limited information about what is going on on the ground. I appeal to Members to forget about your sound bites and your politicking. Let us call for a proper ceasefire in order that something good will come out of the carnage that is being perpetrated on Israeli families and on Palestinian families, and let us hope and pray that, some day, there will be lasting peace in Israel.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion. Other Members have spoken to the facts and the statistics: 100,000 Palestinians dead or injured, 70% of them women and children; and 1.4 million innocent civilians now cornered in Rafah, corralled like cattle. They were told to move south towards Rafah for their own safety, but they are now more vulnerable than ever, with doom and death breathing down their necks. Ultimately, there are no words that any Member can offer today that can comfort the besieged and slaughtered people of Palestine. There are no words that any MLA can offer that will strike at the heart of the horror that the Palestinian people are enduring. Our words are not enough, and that is why I want to use my time today to give ordinary people in Palestine a voice. I want to amplify the words of those people, who do not know whether, tomorrow, they will see dawn or doom and whether, tomorrow, they will see dawn or death.

My friend and SDLP colleague Killian Feehan has spent time in Gaza bringing help and aid there over the years. He has built abiding relationships and has reached out to his friends in Palestine over recent days, first, to see whether they are still alive and, secondly, so that they can give a voice to those who are fighting for survival under attack from a genocidal regime. I will share with you the words of Killian's friend, a young woman called Tala. At just 30 years old, Tala has witnessed more destruction and brutality than any of us should see in a hundred lifetimes. This is what Tala said:

"My heart aches. The pain felt in my beloved Palestine goes beyond words, touching the soul in a way that even tears cannot fully express. The entire world now knows of our horror. Silence and inaction will haunt you all of your life, and you shall endure the guilt of living next door to genocide. Human beings are supposed to live together, not to be left to die alone."

Nicola, aged 31, became a father for the first time last year. His words to Killian cut deep. Nicola said:

"There is nothing more brutal and inhumane than watching your son die in front of your eyes while you are tied up with no place to run. Please stop the destruction now. This is the scream of all fathers in Gaza."

George, at just 24 years of age, implored us to make this plea today:

"At a time when humanity is being extinguished in Gaza, send us yours. As the rest of the world turns their back on Gaza, come to our aid and stand with us."

It is critical that we keep sight of our common humanity and resist the urge to allow today to descend into whataboutery and one-upmanship. The words that I quoted were shared with us by three young Palestinians, three living, breathing human beings out of millions who now live with no guarantee of seeing tomorrow. Think about how that feels: millions of people do not know whether they will see tomorrow.

Those people love their parents just as much as we love ours. They love their children just as much as we love ours. They yearn for the same things as we yearn for: food, shelter, safety, peace, dignity and the freedom to build a better future for themselves and those around them. It seems obscene to me — it is obscene — that calling for an end to the slaughter of innocents has not yet received universal support.

My call today is simple: honour the pleas of innocent men, women and children. Do the right thing. Demonstrate your humanity. Demonstrate your morality. End the genocide. Call for peace with a collective and united voice.

Mr Allister: I cannot support the motion, because it is partisan and unbalanced. There is no recognition of the right of Israel to defend itself even after the most horrendous events of 7 October. Is there even a recognition in the motion of the right of Israel to exist, which would have to be the starting point for any solution? Indeed, the motion does worse than not accepting the right of Israel to defend itself; it, in fact, expressly wants to deny Israel the right to defend itself. It calls for:

"an end to arms sales ... to Israel".

How is Israel to defend itself if the House says, "You shouldn't get any arms"? The inescapable inference from the motion is that those who tabled it think that Israel should not be able to defend itself.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. First, as others and I have said, the scale of what Israel has done in the past seven months goes way beyond any concept of defending oneself.

The Member spoke about Israel existing. If he reads our motion, he will see that the text

affirms support for a two-state solution, and clearly implicit in recognition of a two-state solution is that the state of Israel would exist.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: The motion is without a word of rebuke for Hamas. Not a word of rebuke for its actions since 7 October. Not a word of rebuke for the thousands of rockets fired into Israel.

Yes, there is a call to stop arms sales to Israel, but not a word of rebuke for Hamas for bombarding Israel with rockets, night after night. There is no call in the motion for Hamas, a terrorist organisation, to give up its assaults or its dogma of dedication to the annihilation of Israel. There is no call to recognise the state of Israel. Rather, there is a quite partisan approach to the whole issue.

4.00 pm

That partisanship was carried further in the single Sinn Féin contribution. That contribution did not manage to make any mention — not a word — of condemnation of Hamas. There was not a word of condemnation of hostage-taking. Maybe that is no surprise, coming from a party that does not apologise for but supports the actions of the IRA in taking hostages. They could not even bring themselves to condemn the hostage-taking or to call for the release of hostages. Those same people talk about morality and lecture those of us who dare to speak against the motion. In the words of Ms Hunter, they question our morality. Well, sorry, but morality cuts both ways, and this is a motion that is crying out for the insertion of some morality in recognising the right of Israel to exist and to defend itself. It should contain unbridled condemnation of Hamas. In the absence of all those things, this is a tawdry motion that is not worthy of support.

Mr Carroll: It is important that the Assembly has a chance to discuss the urgent, pressing need for a ceasefire to be implemented to stop the Israeli killing machine. Despite all the declarations from this place about peace and peace processes, it is unforgivable that it has taken this long to have the debate about condemning genocide and the actions of Israel. It is long overdue for the Executive to call for a ceasefire. Rather than cosying up to states and Governments who fund the slaughter and the apartheid state, the Executive should call for a ceasefire. They should call for there to be no engagement with the apartheid state and for the expulsion of Israeli diplomats from these islands. So far, they have refused to do so.

The scale of what has been taking place is horrendous and unimaginable. One can only imagine what it is like for Palestinians who are trying to live through probably the first live-streamed genocide of our times. Although the scale is grotesque, it is not an aberration. The violence did not begin on 7 October. There has been a 7 October every other month or so for Palestinians, who have been living under terror, occupation and apartheid since at least 1948 — before that, if you include the violent British mandate system that was imposed on Palestinians.

There are a few issues with the motion that need to be mentioned before this place can hopefully call for a ceasefire. The first is that it equates the violence of those who are living under brutal occupation with those who seek to resist and push back against it. People often say, "What about peaceful protests?" Of course, that is always the preferred and usual way by which folk can and do stand against war and slaughter. However, when people tried to march peacefully for an end to Israeli occupation and violence, what happened? The Great March of Return was an attempt to do that. Palestinians with flags and banners were mowed down like dogs. Hundreds were killed, but there was no outrage from most Western states. Note the different reaction from states and Governments. We live in a cruel world: one in which some lives matter more than others. In that cruel world, in the eyes of most Governments, Palestinians are always at the bottom of the pile, their lives do not count and their stories do not matter. They do matter, however, to the millions of people across the world and across these islands who have marched to condemn the slaughter and to call for a ceasefire, the implementation of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) and the expulsion of Israeli ambassadors.

Palestine is a litmus test for the world. It is a litmus test for humanity that people are meeting that test. Across the world — in the Middle East and elsewhere — most Governments are failing that test. The EU, Britain and the US are complicit in the slaughter. They are not just turning a blind eye to it, which would be bad enough, but are up to their necks in funding and backing it. Shame on them all.

The people have still marched and taken to the streets. I commend all those people who have done so. I particularly mention the students and young people who are marching in the US and camping out in universities there. Here, I salute the students at Queen's who have occupied the Lanyon Building today to call on the Queen's administration to call out the Israeli state.

Palestine is the end of the world that never ends. It is up to Palestinians to determine what their future looks like, free from assault, slaughter, massacres and occupation. It is a mistake for the motion to dictate what that should look like. In my view and that of many others, it is a mistake to impose a discredited, unworkable two-state solution on Palestinians, many of whom do not accept it for many reasons. We have recently seen that even the US does not want a two-state solution. It has resisted calls to implement one for decades.

The Oslo Accords gave the green light to the extension of illegal and immoral Israeli settlements. Palestinians have every right to dismantle that apartheid system and apartheid state, and we support them in their right to do so. Unfortunately, the motion does not support that. Israel has to be seen as a settler, colonial, apartheid state. Growing numbers of people see it that way. The logic that should follow, as it did with South Africa, is that the state and the system should fall.

Despite all the talk of agreeing a ceasefire, what does Israel do? With all the talk of a possible ceasefire in our midst, Israel goes to the border at Rafah, states that it will intervene there and implements slaughter on a mass scale. In that context, people need to go back to mobilising and to go back on to the streets to call for a free Palestine from the river to the sea. People need to end support for that apartheid system, that apartheid state and that brutal apartheid regime.

Mr Speaker: I call Colin McGrath to make a winding-up speech.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I begin by thanking all Members who participated for the way in which they contributed. They added to the conversation that we need to have, and this is an appropriate place in which to have it. It has been good to have those contributions in order to allow us to continue with the discussions.

The debate was not one for grandstanding, dog-whistling or making assumptions. One of the key underlying reasons for that is that, if we have learnt anything in the past 26 years here, it is that an agreed peace, imperfect though it may be, can be incredibly fragile. Peace has to be the ultimate goal. It can never be won by a military operation alone, or through violence or subjugation of another, but rather by negotiation, agreement and reconciliation.

I listened to the debate, and I agree with most of the remarks made. Some were a little bit off

the mark, while some were rather typical. The past 24 hours have been turbulent for the future of Palestine. We have heard that Hamas has accepted a deal negotiated by Egypt and Qatar that would allow for a 40-day ceasefire. We have heard that Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said that the deal falls short of Israel's wants, although one has to question what wants he is looking for. Is it the future of Israel, or are his actions about holding on to power and remaining as Prime Minister?

Amidst all of that, we have heard that, following Israel's overnight strikes against Rafah, five people have been killed. That is just overnight in one event that five civilians have been killed. What would happen if that were to happen here? What if we had woken up this morning and found out that five people from here had died as a result of actions that had taken place? There would be an outcry in the Chamber from all parties. Nobody would come in here to defend the actions of one or the other. If five civilians had lost their lives, there would be an outcry from everyone. Where is the outcry for the more than 35,000 people who have died as a result of Israel's bombardment since 7 October? Where is the outcry for the 14,000 children whose lives have been taken since 7 October? Do their lives not matter? Do they not breathe the same air as the rest of us? Do they not bleed the same blood as we do? Did their lives not have the same potential as the life of any child who was born in Northern Ireland? They are children, but to some people in power, they are nothing more than collateral damage in a conflict that has been raging for hundreds of years. Their lives are gone, and that cannot be undone.

We do not support the actions of Hamas: that is written clearly in the motion. We do not agree with taking hostages or hiding behind women and children or international workers to achieve your aims. We do not agree with any of that, but likewise, we do not agree with the IDF's carpet bombing of schools and hospitals to achieve its aims. We do not agree with the murder of innocent women and children. Consequently, we do not agree with the United States earning \$4 billion a year from exporting arms to Israel or the United Kingdom exporting nearly £600 million of arms since 2008.

While the text of the motion debated today concerns what has happened since 7 October, it is important to recognise that a genocide has been happening in Palestine over the past number of years. It has been a genocide — an ethnic cleansing on an unsurpassed scale. In the past 70 years, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian people have been dispossessed of

their land, property, jobs and homes. The people forced to leave their homes and families have never been able to return.

Of the nine million Palestinians worldwide, only a small number still live in Palestine. Their lives are constricted and controlled by the Israeli Government. Walls have been built to keep Palestinians out. Their water and electric supply is restricted. If they want to enter Jerusalem, they must request a special permit. If they want to avail themselves of healthcare, they often have to travel to another country to do so. Can any of us imagine if we were asked to live like that?

The deliberate killing of such a vast number of people from that nation and ethnic group, with the aim of destroying the nation, is the dictionary definition of genocide. It is not just something I am saying; it is the dictionary definition — go and check it. The definition is clear to see.

What about the solution? How are we to find peace? The first step must and can only be that we stop the killing. Someone has to step forward and interrupt the cycle of violence, otherwise, it will roll on and on. That today we can debate and discuss the matter is a testament to what can be achieved when we stop the cycle of violence, bloodshed and killing. We know that it took time. We know that it was and is a painful process. However, the pursuit of lasting peace is never easy, because, in that process, there has to be an acknowledgment of the hurt and pain that has been handed out.

We must see recognition of the state of Palestine. Only then can the people of the Middle East begin the process of becoming neighbours. Some have referenced that we have not acknowledged that Israel has a right to exist. We clearly state that there should be a two-state solution. It is implicit that the motion includes Israel. No one is saying that Israel should not have its place. Others said that we have ignored what Hamas has done. As I said, the text of the motion is clear, and I have stated that we do not support that. Reference was made to the other genocides taking place in other parts of the world, and that is correct, but the motion is about what is happening in Gaza. It has unique features that make it more relevant to people here. I suggest that Members are contacted more about Gaza than other disputes around the world. Another important thing is that, if we permit what is happening in Gaza, we give permission to the genocides that are taking place in other parts of the world.

4.15 pm

Surely we can teach the world what it is to overcome violence and become good neighbours. That is what we have experience of here. If we cannot even do that, what is it that we are doing here? I urge all Members to stand up for peace and for humanity, to join the call for an immediate ceasefire and to support our motion as presented today.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 44; Noes 26.

AYES

Ms Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Egan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr McAleer, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr Andrew McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Hunter and Ms McLaughlin

NOES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mr Beattie, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Harvey and Mr Kingston.

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

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the ongoing genocide in Gaza that has left more than

35,000 people dead, most of them women and children; further condemns the actions of Hamas on October 7, which left 1,300 people dead and many families searching for loved ones; abhors the killing of international humanitarian aid workers seeking to deliver vital supplies to the civilian population on the brink of famine; rejects plans for a ground assault on the city of Rafah, with a refugee population of more than one million Palestinians sheltering with nowhere safe to go; regrets the failure of the international community to act decisively in the interests of peace; affirms its support for a two-state solution and the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine; calls for an immediate ceasefire in the region and the release of all hostages; further calls for an end to arms sales and transfers to Israel while the genocide continues; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to write jointly to the UK Prime Minister in pursuit of these objectives.

Mr Speaker: Members should take their ease while we change the top Table before the Adjournment debate.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Housing Crisis on the North Coast

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Cara Hunter to raise the matter of the housing crisis on the north coast. I call Cara Hunter, who has up to 15 minutes in which to speak.

4.30 pm

Ms Hunter: I thank all my constituency colleagues and the Minister, of course, for being here today. I submitted the topic for the Adjournment debate in good faith, Minister, to work with you and your Department, as well as alongside constituency and other party political representatives. Today, we have the chance to highlight the undeniable and unbelievable need for housing in the constituency of East Derry or East Londonderry — whatever you want to call it. Minister, in my past few years as an elected rep — it is coming up to five years now — housing has continued to be the number-one issue that I see. Whether it is young, vulnerable single men, looked-after children leaving care and looking for housing for the first time, people who live life with a physical or learning disability or mothers and fathers who have been left homeless with nowhere to go, it is creating significant pressure. I really welcome the chance to debate and talk about it further today.

I will touch on the lived experience of one of my constituents. Years ago, I met a lovely lady in my constituency who uses a wheelchair due to a medical diagnosis. She could not gain access to a house that was fit for purpose, and it was taking years to get a suitable home for her. As a direct result, she has been living in a caravan in the East Derry constituency. That shows the level of pressure that exists and the solutions that people have been forced into in order to get a fit-for-purpose, disability access-approved home.

That is just one of many stories. All of us across the House have heard over the past number of years about the pressures on our housing system. Over 46,000 people in the North are awaiting a home. I am genuinely worried for the

health and well-being of my constituents who are experiencing the pressures that housing stress can bring.

Having this conversation today is an opportunity to hear directly from you and your Department, Minister, and to talk a little bit more about strategies for housing and the solutions that are being proposed in order to adequately solve the ongoing housing crisis. Minister, I am aware that you have been in position for only a couple of months, but housing here is a historical problem. It has been underfunded for generations, arguably. I really welcome the fact that we are here today to talk about it further.

We must immediately build and expand social housing in our communities and throughout East Derry. We have seen each and every day the unbelievable challenges of people being made homeless, with mere weeks to find a home, but they rarely do. That forces families to move into overcrowded houses, and they suffer immensely. Their mental health suffers as well due to housing pressures. Housing stress really does ruin lives. I spoke recently with children who are experiencing housing stress. They touched on the fact that they cannot bring friends over because they live in a family member's living room, as opposed to having their own bedroom and their own home. Those are just some of the lived experiences that I wanted to share today.

The debate covers the constituency, including the north coast area, so we are talking about places like Portrush, Portstewart and the wider Coleraine area. We are continuing to see the loss of private rentals for families who desperately need them, and there really are no homes available. That has contributed, essentially, to a situation in which we have fewer houses available, the market is more competitive, the rent prices are going up and when houses are for sale, people cannot afford them. Young professionals, young families and people who have just got married or want to start a family are really struggling. Ultimately, I believe that the lack of available housing is eliminating a sense of community in those areas, but I will come to that further down the line.

As I mentioned in previous speeches in the House, I have met estate agents over the past few months who said that they have never seen the situation as bad or as stark as it is now, with so few houses available in the north coast area. That is a really interesting point to raise today. When talking about housing and housing stress in East Derry and the wider north coast area, we need to address our unique position of

struggling with housing and second-home ownership. Portrush is a very attractive place. I live there, I love it there and I grew up there, and I can see why people want to live there. When we talk about second-home ownership and, of course, the lucrative short-term lets, for example, Airbnbs, we see that they are really impacting on young families' ability to access a house there for the children to grow up in. It is important to raise that today. Whilst I in no way seek to demonise second-home ownership, I want to place it on your radar, Minister. There is a conversation to be had about perhaps moderating the number of houses that are being bought to be second homes. I will give an example. In the last Assembly election, I canvassed a street that I grew up in — it is a street of about 10 or 12 houses — and I thought, "This is great, I will knock on the door of the house that I grew up in." However, nobody lived there, because it was a second home. Eventually, I knocked on a door and a lady answered. I asked, "Is there a football match today? What is going on? Why is it so empty?". She said, "There are three families in the street, and the rest of the houses are second homes". I said, "This is such a transformation from when I was a child, about 20 years ago". The cultural and community changes in Portrush are interesting points to talk about. Other Members will have canvassed other areas, such as Portballintrae, where up to half of the properties are second homes.

I welcome the fact that Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council has researched this issue as part of local area planning, and I previously touched on the statistics for Portrush. Its figure for second homes is estimated at between 16% and 24%. The figure for Portstewart is between 15% and 23%. Minister, that is why I put this on your radar today. It is about the lack of sustainability of housing in the area. People feel hopeless. I have spoken with mothers and fathers who said, "I know that this will not go the way that I want. I will be waiting for up to five or 10 years". We talk a lot in the House about mental health, supporting families and early years. If we want to support families and, ultimately, give children the best go at life by supporting them in their early years, the best way for them to have a happy life is to have a happy and stable home.

I welcome the opportunity to bring this matter to the House today. I know — I say this sincerely — that Members across the House genuinely care about the issue and work hard within their parties and with councillors and other reps to house constituents. For me, it is not a party political issue but about ensuring that we can provide the best standard of life, opportunity

and success for our constituents to live life and have a happy, stable home. Minister, in your response, I would welcome your touching on the strategies, targets and conversations that you are exploring, particularly on second-home ownership and Airbnbs. It is such a lucrative sector, but it is undoubtedly negatively impacting on my constituents. I have seen a trend of Housing Executive houses being bought and, a year or two down the line, turned into Airbnbs. Local families then knock on my office door and ask, "What do we do? I have no access to a house". That is why I am here today to raise this with you, Minister. I thank all who are in the House for being here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): All other Members will have approximately seven minutes in which to speak.

Mr Robinson: I will begin my contribution in a positive way by highlighting the picturesque retreats that dot our north coast. There is no doubt that the coastline and the towns and villages that we represent in East Londonderry are truly stunning, world-class and highly sought-after places for visiting and living in. All of us in the Chamber who represent East Londonderry should feel proud and lucky to live in and represent that part of Northern Ireland.

The north coast certainly has its seasonal patterns. It is safe to say that some businesses have had their economic struggles because their times of thriving on seasonal trade are interspersed with large parts of the year when accommodation is semi-redundant because owners are absent, therefore contributing only sporadically to the local economy. However, the many wealthy second-home owners contribute handsomely to the area. I know that some are entrepreneurs who have created multimillion-pound businesses and generated wealth in Northern Ireland. When they visit our region, they shop and dine. The maintenance industry, indeed, relies on second-home owners, with builders, carpenters, plumbers and electricians finding steady work in maintaining their properties.

With the abundance of second homes, however, come many challenges. It is safe to say that homes being empty outside peak season leaves some of our towns and villages feeling empty. There is also the affordability crisis: the influx of second homes can inflate property prices, pushing locals out of the housing market. We must always remember that a community thrives on its people. When second-home owners outnumber permanent residents, the social bonds weaken. That is prevalent in areas such as Portballintrae, where

the council suggests that 45% to 51% of the housing stock is now second homes.

Councillors in that area have told me that there are localities where a single light shines from the one permanent home and where residents talk about a lonely existence. Maybe there is the possibility of local groups, the council and others engaging with second-home owners to foster a sense of shared responsibility for towns and to provide a future where second homes coexist with the heartbeat of the local area. The path forward with regard to second homes is about striking a balance. If regulation is the way forward, it must be done with sensitivity. Welcoming second-home owners while preserving our community spirit is paramount.

If councils are minded to wield power by way of changing planning law to regulate second homes and holiday lets, it must be done with common sense. I am aware that Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council had called for DFI to consider changing planning laws in a bid to control the number of holiday homes on the north coast, only for DFI to respond by saying that it had no plans to amend existing planning legislation as not all council areas are affected by second homes and holiday lets. DFI suggested that it was for councils to prepare bespoke local policies to address the issues. However, a council report dated 26 October 2022 indicated that research had not established evidence to demonstrate that the presence of second homes and holiday lets was the sole reason for high property prices, and that leads me on to the need for more investment in affordable housing for our local residents.

The council paper that I referred to states:

"Where it has been demonstrated that the presence of second homes raises a local issue in particular settlements, for example a significant level of affordable housing need as identified through the Housing Needs Assessment, experience has been that the most effective way to assist in redressing the imbalance has been to provide a substantial number of new affordable housing units in that settlement through the planning system by zoning of land specifically for affordable housing purposes."

I will not speak on any specifics of the housing need on the north coast. I know that that may seem a little strange, given that I represent the area, but my party colleague Maurice Bradley and I have what you may call a "gentleman's agreement" whereby I look after the west of the

constituency and Mr Bradley looks after the east of the constituency. Therefore, Maurice, who unfortunately remains off while he recovers from a period of ill health, would have been a capable individual in a good position to give many practical examples of the housing needs on the north coast. I will be limited to comments around the social housing new-build programme.

In Causeway Coast and Glens, in the previous financial year, there were 79 new social houses started, with a proposed 576 new builds being planned for the period from 2023 to 2026. However, with 3,604 people on the waiting list as of March 2023 and 2,069 of those in housing stress, it does not take a mathematician to see that there will be disappointment for those on the list, who may have to wait longer than they had hoped. That applies across Northern Ireland and obviously is not unique to Causeway Coast and Glens.

The most recent Housing Executive housing investment plan indicated a need for small family accommodation, but, given that the 65-plus age group increased by 26% over the period from 2011 to 2021, there will be a need for the design and construction of greater amounts of accommodation for older people. I welcome the fact that, in that report, in Causeway district electoral area (DEA), Portrush and Portstewart are highlighted as areas of high need and therefore considered to be two key areas of priority. Coleraine and Limavady were highlighted, with a social housing need of 420 and 213 respectively.

Minister, I look forward to hearing from you today. You are from the area, and I know that you have spoken passionately for the Province and, specifically, for the north coast, where you still have your roots. I welcome your contribution today, Minister.

Ms Mulholland: I am obviously here as an MLA for North Antrim, but we share a council area and the pressure for housing on the north coast does not end at the boundary into Portballintrae. Something similar is happening in Bushmills, Ballintoy, Ballycastle and even on round into your constituency, Minister, in Cushendall, although I am taking back Cushendun in the next boundary changes. It is a common issue across the north coast, and there is an urgency about the debate. I hear about this so often in my constituency surgeries outside of the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council bit of the constituency, when we go into the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area. What was a crisis of housing is

now a real threat to the sustenance of the communities right along the coast.

4.45 pm

We urge that action be taken to address the multifaceted nature of the crisis, particularly the unchecked growth of second homes, the detrimental impact of short-term rentals that appear on platforms such as Airbnb and the lack of affordable and social housing in the area. I will not go over the statistics that the Members who spoke before me, both of whom represent East Derry/Londonderry, outlined. The proliferation of second homes is not just a statistic but a force that is driving those astronomical levels, and it renders the dream of local residents to buy their own home completely inaccessible. I have spoken to constituents in my area who have had to move to Ballymena, Ballymoney or Coleraine just to get somewhere affordable to live. The knock-on effect of that is that there are more challenges to growing a family, between childcare issues and being able to raise a family without a close network nearby. As they say, it takes a village to raise a child, but we are losing that sense of community.

On top of all those issues, the average wage in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area is depressingly low when compared with the soaring property prices. The disparity is stark. The lowest average wage in Northern Ireland is found in Causeway Coast and Glens, while the highest average house price is also found in Causeway Coast and Glens. Our communities face a crisis that is perpetuating the cycle of outward migration to areas such as Ballymoney, Ballymena and even Belfast, although why would people choose to live in Belfast when they could live on the north coast? I think that that is the issue.

It does not get any easier for those who are unable to buy their own home. The rents that are charged to long-term tenants in the area are rising faster there than in any other region. The rise of Airbnb has exacerbated the situation, as we have said. If property owners can get up to eight times more for a short-term let than they can for a long-term rental, more and more of them will choose that, which underscores the urgency of the situation. According to the figures, 3,000 new self-catering units have been registered since 2019. That is a staggering 163% increase in self-catering accommodation, and nearly 40% of it is in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area. Of course, that is just the ones that are properly registered, because, as we know, there is a proliferation of such accommodation that is not registered.

That is something that we hear anecdotally in the office about places in Ballintoy, Ballycastle and across the north coast.

The Department for the Economy's recent report recommends trying to regulate those short-term rentals and the online booking platforms in order to restore balance. We would welcome that. There has to be some kind of oversight of the percentage of homes that are either second homes or short-term rentals. The consequences of the crisis extend far beyond economics. Our communities are suffering, as I have said. Local businesses falter during the off-peak season. Populations dwindle owing to the lack of affordable housing, so schools close, services vanish and the fabric of those communities frays.

The issues with social housing are not unique to our region, with Northern Ireland as a whole grappling with the same challenges, especially in the absence of a housing supply strategy. We would love to see one urgently. As we map the market and the need and analyse the numbers, it becomes clear that it is something on which we need to take action as quickly as we can. We cannot allow those communities to wither away. If young people are not able to grow up in their community and we continue to have more and more transient populations, there is nowhere left for people from those communities to go. We want a future in which housing is a right, not a privilege that is dictated by economic disparity.

Ms Sugden: I offer my best wishes to Mr Bradley. I was not aware that he was unwell. I appreciate that he takes care of the east of the constituency and that you, Mr Robinson, take care of the west. As ladies, we take care of all of it. Hopefully, I will commit to that through my contribution. I also thank Ms Hunter for securing the debate. Her contribution was fantastic. She articulated the issues so diligently and got to the crux of the matter.

I have been highlighting the problem for several years, so I appreciate the attention that it is now being given in the Assembly. I also appreciate the fact that the Minister is here. He is a north coast boy, so I am sure that he has an interest, but the issue is not limited to the north coast. I am sure that there are other areas of Northern Ireland and, indeed, outside Northern Ireland that are affected, and we can talk about that later.

It is an important issue, and it has a severe impact on those affected. We have heard from other Members how many that is. Having a home is a fundamental part of our lives: it

creates stability, enables community and is connected to our children's education, our health, our ability to work and earn a living and our emotional well-being. I appreciate that there are many areas across the region that have housing challenges, and I expect every MLA to say, as Ms Hunter did, that it is the most common issue that is presented in our constituency offices.

Undoubtedly, Northern Ireland is experiencing a housing crisis generally. We see that acutely on the north coast for the same reasons as other areas, but it is compounded by issues related to second-home ownership. I take Mr Robinson's point that this is not about demonising second-home owners but about trying to find balance, so that we can benefit from the economy that is stimulated by second-home owners and other people who come to the north coast but, equally, so that we can provide enough homes for people who want to live and work there. They may have grown up in the area, and it is what they want for their families and their children as well.

The impact of the housing crisis is wide-ranging, and it has a profound effect on individuals, communities, local services and the economy. An immediate consequence is an increase in homelessness, and people are being forced to live in shelters and overcrowded accommodation. They are sofa-surfing, or they are placed in temporary accommodation that is hours away from their community, their child's school or their job. Imagine having additional challenges, such as fleeing a domestic abuse situation, having a child with special educational needs or being an older person who already feels isolated, and to then be offered temporary accommodation that is miles away from the area that you call home. That is shameful, and it feels as though it is not a priority for our Government. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on that, because, if it is the number-one issue in every constituency office across Northern Ireland, that tells me that it is an action that needs to be prioritised, and I would expect to see it in our next Programme for Government.

Housing affordability is also becoming a significant challenge in the midst of a housing crisis and a cost-of-living crisis. As demand outstrips supply, housing prices and rents increase to unaffordable levels. Many now find themselves in financial hardship simply to keep a roof over their head. Those who cannot afford the rising costs will move on, and those who can afford it will move in for the weekend. Long-term residents and families are being displaced. Young families who wish to raise their children

in the area where they grew up are being priced away. Older people, who expected to live out their final years, are being evicted. I have many examples of that having happened.

I want to talk about second-home ownership, because there is increased interest in it and it is something that I have spoken about over the last number of years. It has an impact: it can drive up property prices in areas with limited housing supply, which makes it difficult for local residents, particularly those on lower incomes, to afford housing. That phenomenon, as many of you will know, is known as "gentrification", and it can lead to the displacement of long-term residents and change the character of communities.

Many homes are primarily used as holiday homes, leading to seasonal fluctuations in population. We have heard that, in the winter months, there is, perhaps, only one family living in a street. You do not have to knock the doors: if you look at the electoral register, you will see that, in a street of 10 houses, there is only one family registered there. That is definite data that suggests that we are experiencing a problem on the north coast, and maybe it is something that the Minister can look at to see how prevalent it is.

Local infrastructure can also be strained, leading to issues with waste and water management. That comes back to the issue of building more homes, and the Minister will be familiar with that. We can build as many homes as we like, but the first hurdle is getting planning permission, and our infrastructure is not able to cope. This is such a cross-cutting issue, as, it seems, everything is, and it is something that we really need to properly focus on.

Members have talked about other impacts, but it is important that we look towards solutions. It is a really difficult issue. We need only to look at other parts of the UK — for example, Cornwall and, I think, Pembrokeshire in Wales — to see what solutions have been taken there. They have not always been successful. They include council tax premiums, or whatever the equivalent might be here, but some people would argue that if you can afford a second home, you could probably afford that particular increase. How much impact would it really have? There is a lot more to be done to empower the local authorities, the councils, to look at their planning policies to see how we give status, I suppose, to second homes and whether enforcement is actually happening, because, sometimes, a measure is already in place, but the council is not enforcing it.

Other opportunities are affordable housing requirements and change of use restrictions. There are community land trusts. I do not know whether there is a direct translation to Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Minister could look into that. There are tourist taxes. We see those in other parts of the world. That might be something that we want to do, and the money could go back into those local communities to, perhaps, mitigate some of the challenges that we have with second homes. There could be empty homes initiatives. Second-home owners might find themselves in the difficult situation where their home, which is costing them money to keep, heat and light, is not working for them, maybe because people do not want to come to the area. We need to do a number of different things and be creative.

I am really pleased that the Minister is in the Chamber, because it has felt as though we have been talking about the issue for such a long time but not really doing anything about it. I look forward to hearing the Minister's solutions.

Ms Ferguson: I thank the Member who secured the Adjournment debate on housing need. Although the debate is specific to the north coast, including parts of the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area, it is important to reiterate that we recognise the growing need that exists across all our constituencies. When we consider the data, broken down by council area, it is clear that there is significant need in all our constituencies, particularly in Belfast and Derry. However, coastal areas, such as Causeway Coast and Glens and Newry, Mourne and Down, for example, face unique challenges, including those that relate to the proliferation of short-term lets and second homes. As we are well aware, as of September 2023, 45,615 households were on the social housing waiting list. The crux of our challenge remains both the availability and affordability of housing, alongside adequate support to tackle poverty and support for low-income households.

Housing is a human right, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and recognised in international human rights law. However, much more work is needed for that to be realised, including government policy, which can help to guide housing provision. We all have a duty to ensure that every person has access to a safe, secure and affordable place to call home. We must use our collective knowledge about the key issues in respect of housing need, which is further examined by the Department, to ensure that we can prevent any imbalance in housing diversity, affordability and availability across our different communities.

Young people deserve to have suitable housing available in their area of choice, including the communities in which they grew up or where they find work, whether that is urban, rural or coastal. We must ensure that design standards are improved to meet a diversity of needs, including for people with physical disabilities and larger families who are currently living in unsuitable homes without the facilities, space or independence that they need. Every home that is built that is not accessible or adaptable to a diversity of needs is a wasted opportunity and a future problem.

It is also important that we can and must deliver a more regionally balanced economy, unlock the full potential of our tourism sector and, coinciding with that, resource a long-term plan for building homes both for social rent and to be made available for homeowners. We must see urgent developments on the Housing Executive reform project alongside improved housing standards and energy efficiency. Additionally, we need to see enhanced regulation of those who are involved in house letting.

In order to provide a long-term framework to work to across the four-party Executive and the Opposition, I ask the Minister for Communities to publish the housing supply strategy with a sensible timeline for delivery and also to ensure that housing is and will remain a priority in the forthcoming Programme for Government. Achieving housing for all will have positive implications for the health and well-being of every generation, and our communities and families cannot wait.

5.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the Minister for Communities to respond. The Minister will have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): I thank Ms Hunter for bringing the Adjournment debate to the House, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to it. I recognise many of the issues and concerns that the Member and others raised in the debate about housing on the north coast. I also understand that there are some housing matters, including second homes and holiday homes, that are perhaps more commonly raised when we talk about places such as the north coast. However, many of the issues that are experienced are replicated throughout the country, and Ms Ferguson reminded us that the problem is not limited to any one area and that the solutions that are required to address them are the same. As Minister for housing, I spoke recently in the

Assembly about the need to accept that those issues and concerns are faced not just in one constituency or one area. In our cities and our towns, urban and rural, the demand for good-quality, affordable and sustainable homes continues to grow. I reiterate that housing in all places is a priority for me and needs to be a priority across the Executive.

Housing must be considered as a whole system, and there must be collective commitment and action across government alongside private, voluntary and community sector partners. I state again that the barriers to delivery that we face, such as water infrastructure capacity constraints, land availability and the planning process, will require coordinated action and investment from across the Executive, otherwise housing supply will continue to decline. We must acknowledge the very challenging Budget situation and the recognition that, with increased demand on services and rising costs, there is not sufficient funding to do everything that we want. However, we need and want to be an Executive that deliver. That means focusing on what is important, and I believe that one of those things is providing homes for our people. We must deliver if we want to avoid sliding into a housing crisis like those elsewhere in the UK and in Ireland, but we have to acknowledge that the financial situation is more challenging than it has ever been.

The whole-system approach that I talk about is fundamental to the draft housing supply strategy that I am working to finalise. As I mentioned before, that strategy will aim to provide the framework for the system changes that we need, but it will deliver only if other Departments prioritise the changes in budgetary allocations that they have to make so that the whole system can deliver the homes that we need. I have been clear about the need to build more social homes. I announced to the Assembly on 9 April that, in the last financial year, across Northern Ireland, we met our target of having over 1,500 social homes started in partnership with the Housing Executive and housing associations. I am pleased that that target was met in the face of an extremely constrained budgetary environment, but I also acknowledge that 1,500 homes are not enough. We know what the evidence is telling us. We need to protect the social homes that we have and start about 2,500 houses a year, but that is not the environment that we are operating in.

Members will be aware of the 2024-25 Budget and the Finance Minister's remarks about the demands on our finances outstripping many

times over the funding that is available. However, I assure Members today that I will continue to spend most of my capital budget on the provision of social homes. As much as I want to build 35,000 more social homes over the next 15 years, I must remind Members that that will be possible only if budget is available year-on-year. I want to put that ambitious programme into place, but it is dependent on housing being prioritised in Budget allocations.

The commitment to social home delivery can be seen across the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area. Between the financial years 2019 and 2024, 505 social homes were started and 361 were completed in the council area. Over the next three years and subject to budget, 463 social homes are programmed to start in the constituency as part of the social housing development programme. I also intend to take action to protect our Housing Executive so that it can continue to provide decent homes for our households and families. I recently highlighted the very real warning from the Housing Executive that, due to the current state of its houses and rental income, some of its houses might become unfit to live in. We simply cannot allow that to happen. That would have a catastrophic impact on communities and the tens of thousands of people who would never get a social home. The Housing Executive is a significant landlord in the scale and provision of services to its tenants. I want to make sure that it remains so for generations to come. Finding a solution that will place the Housing Executive on a sustainable financial footing is a top priority for me.

As I mentioned, the potential impact of holiday lets and second homes on local housing markets and communities is of particular interest on the north coast. People who are looking for a home are not able to find one, so it is hard for them to see houses in their communities sitting empty for most of the year. Houses once rented to tenants are now Airbnbs, so people see houses that they could live in being used only in the summer or for a few weekends. There are housing developments where local working families feel priced out because people from outside are buying houses as holiday homes.

That is a challenging issue. There is limited data on second homes, and sometimes it is conflicting. It can, because of that, be difficult to establish the extent of second homes, their location and the impact that they may be having on local housing markets. The latest census for Northern Ireland showed that 6% of all houses had no usual residents. There is a range of possibilities for that, including that they are truly

vacant; they are being renovated; they are self-catering, short-term lets; or they are second homes. It is notable, however, that, in the Causeway Coast and Glens area, the proportion of homes with no usual residents is, at 13%, more than double the overall figure for Northern Ireland.

Some of that is unavoidable. However, more holiday homes or holiday lets could distort a housing market, especially if there were a rapid change in the number of such properties. My Department and the Housing Executive are therefore carrying out research on second-home ownership to improve our understanding of what has gone on. Also, at a basic level, the local council needs to know the extent of second-home ownership to properly understand the need for new housing and to make provision for that in its local development plans.

This will, of course, require all of the Executive to work together. The Department for the Economy has a role as well. The provision of tourist accommodation in Northern Ireland is regulated by Tourism NI, which is undertaking a review of legislation relating to the provision of tourism accommodation. That will allow it to consider the changes required to the regulatory environment in its totality to ensure sustainable growth. The Department for Infrastructure could look at the reforms that have been made in England. The Welsh Government have introduced powers for councils to charge a council tax premium of up to 300% on second homes. Obviously, that will require consideration by colleagues in the Department of Finance. As you can see, this issue will require a genuinely collaborative approach because it impacts on Departments across the Executive. I will write to Executive colleagues shortly on the housing supply strategy, and I hope to have an early discussion on those issues.

I will touch on some of the comments that were made. The Member who secured the debate was right to say that this is the most pressing issue for all of us in our constituency offices. That is why we need to address it. Alan Robinson — or should I call him the Member for West-East Londonderry? — was right to highlight the point that this should not be about pitting second-home owners against those who live in the area permanently. What we need is additional supply to deal with the demand, and that is at the heart of what we are trying to do. We do not want to be in the position, as Sian Mulholland said, of people moving away. Families moving out causes huge problems for the community, including a damaging loss of services. Ms Sugden was right to raise the

issue of homelessness. We know the instability that moving about creates in the life of a family, and for children in particular. That is why this needs to be raised.

I am committed to a genuinely ambitious and strategic programme of work that will deliver for everybody. I recognise that these issues face people across the country and that a cross-Executive approach will be required, and I am up for that. I will bring the housing supply strategy forward soon. I want to make sure that we are in a position to ensure that everyone has a safe, sustainable and affordable place to call home.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Minister Lyons, for that response.

Adjourned at 5.10 pm.