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Contents

Assembly Business

Committee for the Executive Office: Deputy Chairperson..... 1

Matters of the Day

Decision not to Prosecute Black Lives Matter Protesters 1

Special Envoy to the United States 5

Assembly Business

Public Petition: Support for Unpaid Carers in Northern Ireland..... 10

Committee Membership 11

Executive Committee Business

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension..... 11

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2021-22 11

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy..... 24

Education..... 31

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2021-22 (*Continued*) 39

Budget (No. 2) Bill: First Stage 52

Committee Business

Nature-friendly Farming..... 53

Private Members' Business

Defamation Bill: First Stage 68

Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Blair, John (South Antrim)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Brogan, Ms Nicola (West Tyrone)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Flynn, Ms Órlaithí (West Belfast)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McHugh, Maolíosá (West Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (Speaker)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (Strangford)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 7 June 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee for the Executive Office: Deputy Chairperson

Mr Speaker: I have been notified that, with effect from 25 May, Mr Doug Beattie has resigned as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office. I have also received notification from the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party that Mr John Stewart has been nominated to fill the vacancy of Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office, also with effect from 25 May. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Matters of the Day

Decision not to Prosecute Black Lives Matter Protesters

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerry Carroll has been given leave to make a statement on the decision not to prosecute Black Lives Matter protesters, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called to speak, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for selecting this matter for discussion today. The former slave and abolitionist who spent time in this city, Frederick Douglass, said:

"Power concedes nothing without a demand."

The only reason that the prosecutions of those who attended the 6 June Black Lives Matters protests have been dropped is that people refused to accept the double standard that was at play. Activists and members of the BAME community refused to accept that there should be one rule for them and another for others who wanted to protest or gather in large numbers. They refused to accept that people could not protest in a safe and socially distanced manner at a time when police violence in the United States had reached new, brutal levels with the killing of George Floyd last year.

I pay tribute to and recognise the role of those who gathered on that day to stand up against racism and police violence. I recognise the role of the stewards and activists who made it a safe and socially distanced protest, as was recognised by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and many others who observed the protest. I recognise the role played by the North West Migrants Forum, United Against Racism

and the many organisations that stood up, that day and since, against the disgraceful decision to consider prosecuting 14 suspects from the day.

We also have to condemn the role played by the entire Executive throughout the scandal. Ministers rushed through legislation at the last minute in order to allow for the prosecution of people who attended the protests. Afterwards, Ministers had the gall to defend those actions, which were later described as "discriminatory", "disproportionate" and in breach of human rights. The Justice Minister described the actions as "proportionate", and, since the decision not to prosecute, which I absolutely welcome, as do many others, there has been radio silence from the Justice Minister. That speaks volumes.

The whole Executive need to issue an apology urgently for how people were treated that day. The fines need to be dropped. Black lives mattered then, and they matter now. This is a welcome and important decision, but it is something that people should not have to face.

Mr Storey: No one should be surprised that the Matter of the Day has come to the House and is cloaked in a sense of injustice. However, it also gives an opportunity to attack the police.

In the last year, the police have had the most difficult of jobs to carry out, not least because of the pandemic that we endured. I am amongst those who have been critical of police actions. Where I am critical, I always set it in the context of saying, first and foremost, that there is only one law and order and only one organisation that is legally bound to uphold the law, and that is the Police Service of Northern Ireland. There is no institutionalised racism in the actions of the police. I met representatives of the Black Lives Matter organisation from Londonderry some months ago, and I underlined that there is no institutionalised racism as they described.

It is shameful that are those who have used the system to attack the police, verbally or physically, in the circumstances that we have found ourselves in over the past number of months. No one should be above the law. Surely, in attending a protest against an action that they rightly felt very concerned and aggrieved about, those people should have observed the parameters that exist for us all. There is no equivalence between the actions of the police services in the United States and what happens with our police service in Northern Ireland. The Police Service of Northern Ireland is the most scrutinised police service. Some of us take the view that it is

probably over-scrutinised on those matters. Whether it be a protest or a funeral, no one should try, as some have done, to circumnavigate the law to say that their issue, whether it is the events concerning the death of George Floyd or the funeral of Bobby Storey, is more important —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — than the livelihoods and health and well-being of us all.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for bringing the Matter of the Day. Sinn Féin welcomes the recommendation by the PPS not to prosecute Black Lives Matter protesters for their attendance at anti-racism protests last year. The PPS rightfully recognised that the protests were organised in a manner to minimise risk of transmitting the virus at the time. The protests related to matters of increasingly important social concern.

The Police Ombudsman found that the PSNI's response to the protesters was "disproportionate". The Chief Constable has apologised, and the PPS has recognised that the prosecution should be dropped. The protesters have been unfairly treated, and the fines that they paid should be reimbursed. This case provides us with an opportunity to look at how the PSNI deals with human rights matters. The PSNI should look at its training programme for officers to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated and that the ethnic minorities who have made their home in the North of Ireland are treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

In many regards, 2020 was a terrible year for us all, but the pandemic brought a sense of community to many of us. I sometimes felt that the challenges of COVID gave us all a spirit of goodwill and forgiveness towards each other, and people were looking out for everyone in their community. In that context, to see someone murdered in the street by the organisation that was supposed to protect him was all the more shocking. Obviously, it harked back to a darker time in our international memory.

We in Ireland do not need to be told how damaging police brutality is. We do not need to be told about how lasting impact its on communities is or the damage that it does to confidence in policing and government in general. We know that racism, like all forms of discrimination, is hugely damaging, not just for those who feel the very explicit brutality, such

as that witnessed on the streets of Minneapolis last year, but in the subsequent prejudice and bigotry that are allowed to go unchallenged. When a community such as the black American population receives systemic abuse that goes unchallenged and is justified, it has lasting impacts on us all.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for accepting this Matter of the Day. I thank the Member for West Belfast for bringing it to the Assembly. The SDLP welcomes the fact that 14 Black Lives Matter protesters will not face prosecution as a result of the events of 6 June last year. As mentioned, this comes after a clear statement from the Police Ombudsman that the approach to policing on that day was unfair.

To understand what happened last year, we need two important bits of context. First, the death of George Floyd, prompted a global focus on long-standing and, yes, international issues of inequality, discrimination and structural racism. Those issues face us all. It is important to say that those issues are not unique to the United States. Yes, they are distinct and have been a significant part of the history of the United States, but they are not irrelevant to this part of the world. Earlier, it was mentioned that Frederick Douglass spent time in Ireland, including this part of Ireland. He certainly did, and he talked about the racial and other forms of discrimination that existed in Victorian Ireland. We kid ourselves if we think that those issues, prejudices and sicknesses do not affect us in this part of the world.

Secondly, last year, we were moving out of the initial phase of the pandemic, and rules restricted the numbers of people who could gather. As mentioned, those rules were confusing not only for the people trying to organise legitimate and peaceful protests, as this was, but for the police who had to enforce the regulations. However, that is not a justification for some of the disproportionate actions that were taken. Therefore, it is right that no prosecutions will proceed, and I am glad for those who took part in the peaceful protests that day.

Let me state again something that is particularly important to me because I proudly represent South Belfast, which is the most diverse constituency in not only Northern Ireland but the whole island of Ireland: if we are not willing to stand in solidarity with people of colour, here and across this island, who want to stand against structural racism and systemic discrimination, we are not about changing this society and making it better for everyone. I am proud that my constituency includes people of

colour and people from all over the world. They have faced not just discrimination but significant attacks in the last few months, and they have not always been served as well as they could have been, it has to be said, by the police. I am reassured that the Chief Constable is taking these issues seriously, but we should not be casual or relaxed about it, and I will follow it up. I am glad —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — that the prosecutions will not proceed.

12.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I thank Mr Carroll for bringing the Matter of the Day to the House.

It seems to me that, over the last 50 years, the police, be it the RUC or the Police Service of Northern Ireland, have come under constant scrutiny, criticism and censure for the way in which they have policed just about every aspect of human life. Over the last 18 months, however, it strikes me, every time that they have come under public scrutiny, it has been about an incident related to the COVID regulations, be it funerals, the anniversary event at Sean Graham's bookmakers on the Ormeau Road, the swimmers at Helen's Bay — the so-called Helen's Baywatch — or, indeed, the Black Lives Matter protests. Does that not raise the question of whether there is a systemic problem in the PSNI or, indeed, in the criminal justice system? In my role on the Policing Board, I am certainly struck by the relationship between the Chief Constable and the Director of Public Prosecutions. That was perhaps signalled in the letter that Mr Herron wrote to Mr Byrne on 2 April about one particular funeral that seemed to highlight certain tensions or perhaps differences in the interpretation of the COVID regulations.

It seems to me that the interpretation of the regulations is key to what is going on here. Is there a right answer to dealing with the pandemic? Probably not. A huge number of judgement calls have to be made by organisations such as the police and by individuals such as the Chief Constable. The fact is that the pandemic has presented us with unprecedented challenges; in fact, it has upset the balance that we cherish between freedom of assembly — the right to get together — and other rights, such as the right to protest. Everybody who has spoken about the

regulations from time to time in the House has made it clear that, while they support the regulations, they do so reluctantly because of the impact that they have on that fine balance. Perhaps the best thing that we as an Assembly can do, therefore, is to acknowledge what has happened, with there being no prosecutions, look to see whether there are lessons to be learned and move on — to use the current phrase — to build back better.

Mr Blair: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I add to the thanks expressed to Mr Carroll for bringing the Matter of the Day to the House. The PPS decision not to prosecute the Black Lives Matter protesters, who were exercising their human right to protest in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry last June, is the correct path of action. The demonstrations were, as we all know, peaceful and conducted in a manner that sought to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID.

Work now has to be done to improve relations with the police and build back confidence and trust in policing all communities in Northern Ireland. At the Northern Ireland Policing Board, membership of which I should also declare today, in the House and in public, I have previously questioned the difference in policing approach at two types of demonstration on two separate Saturdays on 6 June and 13 June 2020. It is perfectly valid to make the point here again today that consistency in these matters is key, both in policing approach, in the first instance, and in building and maintaining that confidence in policing. We know that there are legislative and process limits to what the Department of Justice, the Department of Health, the police and, indeed, the PPS can do in respect of rescinding fines already issued. The Justice Minister, whom Mr Carroll referenced, has explained that situation publicly. She has also, when speaking publicly as Minister and as party leader, defended the right to peaceful protest.

This has been said here before, and it is something else that is worth repeating: policing is a difficult job at the best of times, but it is especially so during a public health pandemic — policing in unprecedented policing circumstances — and that has proved to be the case. All of us in the House, particularly those of us who serve on the Policing Board, must do all that we can, working together, to build back confidence, build on that confidence and work with the police for the good of all people in Northern Ireland.

Miss Woods: I thank Mr Carroll for bringing the Matter of the Day to the House. The policing of

the Black Lives Matter protests has had a deeply damaging and corrosive effect on the relationship between the police and our minority ethnic communities. The Black Lives Matter protesters engaged in social distancing, yet they were met with a firm response, with numerous fines handed out. Last week's PPS decision not to prosecute is therefore entirely welcome for those who have been subject to investigation for nearly a year.

From the outset, the operation and the decision-making were deeply flawed. I appreciate that the PSNI has admitted that it got things wrong and has offered an apology a number of times. The Police Ombudsman's report on an investigation of police policy and practice at protests in Northern Ireland was published last December in response to the handling of the protests held in Northern Ireland on 6 June. I note that the actions were also subject to a Policing Board review and report in November 2020, in which a number of recommendations were made. I hope that the Policing Board will continue to hold the police to account on those recommendations, which include a recommendation that the police consider adopting a human rights-based approach to the policing of future protests. That would involve the balancing of competing risks and rights. I appreciate that there has been an apology, but we need to do much more.

I would like to see a mechanism created by which fines that were accepted on the day or that have paid to date can be refunded or donated to charities and those working with minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland, given that the PSNI has confirmed to me that no such mechanism existed in the regulations when fixed penalty notices (FPNs) were handed out on that day and that FPNs could be set aside only by using regulation 12 by a direction of the Magistrates' Court. I urge anyone with the powers to do that to do so immediately.

I pay tribute to all the people and groups who advocate support for BAME communities in Northern Ireland and to those who stand up to racism. Their voices and actions are essential.

Dr Aiken: I add my thanks to those already made to Mr Carroll for bringing the Matter of the Day to the House. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on ethnic minorities. Anybody who has seen what has happened over the Black Lives Matter protests and what has been happening in Northern Ireland will know the degree to which members of our much-valued ethnic minority community will feel that they have been undermined. There seems to be one law for them and another for

everybody else. The anger and frustration in that community are palpable, but there is another significant issue. Many of those people come from societies that are not as open as ours, and where trust in policing and the justice system is, to say the least, minimal. They have come here, but, in many respects, they feel that the justice and policing systems here are not of the standard that they were led to expect and not of the standard that other people in Northern Ireland expect to be shown to them.

We have heard many comments from Members about what has happened at other events in Northern Ireland, and we know the issues around those. I know the palpable anger that was felt by members of our ethnic minority community when they saw what happened at the Bobby Storey funeral and other issues. Why were they being treated significantly differently? What was the issue? Were they seen as being an easy touch, or did policing feel that it could put them in the position of making them again feel under threat or as though they were a concern?

I make this call to the Justice Minister: Northern Ireland needs to have dedicated hate crime legislation. As private Members, we probably do not have the time to get it across the line now, but I call on the Justice Minister to try to get hate crime legislation on the statute book as quickly as we can. We need to send a strong message from the Assembly to all our ethnic minority communities that we support and value them and do not see them as being different in any way. The rules and regulations should apply equally across the board. I welcome what has happened with the PPS, as I do the apologies from the Police Service of Northern Ireland — both are well overdue — but we as an Assembly need to reflect and make sure that we send a strong message about how much we support our ethnic minority communities and let them know what a valued part of Northern Ireland's society they are.

Mr Speaker: That concludes that Matter of the Day.

Special Envoy to the United States

Mr Speaker: Mr Pat Sheehan has been given leave to make a statement on the appointment of a special envoy to the United States that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. Members who wish to be called should indicate that they wish to do so by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not

take any points of order until this item of business has finished.

Mr Sheehan: It was with some surprise over the weekend that I heard that Trevor Ringland had been appointed by Brandon Lewis as a special envoy to the United States for the North. When an appointment of that nature takes place, one would assume that there would at least be some sort of consultation or discussion with the democratically elected Executive here, but there was not. It is an indication of the level of arrogance and disrespect that the British Secretary of State shows to the Executive and the devolved institutions here that there was not even a hint of consultation or discussion about the appointment. It is all the more surprising given that the Executive already have a permanent diplomatic mission in Washington DC that is very effective at engaging with the US Administration, Congress and the Irish-American community.

I listened to Trevor Ringland on Radio Ulster this morning. It was a bit of a car-crash interview. He did not even know what his job is and was not sure who his employer is, but he was happy to say that he will represent the views of everyone in the North. Well, he will not represent my views and the views of Sinn Féin in the United States. We already do a good job of representing our views. We do not need a unionist over there pretending that he represents the view of republicans. That is not what he will be doing.

The appointment comes on the back of another Whitehall Department saying that it will open an office in Belfast.

Mr Allister: Hear, hear.

Mr Sheehan: Sorry?

Mr Allister: Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Sheehan: There is absolutely no need for it. It again indicates the level of arrogance and disrespect for the institutions here. In the long term, it can serve only to undermine our devolved institutions. We, as a party, will challenge Brandon Lewis at the earliest opportunity to explain the appointment.

Mr Buckley: I begin by welcoming the appointment of Trevor Ringland. It is a hugely positive story. It is hugely positive that anybody would go from these shores to represent the views of our people in a positive light. From

listening to Sinn Féin and to Pat Sheehan, it seems that there is a wee bit of jealousy that somebody else who may articulate an opinion that is shared by us all has turned up to the party in the United States. For too long, Sinn Féin has very much had it its own way in the United States, with a one-sided narrative about what happened in the past and a one-sided narrative about what is happening now.

As a member of the Democratic Unionist Party and as somebody who shares the views of many in our society, I feel that Trevor Ringland's appointment is welcome. I will talk about what his purpose is, because I did not listen to a car-crash interview this morning; I listened to a man who is very much stepping up to go to the United States to sell our story and to portray Northern Ireland in a positive light by telling them about cross-community projects or talking up moneymaking opportunities in the Province. That is what Mr Ringland said.

We know that there is huge interest in the United States in engaging with Northern Ireland. There is a massive amount of goodwill throughout the United States for helping and supporting us as we go along on our journey. That can be done only if we hear views from all sides of the argument. I am afraid that, while the Sinn Féin rhetoric today and its views in relation to the appointment are not surprising, they are deeply saddening for many of us across the Chamber. We need to see renewed engagement with the United States. We have heard much misrepresentation by elected officials in the United States regarding our position on the protocol.

For some time, Sinn Féin has gone about its business of trying to undermine this place and the unionist community in it. I look forward to Trevor Ringland representing the facts to the United States, and I put on record that many had the opportunity to do so.

12.30 pm

I pay tribute to the work of the Northern Ireland bureau throughout some very difficult times and, in particular, the work of the late Norman Houston, who was an absolutely stellar ambassador for this place. In many of the conversations that I had with him, he said that the United States is always open to listening to voices from here, and, wherever those voices come from, I will welcome the fact that we can now put our positions on the record to the United States Government and officials so that we all feel that we have voice at the table.

Ms McLaughlin: The last thing on anybody's mind is to make this debate personal. It could easily be seen as a personal attack on Trevor Ringland, and I have no wish to be part of that at all.

I want to express my party's very serious concerns that, once again, the Secretary of State is doing things on the hoof and without structure or process. That is not good enough. He is not some old-fashioned British governor of a British colony. He is the Secretary of State, and we are the legislative Assembly. Where was the advertisement seeking applications? Where is the job description? What is the job specification? What is the structure of accountability? Where is the transparency? What was the process? I was not even aware that there was a vacancy, and I was not aware that there was a vacuum. Our party was completely blindsided, as were all parties in the Assembly, and I believe that that is disrespectful to the Assembly.

I also put on record our deep appreciation for the work of the Northern Ireland bureau. It has proven to be an excellent conduit for developing trade relations here in Northern Ireland, and I have no doubt that Trevor Ringland will fit into the existing structures somewhere. However, this has clearly all been done in a rush and on the hoof, as I said. The appointee was clearly not given a detailed job spec for his new portfolio. The British Government are really quite shabby when it comes to their engagement with this Administration. Having said that, I offer Mr Ringland my best wishes in his new role, whatever that appears to be.

Dr Aiken: I thank Mr Sheehan for bringing this matter to the Assembly today but not necessarily for the manner in which he has done so.

First of all, I make a declaration of interest: Trevor Ringland and I served for a long time on the board of the British-Irish Association. I have never met anybody who is better at putting forward a good case for Northern Ireland and, indeed, at fostering not just North/South but east-west relationships. He has been absolutely outstanding, whether working with the International Fund for Ireland or for Co-operation Ireland or in a vast raft of activities in representing all the communities in Northern Ireland.

I have seen him in Washington. I have seen what he has done. The fact that he will be there as an envoy representing Northern Ireland should be welcomed by everybody in the Assembly. Indeed, it will be welcomed by

everybody in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst the Northern Ireland business community, because he has strong links to businesses and a great understanding of the Northern Ireland business landscape. He will be in the United States four to six times a year representing those views across the United States, not just inside the Beltway but in other areas. That is a great opportunity for us, and we should be working to support it. Indeed, the fact that we have a Northern Ireland envoy sends a very strong message to the United States about the interest that our country — the United Kingdom — has in fostering relationships with the United States of America. Our nation has decided to send an envoy there. That is a very positive development for everybody here in Northern Ireland, and we should be seeking to support that.

There are some other issues that we need to address. I know about the great work that the Northern Ireland bureau has done, but, when you go to the United States, you sometimes think that you are walking into a parallel universe. I have another declaration of interest: two thirds of my family are from the United States, but they are not from Washington or New York. They come from middle America: from Georgia, Tennessee and areas like that. Those people do not see Northern Ireland in the way that it has been presented many times in New York and Washington; they see Northern Ireland as a great place to do business or to come and visit and a great place that has opportunity. Those are the people to whom Trevor Ringland will reach out, and we need to support that as well. I look forward, as time goes on and as COVID restrictions are released, to being able to get back to the United States and pass that positive message on, because Northern Ireland is a great place to do business. We in the Ulster Unionist Party thank Trevor Ringland for what he is about to do and wish him very well.

Mr Dickson: The Alliance Party is not opposed to the appointment. The Secretary of State is, of course, free to do as he pleases within the confines of his role as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. However, we should express some surprise and concern that there has been no consultation with the Northern Ireland Executive with regard to a very sensitive and perhaps even quite challenging and difficult role for anyone to play in representing Northern Ireland on the big international stage of the United States of America. The individual will have to work very hard with the Northern Ireland bureau to represent Invest Northern Ireland, to represent the political views of this Chamber — we have heard today how difficult

and diverse they are — and to be the voice from Northern Ireland that can be respected in the United States. They will have to try to project the politics of Northern Ireland to the United States of America.

The Secretary of State has perhaps acted in some haste in respect of this. He has perhaps acted injudiciously by not consulting the Northern Ireland Executive or the Assembly. The appointment has been made, like many that the UK Government make, with little transparency or openness, yet that Government rightly require the Assembly and legislature in Northern Ireland to be very open and transparent in all our public appointments. While I wish Mr Ringland well in his appointment, I trust that he will be sensitive to the voices that he has heard in the Chamber today and not represent just one voice or one political party in the United Kingdom when he stands in the halls of business, politics and commerce in the United States of America.

Mr Allister: I welcome the timely appointment of an envoy. I note the manner in which Sinn Féin raised the issue; it is in the old vernacular of a "not a unionist about the place" approach. Sinn Féin does not want to see any challenge to its monopoly of misrepresentation in the United States. The appointment is a good move. I am sure that Mr Ringland will not always please me in what he says, but it is important that Northern Ireland is so represented.

The thing that I find quite staggering in this debate is the total lack of recognition that international relations are not a devolved matter. They are a matter exclusively for the Secretary of State. There is all this whinging about not consulting the Executive, but he had absolutely no need to consult them. It is not a devolved issue; it is a matter totally within his competence. Of course, if he had consulted the Executive, he would have been bogged down in months of disagreement, so I am glad that he got on with the job and did it. I wish Mr Ringland well in that regard.

Moreover, it is important that the appointment is made in this, our centenary year. Indeed, today — although, shamefully, we are not marking the day in any way in the Assembly — is the 100th anniversary of the very first time that the predecessor legislature of this place met in Northern Ireland. I salute the men of that generation who settled down, made provision and bedded in Northern Ireland in very turbulent years. Many have much to be thankful for in that regard. They were neither flip-floppers nor rollovers, but they did a good job, and I place

that on the record. It is to the shame of this House that all those events have been brushed under the carpet. There is no centenary stone and not even a rose allowed to blossom or a flag on this Building today to mark the 100th anniversary of when the legislature of Northern Ireland first met. That is a calculated slight and one that I repudiate.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the appointment of a special envoy for Northern Ireland to the United States. Ms McLaughlin said that she did not want to make this personal; I want to make it personal, because I want to congratulate Trevor Ringland on that appointment. He is from Larne in east Antrim, and we are very proud that he is taking up that post. We wish him well because the United States is a hugely important partner for us in Northern Ireland. There are very strong social and economic ties that we want to continue and develop. I wish him well. He has my support and my party's support as it seeks to promote Northern Ireland and defend its interests in the United States.

The Executive Office's office in North America has been mentioned. It serves North America well, looking out for our economic interests in particular. However, as Mr Allister stated, international relations are for our Government to oversee. I think that it is a positive move, and I wish that it had been welcomed by everybody across the House today. I understand why Mr Sheehan is disappointed: Mr Ringland will not be over there to say that Northern Ireland is a failed state, because it is not. He will not be over there to say that it is an occupied territory, because it is not. He will not be over there to say that Northern Ireland is represented only by Sinn Féin, because, of course, it is not.

The balance that he will bring to the discussions that take place there is to be welcomed. At this time, it is important that we have somebody over there from the UK Government's position to explain a little bit more about Northern Ireland, because I think that it is fair to say that there has been more than a little bit of a lack of understanding about Northern Ireland, particularly about what the Good Friday Agreement says and how the protocol is damaging the Good Friday Agreement. That is clear for us all to see, yet many Members in this House fail to grasp or acknowledge that.

It is a good day for Northern Ireland. We should all always welcome the fact that there are people over there who love Northern Ireland, who want the best for Northern Ireland and who are defending and promoting our interests there. It should be strongly welcomed.

Mr O'Toole: First, as my colleague Sinéad McLaughlin said, it is worth saying that, on a personal level, many people admire Trevor Ringland's record not only on the rugby pitch but in multiple areas of peace-building through Co-operation Ireland, various funds and the British-Irish Association, as mentioned. He has clearly done a lot of work in that area and is well thought of. It is, however, important to place on record and to clarify a few things that have been said today.

It has been said repeatedly that Mr Ringland is being appointed to represent Northern Ireland's interests in North America, specifically in the United States. That is not what the press release that announced his appointment said. It says that he is there to represent the UK Government's interests on Northern Ireland in the United States. I am afraid that those are quite distinct and different things. While I do not mean to carp or to impugn Mr Ringland or his record, let us be absolutely clear: representation for Northern Ireland, the power-sharing Executive and this institution occurs through the Northern Ireland bureau in Washington DC. I am pleased to see the number of people who have reiterated the great job that it does. It does a job in a very unique and occasionally difficult context. Tribute has been paid to the wonderful, late Norman Houston. That, I am afraid, is not what this appointment is.

It is completely reasonable for Members on any side of the House to ask real and substantive questions about what Mr Ringland has been appointed to do and to point out, as it was on the radio this morning, that he does not appear to be entirely clear about the nature of the role.

12.45 pm

It has been said that the Secretary of State is entitled to appoint whomever he likes. It has also been said by a couple of people that the Secretary of State is responsible for international relations in Whitehall. I am sure that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Dominic Raab would have something to say about that.

It has also been stated, in slightly contradictory terms, that Mr Ringland will be a trade envoy. Given the amount of interest that Invest NI clearly has in Northern Ireland's dual market access, which means its access to both the European single market of half a billion people and the UK market under the protocol — I hear sighs coming from a sedentary position; I am afraid that some people do not like the truth

about the opportunities from the Brexit that they forced on us — the first thing that lots of business leaders in North America will say to Mr Ringland is, "I hear that Northern Ireland is in a unique position and has access to two major markets. Is that what you want to pitch to us and why you want us to invest?". What will Mr Ringland say then? If he is willing to say "Yes. Invest in Northern Ireland, because the protocol offers us access to two major markets", good on him; I will support him in that. However, if, as he did this morning, he will dissemble and continue with UK Government lines on the protocol, I am afraid that it will not be a good thing.

I wish him well. My party has concerns about the appointment. Mr Ringland is clearly a —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — person of substance and a good person, but we have concerns about the way the appointment has been made.

Mr Nesbitt: I think this is a very clever move. It is the business equivalent of the reverse takeover, when the smaller organisation makes the move. Rather than waiting to see what Joe Biden's Administration will do, the Northern Ireland Office has gone first. I applaud it for that imaginative thinking.

I should also declare an interest in that Trevor Ringland and I were colleagues during the 2010 general election campaign. I wondered whether that would be the elephant in the room, but Mr Sheehan said quite clearly that he does not want a unionist representing him. The only problem that I have with that is that what we have here is a consociational arrangement for government, and I have to accept that, on some days, I will be represented by a republican, on other days, by a member of the nationalist community, and, sometimes, by a member of the DUP. I will leave it to your imagination to figure out which I would find least agreeable.

Mr Ringland supports the Union, as do the UK Government, in just the same way that the Government of Ireland supports constitutional change. I do not believe that needs to be an issue, because, whatever your constitutional preference, surely what we need to do is make Northern Ireland work. That will be measured in a variety of ways, including by the quality of our public services and by attracting inward investment from the United States, which, I think we can all agree, is no bad thing.

Mr Buckley says that perhaps the problem here is that republicans have had it all their own way for too long. I gently suggest to Mr Buckley that we also need to examine unionism and put a mirror up to ourselves, because, if we do what we have done before, such as when Ian Paisley and Jim Molyneaux cancelled their trip to America in February 1994 because Gerry Adams had been granted a visa to appear at the same conference, we cannot then turn round and accuse the White House of being green in its Irish politics. We could, but, frankly, that would be bonkers, because we have to have a presence. Engagement is key, whatever your constitutional preference.

The point has been made about why the devolved Administrations were not consulted. Let me give you a theory. I will speculate that the Secretary of State and his advisers looked at 'New Decade, New Approach' and saw a commitment to appoint a panel of experts to advise the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights, which has now met for over a year and still awaits the appointment of that panel of experts. Maybe he concluded that consulting the Executive Office would be the political equivalent of putting it into a cosmic black hole from which nothing, not even light, ever emerges.

Miss Woods: I was not going to speak on the matter, but much has been said about the connections between the US and Northern Ireland, including the Northern Ireland bureau. It would be wrong of me not to mention, in the spirit of today, an exchange programme that I was involved in a few years ago that was funded by the US Department of State.

Many youth voices from here and the Republic of Ireland were flown out, and we spent nearly four weeks travelling around the US speaking to people, learning more about each other and being part of the project. Nearly 30 of us were there, and I am pleased to say that I continue to keep in touch with those people, and we share our experiences. We shared our experiences of the George Floyd protests that were discussed earlier and the impact of riots, as well as youth issues, education, food poverty and all the shared interests that we have between here and the US. I am pleased to say that I keep in touch with all those people, who are from Washington, Minneapolis and Oklahoma, and friendships were made in the process. It is that kind of relationship that should be continued and fostered as part of shared understanding and peacebuilding. I speak today with those sentiments in mind.

Like others, I was surprised to learn of the appointment. Then again, we are used to surprises coming from the UK Government and the Secretary of State. Questions have been, and will be, asked on the process of the appointment, and that is OK. However, I worked with Mr Ringland in my constituency, and he is an absolutely outstanding member of our community, especially when it comes to local sports. I appreciate how hard he works, and I wish him all the best. It is with those sentiments in mind that I say that today.

Assembly Business

Public Petition: Support for Unpaid Carers in Northern Ireland

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

Ms Armstrong: Mr Speaker, thank you for allowing me to present a petition calling on the Minister of Health to support carers by reopening all respite and day centres across Northern Ireland and to make good on his announcement in January of a COVID carers' payment.

The postcode lottery and the partial opening of services for people with disabilities and older people are not working. They and their carers are past breaking point. This is carers' week, and I am here on behalf of the 1,100 petition signatories and the thousands of carers to ask why we are still being denied support. If pubs can open, why can respite care not?

This morning, Carers NI launched its 'Breaks or Breakdown' report, which confirms the impact that the pandemic has had on carers. It states:

"Caring for a family member, friend, or neighbour can be challenging and often comes at significant personal cost. Without sufficient support or meaningful breaks it can take its toll on carers' emotional and physical health, their ability to work and also have a knock-on effect on their long-term finances."

For carers, a break is time off from caring and a chance to do things that they would like to do but cannot do while caring. Those are everyday things, such as catching up with friends, going for a walk or simply catching up on sleep. It could be for 30 minutes, an afternoon or a week. A break could be provided by accessing care services, such as replacement care, sitting services, a day service or through support from family and friends providing respite or essential care.

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on carers' ability to access breaks. Not only are the majority of carers — 81% — providing more care than before the pandemic but their responsibilities have grown as the support that they used to rely on has reduced. Many carers have been on call all day, every day in the past year, always

on duty, never getting a night's sleep and with no time to themselves or proper time with family or close friends. Many spent that time shielding in isolation with the person whom they care for, and many now suffer with depression.

Unsurprisingly, many carers are now exhausted, and they are worried about how they will continue to care without increased support. The Carers Northern Ireland research shows the impact that reduced support from services and from family and friends has had on carers' health and well-being. It demonstrates that, without the right interventions, there could be significant carer breakdowns. We cannot allow that to happen. It would have a massively negative impact on our health service. Carers are asking for help. I hope that this petition is not a continuation of their request falling on closed ears.

Mr Speaker: I would normally invite the Member to bring her petition to the Table and present it. However, in light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in her place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office electronically. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once the petition is received, I will forward it to the Minister of Health and send a copy to the Committee.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Committee membership will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Joanne Bunting replace Mr Keith Buchanan and that Mr Trevor Clarke replace Mr Gary Middleton as members of the Business Committee. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Executive Committee Business

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 7 June 2021. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2021-22

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £10,342,800,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC), the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR), the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) for the year ending 31 March 2022 and that resources, not exceeding £11,843,690,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2022 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2021-22 that was laid before the Assembly on 27 May 2021.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to three and a half hours for the debate. The Minister will have 40 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and making a winding-up speech. The Chairperson of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes in which to speak, and other Committee Chairpersons will have seven minutes. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Murphy: The motion covers the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2021-22, which relates to the supply of cash and use of resources for the current financial year. It seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2021-22 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies as set out in the Main Estimates, which were laid in the Assembly on Thursday 27 May 2021.

The Main Estimates are based on the departmental spending plans set out in the Executive's Budget 2021-22, including the in-year allocations confirmed at that time. I announced the Budget on 1 April and made an oral statement on 27 April, and it was subsequently the subject of an Assembly debate and vote on 25 May.

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

The Main Estimates include allocations that legally could not be included in the Budget as the funding had not been confirmed in writing by the Secretary of State. For reasons that remain a mystery, the Secretary of State has still not confirmed confidence-and-supply and New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) funding, but the Treasury has now confirmed that funding.

The Main Estimates do not include the COVID allocations agreed by the Executive on 20 May 2021 as those had not been confirmed at the time that the Main Estimates document was being finalised. However, some £96 million for the extension of COVID business support schemes has been included as that was agreed by the Executive at an earlier date.

While the funding has not been formally allocated and discussions are ongoing with the British Government, I have included Estimates cover of some £19 million for victims' pensions. That will ensure that there is no delay in making payments and, I hope, will provide much-needed certainty for those affected while we continue discussions with the British Government on their financial contribution to the scheme. The remaining allocations, along with any further allocations agreed later in the year, will be included in the spring Supplementary Estimates at the end of the year.

The Main Estimates position is set out in the detailed document that has been provided to Members, and the Budget (No. 2) Bill reflects that same position. Members will be aware that, as per an NDNA commitment, I had hoped to

bring forward a multi-year Budget that would have provided Departments with greater certainty and enabled longer-term strategic planning of services. Unfortunately, that was not possible as the Treasury spending review on 25 November covered only one year. I recently discussed that with the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, and he indicated that he will announce a multi-year spending review later this year. I very much welcome that, as it will in turn allow the Executive to present a multi-year Budget. That will assist the Executive in planning for recovery, rebuilding the economy and tackling systemic issues such as health transformation and waiting lists.

1.00 pm

I will now go back to the 2021-22 financial position. Members will know that, while the Treasury's spending review provided an increased capital budget, the Executive's non-COVID resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) settlement was essentially at a standstill. Once increased costs and service demands are taken into account, that effectively means cuts. Ministers must therefore prioritise their budgets. There has also been a significant reduction in COVID funding from £3.3 billion last year to £1.3 billion this year.

Three key priorities were highlighted as part of the Budget consultation exercise: health, education and economic recovery. Those are reflected in the final Budget, the Main Estimates figures and the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Executive have continued to prioritise health, and the Department of Health has been allocated nearly half of the entire resource budget and £430 million of additional COVID funding. That includes funding to support our Health and Social Care (HSC) workers, as well as the roll-out of the vaccination programme. Some £250 million of COVID funding is to help rebuild the health service, and the Health Minister has flexibility to use that money for waiting lists.

Education has received 18% of the resource budget and £108 million of COVID funding to support the delivery of services to deal with the impact of COVID on children and young people's well-being and learning. The Department for the Economy's economic recovery plan has been funded in full, with an allocation of over £300 million to support businesses, town centres and high streets to recover and rebuild as we emerge from the pandemic. Rates have been frozen for a second year at a cost of £230 million. That will help families and businesses, and the sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic will

benefit from the rates holiday, which has been extended for a further year. The Executive also made a number of in-year allocations as part of the final Budget process. Those are contained in the Main Estimates and include £35 million for teachers' pay, £20 million for safe staffing in the health service, £12.3 million to recruit additional PSNI officers and £1.4 million to extend the Bright Start school-age grant scheme.

The increased capital budget will stimulate the economy as we move to the recovery phase. The Executive have agreed to borrow up to £170 million from the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) facility. The Department for Infrastructure has been allocated £722.5 million. That is a record budget, representing over 40% of the available capital budget. The Department for Communities has received over £160 million to provide new social housing. Over £111 million has been allocated to various Departments to deliver the Executive's flagship projects, including Casement Park.

In this single year, the standstill Budget will continue to put our public services under pressure as we emerge from the COVID pandemic. The Executive have, however, used their carry-over flexibility and borrowing capability to maximise investment in public services. The Budget was agreed by all Executive Ministers. No Minister proposed a single change to the allocations being discussed here today. I request Members' support for the resolution on the Main Estimates for 2021-22, which, together with the Budget (No. 2) Bill that we will debate tomorrow, will secure the continued funding of services for the remainder of this financial year.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates. The Minister's officials have kindly provided written and oral explanations of the Estimates at a number of Finance Committee meetings. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister for that and express the hope that those useful engagements will continue in a spirit of cooperation in what is left of the current mandate.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, we have lost count of the number of times that we have indicated the Committee's dissatisfaction with the Budget process. We refer, of course, to the opaqueness of the Estimates documents; the confusing and impenetrable accountant's terminology; and the debates that are scheduled after the decisions have been taken

and usually do not deal with budgetary matters anyway. Let us not forget the monitoring rounds, scheduled and ad hoc, where money seems to appear from nowhere and the explanations seem to leave the Committee confused. I know that other Committees are similarly confused.

In recent evidence from officials, the Committee also noted that, in the votes that we will have today and tomorrow, the Assembly will not vote on capital. Nor does it appear that it will vote on much of the spending of non-departmental public bodies. Committee members were surprised to learn that all of that may account for around 25% of the Executive's spending. That should be a significant concern for every Member. I expect that many Members may be surprised to hear what I have just said. I find that, the limited understanding of these important matters by Members of the House, to be the most unsatisfactory aspect of the process.

What are we to do about that? I had hoped that the independent fiscal council would be a good beginning to the process of unpicking this over-complex Budget process, providing further, much-needed transparency and accountability. I had hoped that an independent fiscal council with the necessary functionality, discretion, powers, independence, competence, credibility and engagement with the Assembly would facilitate improved understanding and ownership of the complexities of the Budget process. Perhaps, Minister, in your response today, you will advise the House on the timing of the introduction of the legislation for the establishment of that independent fiscal council. The reason that I ask this now is that my understanding is that it possibly is not going to happen in the current mandate. I can see no good reason for that, but I await with interest the Minister's clarification of what he is doing to expedite the legislative process whereby we can put the independent fiscal council on a statutory basis in this mandate. Will the Minister indicate whether the current fiscal council will indeed produce an assessment of the Executive's revenue streams, their spending proposals and the sustainability of their finances and whether that will happen this year?

Mr Deputy Speaker, in tomorrow's debate, I will, with your indulgence, address the issues of consultation on the public expenditure proposals and speak briefly about accelerated passage for the Budget (No. 2) Bill. For now, I will address the Supply resolution and the Main Estimates.

It is worth beginning by mentioning again that 2020-21 was a very unusual year. If we look at the resource and capital spends for the last month of that financial year, we can see that they are very significant, with nearly £2.5 billion of resource and over £600 million of capital all spent in the month of March. I expect that we will hear more about the provisional out-turn at June monitoring, but it appears that Departments have undertaken a mammoth expenditure task successfully. It also appears that only a limited amount of financial transactions capital (FTC) will go back to Westminster, which, of course, we will all welcome.

Although it is important to ensure that all of our money gets spent appropriately and none gets returned unnecessarily, I am a little concerned in respect of the capital surge in March. I hope that other Departments are not disregarding the Finance Department's advice and settling up with capital contractors at the eleventh hour of the financial year. That is a risky strategy that might one day lead to unspent capital money.

For 2021-22, I refer yet again to the failure of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to provide the necessary clarity on the New Decade, New Approach and confidence-and-supply funding, even though it is clear that HM Treasury has largely approved it. This has led to considerable related sums in the Main Estimates, significant amounts, being recorded as "headroom". That has deprived Departments of a necessary degree of clarity and certainty in respect of their spending.

The Estimates also include funding for a number of post-COVID recovery measures that we have discussed before but are, nonetheless, of undeniable importance as the economy recovers from the pandemic. I think in particular of the rates holiday, the extension of the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) payments into May and, indeed, the much-anticipated high street voucher scheme. I think that we in our Committee and, indeed, the Members of the Assembly would like to have some detail and clarity of when that is due and how it will be accounted for.

I cannot conclude my remarks on behalf of the Committee without referencing the importance of providing clarity and certainty to victims in respect of the victims' payments scheme. I note the Minister's remarks about the £19 million. However, I hope that, as part of that process, the Department, with its responsibility for strategic finance, will come to a better understanding of the related need and thereby

narrow the size of the liability associated with that vital victims' scheme.

In tomorrow's debate, when I have a little more time, I may address some of the detailed feedback received from the other Statutory Committees. In the meantime and on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I endorse the Supply resolution motion.

Mr Frew: I rise to speak in another Budget debate during which we will talk again about the same things. However, the debates are useful. They are useful so that the Finance Minister can listen to the concerns and disgruntlements of Chairs of Committees and other Members who are frustrated and concerned. It is useful for the Finance Minister and the Executive to hear those concerns. That is the essence of what this place should be about. The Minister will have to sit through a few minutes of my disgruntlements and concerns. There are just a few.

In the debate last week, I talked about hope and inspiration and asked where those were in the Budget. Today, I want to talk about direction. We are a devolved Assembly. We do not have sovereign power and have few fiscal powers. There may be good reason for that. As a devolved Assembly, we still need to provide direction for our people. One of the main ways of doing that is through the Budget process. How do we get direction in a Budget process, especially one that is challenging? The Finance Minister has told us about the standstill Budget, having very little money and the cuts that there will be when you take all the inflationary aspects into account: I get that. I get the point about those pressures, but how do we instil direction in a Budget?

Having looked at it for many years, the only way that I can really see that happening is through a Programme for Government that is underlined and underlaid by a Budget that finances and populates the Programme for Government with money. The Programme for Government gives you direction. The Budget funds that direction. Those two have to be coupled, even in a devolved Assembly. We have not yet seen that alignment. That causes concern, but it also means that we are not firing on all cylinders. That is a problem for people, not least those in our businesses out there. That is a big issue, especially with the challenges that we have in health and education and economic recovery and the lockdown restrictions that have placed an intolerable burden on some of our business sectors. People want to see direction. Whilst I talked last week about hope and inspiration, I

am now talking about direction. Our people need to see a way out of this mess.

Every sector in our economy has been affected in one way or another. Do not get me wrong: some people have endured the pandemic and the economic crisis quite well, but so many more have not. We are still living in a phoney war period. A lot of our businesses are on life support, whether through the furlough scheme or the rates holiday, and those are very good and essential. Business is on a life support machine, and, when that life support gets turned off, as it will inevitably be at some point, probably in the near future, we need to be assured that our budgetary processes and the budgets that we have on the ground cater for and assist with the recovery, direct our people and businesses and get them out of the mess that we find ourselves in. It frustrates me that I do not see that direction in this Budget.

I also speak of the grave concerns that I have about the victims' payment scheme for permanent disablement. The Chairperson of the Finance Committee outlined the concerns about that. That is money and a scheme that the Executive had to be taken to court for. I worry about its budget lines and provisions for it, and I hope that the Finance Minister will deliver that funding for those people. Those victims will have read the newspapers over the last number of weeks and seen the great wealth that the Finance Minister's party has in its coffers, yet they struggle day in and day out with life.

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

Mr Frew: Those are just some of my comments. I will elaborate during tomorrow's debate on the Budget Bill.

1.15 pm

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. Thanks to the Minister as well. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Supply resolution that will give effect to the Main Estimates for 2021-22. I commend the Minister and the officials in the Department for producing the Estimates and the associated Budget Bill. The Estimates are based on the Budget 2021-22 document that has been endorsed by all the parties in the Executive and again here in the Chamber only two weeks ago.

This has been an extraordinary year for us all. The scale of the damage that the pandemic has inflicted on society, in both human and

economic terms, has been catastrophic. Thousands of jobs have been lost since the outbreak of the pandemic, bringing down untold stress and hardship on families with so much uncertainty about when the next pay cheque will arrive and whether it will be enough to pay the bills and put food on the table. We have seen a huge spike in the number of people suffering from mental health issues, with many struggling to access the services that are available. On top of that, thousands of workers have been placed on furlough. Those people face a cliff edge come September if they do not manage to find their way back into work before then. The British Government should do all that they can to ensure that people on furlough are protected when the scheme ends. There has been an increase of 125% in the number of people claiming universal credit, and that will, no doubt, continue to rise in the months ahead. Our economy shrank by 11% last year, and the economic forecast predicts that we will not get back to pre-COVID levels of economic activity until the end of 2022.

Despite the significant scale of the problems that we face, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The vaccine roll-out has been a huge success, and we are now in a much better position, with businesses able to open to the public and resume normal activities once again. The task for us all is to start to rebuild the economy and get people back to work by investing in our public services in order to generate growth in the economy. We need to get back to a position where we can make real inroads into the ongoing issues in our health system. The crisis in our health service waiting lists is now at breaking point. That has been an ongoing issue for years, without any significant attempts to get to grips with the challenges. I am regularly in contact with patients in my constituency of West Tyrone who are suffering daily but have no realistic prospect of being seen by a consultant for years to come. A decade of underinvestment and cuts to our health budget due to Tory austerity have left it in a weakened state and struggling to cope with ongoing pressures. We need radical reform and significant investment from the British Government if we are to begin to meet the needs of patients.

Brexit is still a concern. So much of the current uncertainty and disruption is a direct result of Brexit. Boris Johnson and the DUP promised us that we would be better off and that all EU funding lost would be replaced; however, I remain sceptical. We need clarity on the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Levelling Up Fund in respect of the size of the funding envelope and how those schemes are to be delivered. The

£35 million that the British Treasury has committed will be used to assist the implementation of the protocol and will minimise the worst effects of Brexit.

The Minister described the Budget as a standstill Budget, and I agree. We are almost entirely reliant on the British Government to provide the necessary funding to enable our public services to function, and, yet again, we have been let down by the same Tory Government who do not care about this place or the people who live here. To stimulate the economy into a position of recovery, we need investment from the British Government, yet they have chosen not to invest.

It is also disappointing that we have still not got a multi-year Budget settlement that would allow more strategic planning —

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

Mr McHugh: — despite the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to deliver that.

I welcome the £230 million of COVID support funding for the 12-month rates holiday that will benefit thousands of businesses, and I know that this particular Budget will, in fact, leave us all much better prepared in many respects —

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

Mr McHugh: — to meet the challenges of the future.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office. The Committee heard from the Department about its spending plans on 12 May, and we look forward to engaging with officials this week to hear what they are asking for in the current monitoring round.

The Department was allocated over £120 million in the final Budget for resource and £15 million for capital. However, the Department's planned expenditure for the financial year would require an additional £5.5 million in total. Of the planned spending, £33 million is for the arm's-length bodies that are sponsored by the Department, £29.6 million is for departmental spend and the remaining just over £62 million is for ring-fenced funding. That funding includes £46 million for the implementation of the recommendations of the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry, including compensation paid

through the redress board to the victims. The Committee has taken a close interest in this issue and, while we are pleased that there is now acknowledgement and compensation for those who have suffered abuse, there is still much to do to ensure that it is undertaken in a sensitive and appropriate manner.

A £6.7 million allocation has been made to the implementation of the victims' payment scheme for permanent disablement, but nothing for the actual payments themselves, which are estimated at £19 million for this financial year. The Committee acknowledges and supports the Executive's approaches to the Northern Ireland Office to foot this bill, but, in the meantime, it is unclear where this money, which the Department has a legal obligation to pay, will come from. It is of particular importance to the Committee that people who have been affected by the conflict will receive financial support. After years of endurance and campaigning for people to receive support, the scheme is finally expected to open at the end of this month.

The Committee was also pleased to hear that £12 million was announced to continue the excellent work being undertaken by projects under the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy. Just last week, the Committee heard from Community Relations in Schools (CRIS), and it is an example of the commitment and dedication shown by community-based organisations to promote peace and reconciliation in our communities. However, can we not commit to multi-year funding streams to ensure that they can adequately plan and embed their work and retain the experienced staff they need? A one-year funding cycle is barely sufficient to plan and build the necessary relationships to begin this sensitive and challenging work, let alone run a full programme of activities.

The Committee has raised some concerns that whilst £12 million of the shared future funding has been announced, only half of that has been committed with the remainder to be found during the year. If we add that £6 million to the £5.5 million over-commitment by the Department, the £19 million that will be needed to pay victims of the conflict and the additional £2.3 million that the Department says it needs for COVID recovery, that makes, by my calculation, more than £32 million that the Department has to find somewhere, and that sounds like a lot to expect from monitoring rounds. The Committee will be monitoring the Department's financial commitments closely in the coming year, and we look forward to engaging regularly with the Department on how it spends its money.

I now wish to make some remarks in my capacity as an MLA. Government finances should be about people and how their Government values them and seeks to invest in them. Currently, one in four people across the North is on an NHS waiting list. That should terrify and shock us. The waiting list crisis predates the COVID-19 pandemic, yet there is no aspiration in our Budget to address that crisis. It seems to be a recurring theme across so much of our Executive that we do not aspire but, rather, react to some of the issues of the day.

The uninspiring and lacklustre Budget that we are discussing today deals with the short term — temporary bursts of money — and does not aspire to long-term budgeting that will effectively address the very real issues that affect us from day to day. Where is the drive from our Finance Minister to bring forward a Budget that is aspirational, forward-thinking and transformative? After 14 years of successive DUP and Sinn Féin Finance Ministers, we are still reacting to and playing catch-up on the issues of the day. It is people and their lives that are being impacted.

The architect of the Budget that has been supplied today, Minister Murphy, has achieved something quite remarkable in that he is failing not only to fund the waiting list crisis but to sort out our nurses' salaries. I do not think that we will find many from the NHS out clapping for this. Unless we are realistic and aspirational about the issues of the day and what is required, we will become crisis legislators — we will be legislators who react to a mental health crisis, a waiting list crisis and a nursing crisis — and legislators who are themselves forever in a crisis, thanks to the DUP and Sinn Féin's incompetence.

One of the excuses that we hear so often is that we cannot have a multi-year Budget because our finances are heavily dependent on allocations from the British Government. However, until we reach a point of self-determination, that is where we are. If we turn to the Troubles permanent disablement scheme, which was mentioned, we see that the Finance Minister has funded its implementation but that we still need £19 million to issue the payments. If we are serious about addressing the legacy of our past, the Finance Minister has a responsibility to show the British Government — they are the very ones who made so many victims — that they must make that money available. Victims were failed by the British Government. They must not be failed further by the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, or by the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Lastly, I mentioned that £12 million is being made available in order to continue the excellent work that has been done through T:BUC, but, ridiculously, only half the money has been committed, so not only are we not able to do multi-year Budgets but, it would appear, there are areas for which we cannot even do a single-year Budget. The people most affected, such as those on waiting lists, victims of the Troubles —

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

Mr McGrath: — healthcare staff or those delivering T:BUC, are left wondering, "Why don't you value us?". The Executive's finances should be about people. The Sinn Féin Finance Minister owes those people an answer for this lacklustre Budget. It is time to call in the debt and pay up.

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

Mr Muir: As the Alliance Party's finance and infrastructure spokesperson, I support the motion on the resolution, and I seek to speak primarily to it. The Supply resolution authorises Departments to spend money to provide the public services that we all rely upon. It is therefore essential that the motion be approved. I pay tribute to the many dedicated public servants across Northern Ireland who have continued to serve us so well over the past year and beyond. One good thing that has emerged from the pandemic is that we are less inclined to take our public services for granted, and long may that continue.

I note that, next week, the Finance Minister will bring forward his Financial Reporting (Department and Public Bodies) Bill for Second Reading. We will discuss the Bill in detail then, but part of the process is to simplify financial reporting in order to better align Budgets, Estimates and resource accounts. The ultimate aim is to improve the alignment and transparency of the financial information presented to the Assembly and the public.

As someone in their second year of formally scrutinising the Main Estimates, I can tell the Finance Minister that there is a lot to do in that regard. No doubt, the figures and Estimates have been meticulously prepared, but they are bafflingly incomprehensible to the non-specialist. I would be interested to hear whether he agrees that it does not have to be that way and that there is much that can be done over and above the Bill to make those figures more

comprehensible to the public. It is their money, after all.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Dr Aiken: Does the Member agree that it would be very useful if we had a common reporting standard across all government in Northern Ireland, including Departments and, indeed, arm's-length bodies?

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

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. Hallelujah; may that day come, please.

While, in effect, much of the Budget represents flat cash, the baseline figures in the Estimates continue to grow. In particular, the capital budget has increased by 15% compared with the final Budget position this time last year. The Department for Infrastructure's capital budget, which is the largest of all the Departments, has increased by approximately double that — by 29% to be precise. That increase in the capital budget, which was partially as a result of the decision to borrow £170 million in RRI funds and which the Alliance Party has consistently called for since the outset of the pandemic, is welcome.

Across the world, Governments are agreed that investment is key to a successful recovery from the pandemic.

1.30 pm

Recently, the Alliance Party launched 'A Green New Deal' — its plan for a green, equitable and prosperous future in Northern Ireland. While we welcome the increase in capital allocations for Departments in this financial year, more could and should have been done to ensure that that increased money is spent better. Seemingly, the proposals for an infrastructure commission are stuck in the mud. I do not know where it is: it may be in the black hole that is TEO. An infrastructure commission would set a 30-year vision for infrastructure in Northern Ireland to inform multi-year plans from the Executive Office. It would help to ensure that record levels of funding were spent in a strategic and coordinated manner. The ministerial advisory panel's report on an infrastructure commission, which was commissioned by Minister Mallon, was made public in October last year. The

Ministers of Infrastructure and Finance held discussions on its findings. I ask the Minister of Finance for an update on what needs to be done to make that vital proposal a reality.

I am also concerned that the way in which we currently spend money on major capital projects remains suboptimal, to say the least. The Audit Office's 2019 landmark report, 'Major Capital Projects, made clear recommendations on centralising procurement processes and sharing best practice on delivery. I ask the Minister of Finance to confirm whether he is satisfied that the recommendations have been implemented in full and, if not, what the timescales for their completion are.

I fully acknowledge that a flat resource budget makes it more difficult for Departments to spend their increased capital budgets effectively. However, once again, the Finance Minister is not powerless. The Audit Office's report, 'Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service', found serious issues with the way in which the Civil Service operates. Responding in full to those recommendations to ensure that we have a dynamic and attractive Civil Service that has the right skills and processes in place will enable us to deliver more for the people of Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I am content to support the Supply resolution. I urge the Minister of Finance to lead the work required to ensure that Departments are in a position to provide, with the additional funds available, the greatest possible benefits for our entire community.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Michelle McIlveen. As Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, she has up to seven minutes in which to speak.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee for Infrastructure's consideration of and views on the Main Estimates for the 2021-22 Budget, specifically in respect to how it impacts on the Department for Infrastructure and its ability to carry out its responsibilities and functions for the coming year.

It is to the Committee's regret that the Budget process continues to be far from satisfactory and falls short of affording Committees the appropriate time to carry out their scrutiny role, albeit I appreciate that we are living through unprecedented times. As one of the largest-spending Departments, the Committee takes its scrutiny of the Department for Infrastructure's budget extremely seriously. To that end, the

current situation, where there are still unknowns, such as waiting for commitments from the UK Government on city deals, is untenable.

The Committee for Infrastructure received a briefing on the draft Budget 2021-22 from Department for Infrastructure officials on 3 February, and there was a further briefing on 21 April. The Committee also requested written briefings from the Department's arm's-length bodies — Translink, the Drainage Council, Waterways Ireland and Northern Ireland Water — on their budget expectations and what they had received. During the briefing on 21 April, departmental officials outlined that the Department had received a final opening resource budget for 2021-22 of £429.9 million and a capital budget of £772.5 million. That excludes EU replacement funding that is to come from the UK Government for the city deals and NDNA funding for low-emission buses. The Department advised the Committee that the resource budget is an increase of £12 million — 2.9% — on the 2020-21 opening allocation. That £12 million uplift will be used exclusively for Northern Ireland Water: £9.2 million for COVID pressures and £2.8 million to, partially, meet its resource pressures and a draft determination by the Utility Regulator to enable it to continue as an essential public service. Taking that into account, the Department advised the Committee that, omitting the £12 million going to Northern Ireland Water, the resource budget has remained stationary and represents a real-term reduction. The Department advised the Committee that that was a disappointing outcome, especially given the fact that other Departments had an average resource increase of over 6%.

The Department advised the Committee that its total pressures for 2021-22 will be £88.5 million. That is better than the £103 million resource pressures that it estimated when it briefed the Committee in February. It advised the Committee that it has identified £58.8 million of COVID pressures and £29.7 million of other pressures for next year. When the Committee questioned what the COVID pressures are, departmental officials advised that Translink estimated a pressure of £50 million this year, based on how quickly people will return to public transport. That, in turn, is based on the planned staged recovery from COVID that was produced by the Executive. As Members are aware, driving tests and MOTs are returning, but the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) will still lose around £5 million this year. DFI Roads and DFI Rivers, Crumlin Road Gaol and the Rathlin ferry will have COVID pressures of £3.8

million, £100,000 and £300,000 respectively, making total COVID pressures of £58.8 million. Officials outlined that the longer that we work from home, the more water is used in residential settings, which does not create income for Northern Ireland Water, and that water usage by businesses, for which it does charge, is reduced.

The Committee asked officials to outline what the impact would be to the work of the Department. Officials advised that that would mean that work will have to be prioritised and that the core work of the Department, including public services such as gully cleaning, street lighting outages, grass cutting, bridge repairs and road markings, may not be carried out.

The Committee noted that the increase in capital for this financial year is £772.5 million. That is a £164 million, or 29%, uplift from the opening position for the 2020-21 financial year. That represents 40% of the total £1.781 billion that is available to the Executive and is the largest capital budget across all Departments. After conducting an assessment of its capital requirements, however, the Department advised that that does not meet its requirement for capital for this year. The Department estimates that it needs £811.3 million to carry out its functions and that £519.6 million of the budget will be needed for flagship, inescapable or pre-committed expenditure. The Department indicated that that large requirement is due to the expected spend on a number of major projects and the investment requirements for Northern Ireland Water, which were set out in the Utility Regulator's draft determination.

During the Committee's scrutiny, members were keen to understand the disparity between the 29% increase in capital and the 2.9% increase in resource. Officials advised that that disparity was a disappointment and meant that the resources in the Department to deliver on an extensive programme of capital projects will be under severe pressure. The impact of the lack of staffing resource was rehearsed in the Chamber last week during a debate on unadopted roads. The Department has only approximately 20 staff to cover that work when, prior to 2015, it had double that number of staff. The result of that lack of staffing resource is an enforced reactive, rather than proactive, approach to enforcement. That is simply unacceptable.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for very generously giving way. Does she agree that the Department for Infrastructure is underfunded and that it is therefore practically impossible for the Minister to repair those roads and do the

necessary work for our communities with the budget that has been allocated by the Finance Minister? Is that the Member's assessment?

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

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. He will be aware that I have rehearsed that point many times in the Chamber.

That impact on staffing is one example of the knock-on effects of suppressed resources. In considering that disparity, the Committee supports the Department's call for an increase in resource moneys. The Committee has called on the Department to think creatively about how to draw down funds into a range of its ongoing funding schemes and to urge it to get road maintenance schemes up and running quickly to take advantage of those. The Department assured the Committee that it is looking at contingency measures to ensure that it can spend out its budget in case any big spending projects are delayed. The Committee accepts, however, that that takes an adequate resource budget. To that end, to avoid an underspend in the coming year, the Committee supports an increased resource budget for the Department for Infrastructure to ensure that resources exist to enable it to manage its capital programme effectively. I support the motion.

Dr Archibald: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Budget and the Supply resolution. As the Minister outlined, and as has been reflected previously, this is a difficult Budget for the Executive as a whole, with many Departments facing more or less standstill budgets. It is a Budget that, despite some of the party politicking that we will undoubtedly hear, has been agreed by all Ministers in the Executive and was voted for by all parties in the Executive a fortnight ago.

Despite the difficulties, I welcome the significant funding allocations —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: No, I will not give way to you.

Despite the difficulties, I welcome the significant funding allocations for important items and schemes, including to address the economic recovery, to support young people into employment, to create new social housing and, really importantly, to tackle Department of Health problems such as waiting lists. As Sinn Féin economy spokesperson, I welcome the

allocation of funding to extend business supports and for the rates holiday, both of which have been critical supports for businesses over the past 16 months.

I also welcome the fact that funding has been allocated to the economic recovery action plan, which, as I reflected a fortnight ago, is critical for driving forward the recovery from COVID. That overall allocation of almost £300 million breaks down into £20 million for research and development and innovation; £50 million for skills and an agile workforce; £20 million for a greener economy; and £200 million for trade, investment and exports. Over half of the total allocation — £145 million — is for the high street voucher scheme. The Economy Committee got a written update on that scheme last week, but some questions remain, including on its economic impact. As a policy tool for stimulating recovery, it is important that it deliver to the absolute maximum, and I am keen to continue to engage with the Department on how it will ensure that that is the case. It will almost certainly involve an initial focus on promoting uptake, but it will also be about buying locally and supporting local businesses. I am sure that we can all get behind that.

Significant sums have been allocated to other economic recovery action plan priorities, such as skills, which I am sure that we all agree will be really important not just for the recovery but for creating a better economy that has a focus as much on well-being as on productivity. Last week, the British Government published some updated information on the Community Renewal Fund, the deadline for which is 18 June. The Finance Minister might be able to reflect on this, but there are some concerns around ensuring that what is funded through that process aligns with the Executive's priorities and the Programme for Government commitments. There are genuine concerns that there will not be proper oversight in that respect.

We will all agree that supporting research and development and innovation is a really important aspect of driving the creation of well-paid and secure jobs and encouraging entrepreneurship in communities for the benefit of communities. The focus of our recovery very much needs to be on sustaining and creating jobs and on giving people opportunities, particularly our young people. To that extent, I am glad that the Communities Minister was able to bring forward Job Start, which we all very much support.

I consistently raise in Budget debates, and Mr McHugh mentioned it earlier, that the furlough scheme is due to end in September. Last week, there was an announcement of further redundancies at Thompson Aero Seating, and that really highlights the importance of taking a sector-specific approach to the furlough scheme. It would be a strong signal if we could send a consistent message from the Executive and the Assembly that there needs to be a sector-specific approach taken to extending it.

I have a final point on the economic recovery action plan. A lack of priority is given in the plan to maximising our benefits under the protocol, such as our continued access to the European single market as well as to the British market. Last week, the Economy Minister published a trade and investment strategy. You have to scroll to page 10 of a 13-page document to find any reference to that unique ability, yet it should be front and centre of our investment strategy. It is unacceptable for the Economy Minister to ignore the opportunities that exist because it is politically uncomfortable for her to do so.

Points have been about the waiting lists, and it is really important that we have a renewed focus on them. I am really glad that £250 million of the COVID funding has been —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Dr Archibald: — allocated to the Department of Health's budget to help alleviate some of its pressures.

1.45 pm

Mr Irwin: As I have stated in previous Budget discussions, the pressures on our finances have never been greater. At the AERA Committee, we have had many discussions about the challenges that have hit the sector throughout COVID. I put on record again my gratitude to the many farmers and those involved in agriculture, food processing and food preparation for their sterling efforts in what have been unprecedented times. That collective effort has ensured that our industry has weathered the significant storm of COVID-19 and that consumers' needs have been met. The Department and the Minister have also ensured that those who experienced difficulties in various agri-food sectors because of COVID have been supported with specially targeted financial aid, which has been welcomed by many in the industry. Those COVID support interventions across the spread of Departments and responsibilities have, of course, cost a lot

of money and had an impact on spend. It is easy to see why, in this unique period, budgets have become so stretched.

A high street voucher support scheme is pending. That is another unique measure that will aim to provide people with a voucher to spend in local retail and, therefore, assist in the bounceback of our high streets at a critical time. I have asked that the Minister for the Economy ensures that the voucher is not limited solely to the high street scenario and that retailers of all types, and those that are not considered to be on the high street as such, are included, to give the broadest possible target base for the redemption of the vouchers and, in turn, support our local economy. It is, of course, difficult to completely predict the longer-term impacts of the pandemic. However, it is safe to assume that it will take a significant time for the full impacts to be felt. That will have a further impact on spend, as issues that may not have been fully expected or calculated at this stage may have to be focused on and responded to financially.

Bearing that firmly in mind, there is a looming concern over our health service and the impact of the thousands of cancelled surgery appointments and other treatments. That impact will be felt for some time, and debate about how the waiting list crisis will be responded to is intensifying. Health accounts for half of everyday spending in Northern Ireland, with a continual requirement for additional finance. The pre-COVID requirement for extra resources has only become much greater during the current crisis. I was recently contacted by a person who is waiting for cataract surgery. I questioned the Health Minister on the issue of waiting times last October. It was astonishing to note that, at that time, the waiting time was four years; it may have become an even longer wait, given the impacts on services of the virus. For someone with very poor sight that might be vastly improved by surgical intervention, a four-year wait is really concerning. That is, of course, only one example; there are many other areas of concern.

The debate has moved again towards how our health and social services are distributed and delivered in Northern Ireland and how best those can be shaped to ensure that an already significant amount of public money is spent to the maximum advantage of patients and their care. That is the core of the issue. The welfare of health and social care staff right across the sector is also of paramount concern, as they have been under such immense pressure for an extended period.

I know that many in the House have been grateful for the unprecedented support provided by the Treasury in response to COVID. That includes the furlough scheme, which has undoubtedly been a lifeline for many families throughout the UK who have been able to have the security of a continuation of their wage whilst specific sectors have been under restrictions. We look forward to better days ahead. Of course, there will be much more debate to come on the issues of financial resources and how they are managed and spent. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Colm Gildernew. As you are speaking as Chair of the Health Committee, you have up to seven minutes.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I will speak first on behalf of the Health Committee, and then I will make some brief remarks as my party's spokesperson on health.

There is no doubt that the past 15 months have been an extremely challenging period for everyone, with the pandemic, lockdowns, disruptions and the loss of many loved ones in very difficult circumstances. It has been especially challenging for our health and social care system and its workers. I pay tribute to those staff who have sacrificed so much over the past 15 months. They have worked beyond what was expected of them, and we thank them all for their service.

The Committee was briefed by officials on the 2021-22 Budget and was advised that, as things stand, the Department anticipates additional funding of £495 million as compared with its opening baseline last year. The Committee welcomes the additional amount. However, the Department outlined that, with the lack of recurrent funding, it is essentially a standstill budget that will make it difficult for the Department to make any inroads into the waiting lists.

Over the coming years, we need to focus on the transformation programme. However, the 2021-22 Budget provides only £49 million for the transformation agreed under the NDNA agreement. That is 0.7% of the overall Health budget. While allocations for additional nursing staff and mental health are welcome, it does not go far enough. Over the past months, we have heard significant evidence of the very real benefits of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) in primary healthcare. GPs have told us how beneficial they are. However, there is an allocation of only £22 million for MDTs in the

budget. That does not allow for the expansion of MDTs; it merely provides continuing support for those that are in place.

We all share concerns about the length of waiting lists. The Minister outlined that it would take £1 billion over 10 years to address the waiting lists. I think that we can all agree that that needs to be a priority over the coming financial years and that there is a clear need for recurrent funding to make inroads into those waiting lists. Indeed, the Committee has written to the Executive to outline its view that there is a need for an Executive meeting solely on the issue of waiting lists. As we understand it, if that is to be addressed, it will require the whole Executive to commit to it.

The Committee has had some difficulty in identifying spending on specific priority areas in the Department of Health's budget. For example, how much is it proposed that we spend on mental health and on cancer? What is the split between primary and acute care? How much is proposed to be spent on inequalities and even on addressing the waiting lists? When officials briefed us on the budget, significant time was taken on identifying the detail of proposals and allocations. Therefore, the Committee welcomes further work on providing more detail and granularity in the financial briefings to allow members to identify spending priorities and associated funding. The Committee will continue to monitor the budget and to seek to engage constructively over the coming months.

I now will make a few remarks as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. It is fair to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has upended our entire economy; nowhere is that more evident than in the health and social care sector. However, our problems of waiting lists and workforce pressures started long before the pandemic. We are not out of the woods yet, Members, in relation to the COVID crisis, as evidenced by the numbers of delta cases discovered in the North. I have heard recently from healthcare professionals and others working in testing centres of the low uptake of available PCR testing, with the suggestion that people are not aware of that programme. One of the practical measures that the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA) can undertake is a better communication strategy that informs our community of the full availability of testing and allows members of the community to take that up.

If we are to go into the autumn and winter better equipped to deal with the pandemic, the Department of Health must ensure that a

comprehensive testing, tracing and isolating programme is at our fingertips and that it can be mobilised instantly when and where the need arrives. In light of that, I welcome the additional testing put in at Kilkeel over the weekend. To defend the community against the delta variant and COVID itself, we need to apply that type of localised support, based on find, test, trace and isolate.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: I will.

Mr Muir: Across the water, lateral flow tests are available in pharmacies. I am not aware if they are available in pharmacies here. Constituents have contacted me to ask how to get hold of them. Does the Member agree that we need to increase awareness and availability of lateral flow tests?

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

Mr Gildernew: Yes, I agree. We need to utilise and mobilise every single piece of testing and to follow that up with tracing and supported isolation. I absolutely agree, and I thank the Member for raising that point.

I want Members to welcome the additional £495 million from the Department of Finance, though the Minister and I recognise that that is merely a drop in the ocean in relation to what is needed to tackle the problems across the health and social care sector. At its very core, the budget for Health is problematic, as it is non-recurrent and denies us the ability to plan and develop a first-class healthcare system that workers and patients are entitled to. However, we need to do everything that we can in the short term and not be paralysed by the lack of longer-term funding. We need to have the same level of commitment, creativity and urgency in dealing with waiting lists as we have had in dealing with COVID-19.

Many services for mental ill health face not only an increase in referrals but a noticeable increase in the severity and complexity of the care that is required. For example, between March 2019 and September 2020, referrals to eating disorder services jumped by 43% and those needing a review by 64%. Recently, there has been consultation on two considerable new strategies: a substance use strategy and 10-year mental health strategy. A lot of focus will be given to the content of those strategies, but also to the funding that is allocated to them; indeed, rightly so.

I also want to touch on the fact that this week is Carers' Week. A recent report issued by Carers NI states that 79% of carers in the North have not had a break from caring during the past 15 months. That is unsustainable and is driving those carers to breaking point. We need to take that into account urgently. Carers cannot be left behind and ignored. They need to be supported and recognised. That needs to be done through restoring day-care and respite services; dealing with the restoration of those services; progressing the COVID-19 recognition grant for carers, which appears to be no further forward; and ensuring that the future reform of social care places carers at the centre of any changes. I thank all carers and health and social care workers.

Finally, the Minister for Infrastructure has indicated that she is prepared to allow money to be reallocated back towards Health. Has such a bid or proposal been brought to the Executive? Can the Minister provide any detail on that?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm. I suggest, therefore, that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Matthew O'Toole.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Review of the Northern Ireland Postgraduate Tuition Fee Loan

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the time frame for implementing the proposals contained in her Department's review of the Northern Ireland postgraduate tuition fee loan consultation. (AQO 2148/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):

The public consultation was published on 26 April 2021 and will be open until 25 June 2021. I hope to be in a position to publish my response to the consultation, along with any emerging policy proposals, shortly thereafter. The implementation of any policy changes from that consultation will most likely take place in the next Assembly mandate, but I hope that it can be brought forward as quickly as possible.

I clearly recognise the current differences in the levels of available support for Northern Ireland students compared with students elsewhere in the United Kingdom. However, in seeking to resolve that, we must be careful not to simply replicate the type and level of support in place in other jurisdictions when it would be inappropriate to do so, especially when that results in increased financial burdens being solely placed on students. Moreover, we must also be careful not to create perverse incentives. When additional postgraduate support was first made available in England, for example, it resulted in universities there increasing their level of tuition fees, thereby taking away any advantage to the individual student. As such, we need a fair and balanced support system, including the consideration of repayment terms that will not unnecessarily become a financial burden to the individual student.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome her express view that increased support should not lead to increased fees from the universities; that is a very important matter. One issue that I want to raise is that postgraduate students from here who have paid their taxes and whose families have paid their taxes do not get any support if they go to study

in the South, but, if they move to Britain, they get support. One of the perverse reactions to that is that we may lose those students to Britain, because it seems that a large number of students who go to Britain do not return. Will the Minister ensure that students from here who are studying in the South will also receive support because it is fair and equitable and to ensure that we can keep them closer to home?

Mrs Dodds: As the Member knows, the consultation is out, and it will be for people to make that case during the consultation. I am quite exercised about it, and we introduced the consultation with a view to a change in support levels as quickly as we could because it is essential not just for individual students or for the good of universities but to drive forward the economy so that we retain support where we need it most, whether that is support of students who go to the Republic of Ireland to study or those who go to England and Wales.

As I have said, there are two principles that should guide this matter. One is that we do not place an unfair burden on students. I do not believe that the total financial burden should rest with undergraduate students or postgraduate students. If we want to drive forward our economy, we have a duty to look at that very favourably. I also think that we need to ensure that more of our students stay at home with us and, therefore, drive the economy. We will have to look at those issues, particularly the issue of how we fund those students and hope to retain them closer to the home economy.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Minister. Are you concerned that the maximum level of postgraduate support of £5,500 is discouraging postgraduate study by Northern Ireland residents?

Mrs Dodds: Yes, obviously, which is why I launched the consultation. In England the maximum amount of support is over £11,000; in Wales it is over £17,000; in Scotland it is £10,000; and in the Republic of Ireland postgraduates receive a loan to cover course fees of between €2,000 and €6,270.

I keep saying over and over that there is a central mantra in all the documents that I have produced over the last number of weeks. We have our 10X vision for the Northern Ireland economy. We have launched our skills consultation. In order to drive forward prosperity, jobs and growth in Northern Ireland, we have to retain skills at all levels in the economy.

Ms Hunter: Has the Minister considered increasing financial support for Northern Irish undergrad students living in London? NI students in London receive £6,780 in maintenance grants. Meanwhile, English students in the same circumstances are given over £12,000, so there is nearly a £6,000 difference. Is that something that you and your Department are looking at and addressing?

Mrs Dodds: The Assembly will have to address the way we support students, whether they are in Northern Ireland or studying in, for example, London, where the costs of living and accommodation are extremely high. Of course, we will have to balance that across the Executive with the funds that are available for support to our students.

One of the crucial issues that the Assembly will have to grapple with is how we support our undergraduates. We have our consultation on how to support postgraduate students. That will be a whole-Executive decision because, of course, the financial ramifications of that decision will go across the whole Executive.

University Teaching Arrangements 2021-22

2. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline when university students will be informed of their teaching arrangements for the next academic year. (AQO 2149/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for the question, which is very timely and extremely important. It is essential that students are kept informed of teaching arrangements, and I have written to our higher education institutions about that. I have reminded them of their legal responsibilities towards students and how they carry those out.

With vaccination now being offered to over-18s, reduced levels of virus transmission and positivity and the availability of testing, I believe that we should be facilitating a return for all students in the new term. I have asked Executive colleagues to consider the current advice, and we have agreed an increase in face-to-face teaching and for student extracurricular and support activities to be resumed.

As our universities are autonomous institutions, the model and implementation of provision is for them to consider on the basis of the public health advice. However, Ulster University and Queen's University have informed me that they have already written to their students to set out

their vision for the new academic year, and I am pleased that both are committed to a return to face-to-face learning for our students. I am hopeful that that will mean that our students will regain the learning and, indeed, the social experience that they deserve.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for her answer. That sounds like a positive development, but many students are still in the dark about whether they will be taught online or on campus. The guidance needs to be issued now so that they do not take up accommodation that is not required. Is the Minister willing to set up a working group with universities and students that will outline exactly how teaching will be facilitated in the next academic year?

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree that students need to know now. Last year, the way in which the pandemic developed meant that many students had taken on rental agreements, which are private contracts with houseowners. I am not against a working group, but it is for the universities to set out that information for students very quickly. I understand that Queen's and Ulster University have already done that. Stranmillis has communicated to all its students that it intends to return to on-site learning as quickly as possible. I am told that St Mary's will inform its students after 21 June.

Mr McCrossan: It is vital that we avoid the mistakes of last September, when many students were in difficult circumstances. Will the Minister commit to a schedule of regular meetings with the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) — a schedule similar to that of her counterparts in GB — to engage on that issue and others and to ensure that our students' voices are heard? Last year, as she will know, they felt ignored for too long.

Mrs Dodds: I have met student representative bodies and will continue to do so. Throughout last year, the financial measures that we put in place for students were probably the most generous in the whole of the British Isles. I am not undermining or in any way denying the difficulties that students had. From personal experience, I know how difficult it was for them. I know that they experienced loneliness and an increase in mental health issues as they went through a year that was, literally, like no other.

Mr Middleton: The Minister has just touched on what I was going to ask. As many students return to face-to-face teaching, what support is available for students who have faced mental health issues over the past year?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is vital that we enable students to get as much support as we can provide. For that reason, I ensured that, in my last financial package, money was allotted not just to the universities but to the student bodies so that they could reach out among their peers and offer guidance on and help with mental health issues. Each university has a slightly different way of tackling this, but I ask students not to feel alone. There is help there, and I want the universities to be proactive with their students in ensuring that they reach out and give the maximum help that they can.

Food Tourism

3. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her plans to support food tourism. (AQO 2150/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. Food and drink tourism plays an essential role in the visitor economy. In 2019, 5.3 million overnight trips in Northern Ireland generated over £1 billion of revenue. Food and drink accounted for approximately 30% of that spend: £350 million. Tourism NI research tells us that visitors position food and drink as one of the top five factors when choosing a destination. The Northern Ireland Year of Food and Drink in 2016 played a central role in showcasing our food revolution and resulted in Northern Ireland being awarded the world's best food destination at the International Travel and Tourism Awards in 2018-19, which highlighted the growing strength and recognition of our food and drink offering.

I recently launched the next phase of my tourism recovery action plan to respond to the devastating impact of COVID-19. The plan includes a range of measures to stimulate consumer confidence and demand and to enhance the competitiveness of our tourism sector. Food and drink will be an integral part of those measures as the continued development of the sector remains critical to our recovery.

For example, under Tourism NI's recent experience development programme for 2020-21, food and drink experiences represented approximately one third of successful awards, which is commensurate with the overall contribution to the economy. A total of 11 food and drink tourism businesses were awarded over £1.5 million to enhance the experience that they offer to visitors.

2.15 pm

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your recognition of the importance of food and drink to our wider tourism sector in Northern Ireland. Is the Department developing any specific programmes to support the sector? For example, we have a wonderful platform on the north coast called Taste Causeway, and rolling out something similar across Northern Ireland would be really beneficial. With the pandemic, a number of food producers and food trucks have popped up across Northern Ireland, but people want to know where they are so that they can go to them. I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on how we can do better, specifically in food tourism.

Mrs Dodds: The Member is absolutely right. In the middle of lockdown, many of us relied heavily on pop-up offerings of food and drink and so on when we were out and about. That area that will continue to grow over the next number of years.

Taste Causeway was funded via Invest NI's collaborative growth programme. It was awarded a phase 2 grant of £169,200. That funding allowed Taste Causeway to draw in further funding from DAERA, Tourism NI and the local council, which in many ways enhanced the experience and the drive for growth in one of the most important aspects of the industry.

We have just launched our tourism recovery action plan. That is a fully funded action plan that, we hope, will help to revive and revitalise not only tourism but the food and drink element over the next year. Everyone in the House recognises and acknowledges the real difficulties that our hotels, restaurants etc have experienced over the past year. We have put many schemes in place to support them over the past year, and I hope that our tourism recovery action plan will help them to recover from a very difficult time.

Dr Archibald: As the Minister who has responsibility for tourism and economic development and who leads Invest NI and, jointly, Tourism Ireland, does she agree that it is entirely inappropriate and disrespectful to her as Minister and to the Executive — in fact, it undermines the Executive and devolution — for the British Secretary of State to appoint someone without any consultation to a role that is mooted to be about promoting investment in tourism, which cuts directly across the work of the NI bureau and Invest NI in the States, with no oversight or input from the Executive?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, I take a contrary view to the Member. I think that the appointment of

Trevor Ringland is an entirely positive one. There is room for all of us to do our bit to promote Northern Ireland as a wonderful place to live, to invest and to do business in. It can only help to grow jobs and prosperity in Northern Ireland. The Member should remember that it is not only Noraid's voice that needs to be heard in America.

Mr Nesbitt: What steps is the Minister's Department taking to ensure that hospitality outlets can source product from local agri-food and drinks organisations? For example, is there a dedicated website? Are there meet-and-greet events to ensure that hospitality outlets are aware of what they can source locally?

Mrs Dodds: That question comes up regularly. It is important that the Member acknowledge that some of our restaurants, food and hospitality outlets are amazing at sourcing and promoting local food in Northern Ireland. I am constantly amazed at the breadth and variety and at the lengths to which our restaurants go to promote local food. We therefore do not have to look very far to do that.

Through Invest NI, we continue to work with local companies and the local agri-food sector to promote Northern Ireland produce. Recently, in conjunction with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I announced a review of the agri-food sector. I encourage the House and those who are listening to respond to that review. It is really important that we launch a new drive to promote the provenance, safety and traceability of food in Northern Ireland.

A short while ago, I was delighted to visit the Foyle Food Group up in Londonderry. I was also delighted to see a tweet from the British ambassador to Washington, who had been able to enjoy steak from Northern Ireland. It was the first meat provided by the United Kingdom to America in a long time, and it came from Northern Ireland. I understand that many of our companies are looking for USDA approval. The opportunities are enormous.

Mr McGlone: Minister, many employers in a number of sectors, particularly hospitality but also construction, have vacancies and cannot find staff. Some of their staff returned home to the European mainland during the pandemic, while others have found alternative employment. What methods are being used by the Department, or what actions are being taken, to try to help those employers identify and recruit new staff?

Mrs Dodds: The Member has addressed something that even political opponents in the Chamber will admit has been a passion of mine since taking up office. If we are to grow the Northern Ireland economy, we have to grow the skills of our people and widen the opportunities for people to get more and better skills.

We have a fantastic programme called Assured Skills, which operates academies. The Member will be very familiar with the advanced manufacturing sector in his constituency. We have run very successful academies for people in that sector and in the wider construction sector. Welding is one example. All the participants in a recent Assured Skills academy on welding that was run at the North West Regional College achieved employment after they had finished.

In the past number of weeks, I was delighted to be at the opening of a new college in Banbridge, which represents a £15 million investment in the future of skills in Northern Ireland. A new college has also been opened in Armagh, which represents a £35 million investment. A new college in the south-west represents a £35 million investment. We are on-site with a new college in Coleraine, have a contract out for a new college in Ballymena and have a new college in Dungannon. Those are all really important investments in the future of skills in Northern Ireland.

High Street Stimulus Scheme

4. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the terms and conditions of the high street stimulus scheme. (AQO 2151/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. The high street stimulus scheme is a cornerstone of my economic recovery action plan and one of the largest and most innovative responses to tackling the consequences of the pandemic for local businesses. It is a £140 million injection that will support towns and city centres. Local business leaders have welcomed the scheme, and they see it as a practical support for helping businesses recover from the pandemic.

We want to encourage people to play their part and become heroes by spending their £100 to support local businesses that were forced to close or severely impacted on by the pandemic. That financial stimulus will help boost demand and protect local jobs. I want every person who is resident in Northern Ireland and aged 18 and over to register for a pre-paid card. The scheme

should launch towards the end of the summer. The card will be used to purchase goods and services in local businesses but not for online purchases, gambling or financial or legal services.

The multiplier effect of the scheme from people spending more than the value of the card and the ripple effects from purchases will deliver greater economic benefits and make a significant step towards kick-starting recovery. An advertising and public messaging campaign will include engagement with organisations representing hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups including elderly people, persons with a disability and the wider community and voluntary sector.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her answer. She alluded to the many businesses across Northern Ireland that have really struggled throughout the COVID crisis. I am sure that I am not alone in listening to many people who have concerns about the scheme and the reimbursement of it. Will she guarantee that independent traders and small businesses in particular will not be forced to go through heavy admin and that they will receive the money in a timely fashion?

Mrs Dodds: The money will be received by individuals in Northern Ireland, who will choose where they spend it. The parameters and restrictions on that are, as I said, that it is not allowed to be used online, for gambling or for financial and legal services, etc. We are out to procurement — that process has almost finished — for a provider for the card. We will then launch it and work with local chambers of commerce in order to make sure that we get across a "Buy local" message. The stimulus scheme is an investment in local businesses, local high streets and local families, who have had such an incredibly difficult time during the pandemic. As I said in my introduction, it is the largest stimulus scheme across the United Kingdom.

Ms Dillon: I welcome in particular the point that the Minister made about "Buy local". Will there be some kind of incentive to buy local? I certainly want to see the vouchers used in my constituency of Mid Ulster, where we have a large number of independent retailers who have worked hard to keep their businesses going and also, I would say, some of the best restaurants on this island. I would really love to see people from Mid Ulster using their vouchers in Mid Ulster.

Will you confirm that the scheme will be rolled out to the 16- and 17-year-old age group? How much is it likely to cost? I would also welcome that because those people work in our communities and pay taxes and National Insurance.

Mrs Dodds: In the Department, the rationale for the scheme was to provide funding for everybody over 18. If we were to roll that out to our younger age group, we would need to look at how it would impact on the amount of money that is available and whether there is additional funding available, etc. Officials are looking at the equality impacts of the scheme across the board, and we will produce that. It is on our radar, although it has not been priced into the scheme as we currently have it.

I am absolutely adamant that I would like to see the scheme used by local people in support of local businesses, which have come through the toughest of times over the last year. Businesses need that support. We will work with the local chambers. We will, perhaps, encourage chambers to have their own incentive schemes to draw people into their area as we launch the card across Northern Ireland. Businesses will perhaps be able to give their own incentive for that money to be spent in their area.

This is about keeping up the stimulus and demand for retail, which has suffered so horribly over the last year.

Over the summer, we will work with local businesses and, indeed, business organisations to make sure that the messaging is absolutely right.

Mr Speaker: I call Sinead McLaughlin to ask a very brief supplementary question, please.

2.30 pm

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, you indicated that there will be a multiplier effect. Have you done an economic impact assessment on what that multiplier effect will be, particularly for job retention and business sustainability?

Mrs Dodds: We are looking at the issue of the multiplier effect and how we can do it. In Jersey and Malta, where the scheme has been rolled out, there was a significant multiplier effect. Of course, that is not just about increased trade on the high street; it is about greater sustainability and stability for businesses and jobs in local areas. We will produce an equality impact assessment and a business case.

Mr Speaker: Members, that ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. Before I call Seán Lynch, I advise Members that question 3 from Philip McGuigan has been withdrawn.

Students: COVID-19 Study Disruption Payment Scheme

T1. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for the Economy, who will know that, over the past year, students' unions have been appealing to her to provide support to those students who have been excluded from receiving the COVID-19 study disruption grant, to give a commitment to including those students in any further money that not only do they deserve but need. (AQT 1381/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I presume that the Member is talking about the additional £500 that was given to students. We have looked at how that could be rolled out in other areas, but that has proved incredibly difficult to work with. Meanwhile, we have ensured that £22 million is spent on students who go to local institutions and that there is a significant level of funding for mental health and the other issues that students face. I have also instructed universities to make sure that their students are aware of the funds and how they can be drawn down. When I talk to local students, one of the criticisms that they level is that the funds are too opaque in the way in which they are treated by universities.

Students from here who go to university in London or anywhere else in Great Britain are also able to claim the hardship funds that are available in those institutions. Therefore, there is help, and I encourage students to avail themselves of it.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, can you confirm that the 100 master's degree bursaries that you recently announced will be available for students seeking to study the Irish language and translation services?

Mrs Dodds: There are no specific rules around the bursaries. I am absolutely delighted that I have been able to acknowledge Northern Ireland's centenary year by ensuring that 100 students are able to undertake a one-year master's degree and that each of those students will have their fees paid and be given an additional £10,000 of living expenses. That is important not just in acknowledging 100 years of Northern Ireland but in building the critical skills that are necessary to take Northern Ireland forward. I recently published my 10X vision for the Northern Ireland economy. A

consultation is out on the skills that are required to grow that economy, and it is important to do that at every level in every community across Northern Ireland.

Further Education: Awarding Bodies

T2. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for the Economy what she is doing through her skills strategy to address the fact that results for many courses here are delivered by English awarding bodies that are not as aware of the needs in the North as local awarding bodies would be, which is a constant source of frustration to further education colleges. (AQT 1382/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I agree with the Member if she is telling me that the number and complexity of awards make it very confusing for employers and students and, indeed, difficult for further education colleges to administer. It is important, though, that we keep some kind of parity across the United Kingdom so that our qualifications are recognised in all areas of the United Kingdom. That is massively important.

Also in response to the question, I offer my congratulations to further education students across Northern Ireland. I have been out and about at a number of the colleges where students have completed the theory online and are now in working very hard to make sure that they have the practical element of their course completed so that they can move on in their lives and in their careers. I was extremely impressed. I was at the further education college in Newtownabbey last week, where the young apprentice of the year is finishing his plumbing course. He is looking forward to moving on with his life, but he has worked extremely hard, like so many of our other further education students, to manage very difficult conditions and ensure that he has all the practical skills necessary to continue.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, will you commit to looking at, or at least doing a feasibility study on, a centre of excellence for engineering skills in Mid Ulster? We have campaigned for that for a long number of years. We have many engineering companies, and £2 billion comes out of Mid Ulster and goes into the economy every year. If we did not have that, we would be in big trouble. Without us providing the skills for these people, the factories would close, and we would not have that money in our economy. Will you therefore commit to looking at a centre of excellence for engineering in Mid Ulster?

Mrs Dodds: I am always absolutely astounded every time that I visit some of the advanced engineering companies in Mid Ulster and, indeed, across Northern Ireland, given the range of skills available and the way in which they trade across the world. There are companies headquartered in Cookstown that are selling in Texas, in Australia and right across the world. They are always a source of great admiration for me. There are two things that we need to do to ensure that we retain and grow skills in those industries. Working with the companies is the critical aspect of this.

Our further education colleges need to be aware that their skills programmes need to be flexible. We have just introduced our flexible skills fund, which will help us adapt to the needs that companies are identifying. Every time that I go to Mid Ulster — the Member will know this very well — I am constantly asked about the shortage of welders. We have run a number of welding assured skills academies. Indeed, following the last one at the North West Regional College, every one of the young people retained a job, which was very satisfying to see. The other element for Mid Ulster is the advanced manufacturing centre that is proposed in the city and growth deal and how that relates to the advanced manufacturing centres that are proposed in, for example, the Belfast deal. I would like us to see a lot of coherence in how we take forward advanced manufacturing. It is one of the areas that we have identified in our 10X vision in which there can be huge growth for the Northern Ireland economy and huge export sales to earn more for the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mrs Dodds: It is an area that I think will really blossom in the years to come.

Youth Training Strategy

T4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that, following the review of the youth training strategy, trainees who get a level 2 qualification will move from a local training provider to a further education (FE) college, whether the bespoke and, often, sustained support that some of the trainees get will be transferred to the FE colleges, which is a big concern of many constituency MLAs. (AQT 1384/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: That was one of the very first issues that I took up when I became a Minister. The Member will recognise that I know very well many of the training organisations that she

knows. I want to put on record, publicly, the work that training organisations do with young people who come to them and who, sometimes, are in difficult social, family and educational circumstances. The organisations give them wrap-around support to grow as individuals and to be trained and have skills so that they can prosper in future life. We need to put that on the record. I am grateful to the Member for identifying that as an issue.

I would also like the training organisations to be able to bring individuals who have reached level 2 in the organisation a little bit further, because some of them will not feel comfortable leaving an environment in which they have had enormous support to go to Belfast Met, for example. Our new level 1 and level 2 skills programme, which will launch in September, will help the training organisations to do that. I have worked very closely with them to make sure that that is possible.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The obvious answer is to try to equip some of them to go to level 3 so that they stay in the support "bubble" — another word that has been introduced. The other issue is the withdrawal, beyond 2022, of the European social fund (ESF), which was very much geared towards skills. How can we ensure that the impact of that withdrawal is reduced and mitigated? How can we explore opportunities for level 3 for students who are ready to progress? Furthermore, how can we support our local training providers who are going to be in difficulties without that funding?

Mrs Dodds: It is a complex and emerging area in which, and for which, we all must work hard to ensure we have appropriate proposals. In order to give a little bit of time, I have worked with the finance director in the Department, and we are able to offer an additional year of ESF funding for organisations. It will be on a competitive basis, but the general parameters have not changed. That will offer an additional year of funding, in 2022-23, so that organisations will have time to look at what the new funding world is like for them. I am grateful that the finance director and the Minister of Finance have worked with me to ensure that that is in place.

In the meantime, applications are being sought for the Community Renewal Fund, and applications will go forward, in the next year, for the Shared Prosperity Fund. I hope that they will be directed at training and employment opportunities. I hope that we will be able to support local training providers, who know the local areas, local problems and local kids, so that they can ensure that local people can

receive the training that they need, and which will be vital in making Northern Ireland stable and prosperous.

Annual Minerals Return

T5. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy why the annual mineral returns for 2019 and 2020 have not been published and when we can expect to see them, given that, under article 18 of the Quarries (Northern Ireland) Order 1983, her Department has a statutory duty to produce those returns. (AQT 1385/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I will write to the Member with the information that she requests on the mineral returns for 2019 and 2020. I will ask officials to do so as quickly as possible.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. Her answer to my supplementary question might be something similar. It is important that trends and outputs in respect of quarries that operate in Northern Ireland can be reliably monitored. If the Minister is going to write to me, will she also let me know if, and when, the previous mineral returns can be calibrated to ensure variations in responses for individual years are sufficiently robust to ensure that this can be happening and compared?

Mrs Dodds: Again, I will ask officials to take those comments into consideration in their response.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Durkan. He will not get to ask a supplementary.

Border Areas: Economic Well-being

T6. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for the Economy what conversations she has had with her counterpart in the Irish Government about joint actions that could ensure the economic well-being of border areas. (AQT 1386/17-22)

2.45 pm

Mrs Dodds: My Department is responsible for InterTradelreland. InterTradelreland continues to work to ensure that businesses on either side of the border have the support that they need both to manage the implications of the protocol and to grow in the light of the COVID pandemic. I have been closely monitoring some of the work of InterTradelreland. It has been successful at encouraging business not just to be stable in a challenging environment but to grow and to innovate.

Mr Speaker: Time is up, Members. Please take your ease for a moment or two.

Education

Saintfield High School

1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of how Saintfield High School meets the six criteria of the sustainable schools policy. (AQO 2161/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Strictly speaking, the only circumstances in which a formal assessment of the sustainability of a school is undertaken is when a development proposal (DP) has been published that seeks to make a significant change to provision. There is no published proposal for Saintfield nor, to the best of my knowledge, is there a plan for a proposal. Therefore, I do not propose to undertake a formal assessment of that nature at this time.

Like the Member, I am sure, I have visited Saintfield High School on a number of occasions. It is a very successful school. Financially, it is in surplus, so it has a level of security in that way. Also, while the admissions figures are below the recommended total number for a post-primary school, the number of applications has grown in recent years, and its enrolment and admissions figures are always completely filled. It has been able to fill those positions, and I believe it has also availed itself of temporary variations.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. I am sure that he is aware that it is the third-highest oversubscribed school in the area after Lagan College and Saintfield. It has been up to 88% oversubscribed in recent years, yet its admission number is a mere 68 and its largest temporary variation in recent years was a mere four. Does the Member support, either as Minister or as a local MLA, the school's desire to move from an enrolment of 350 to 500 and to have a sixth form centre? Importantly, will he work with me to ensure that the development plan proposing a mid-Down integrated school does not harm Saintfield High School?

Mr Weir: I will deal with a couple of those points. *[Interruption.]* I was not expecting cheering crowds from the side. *[Laughter.]* When looking at any development proposal, a range of things are taken into account. For instance, when considering an integrated school, the statutory duty on the Department will be considered, and, where there are any

development proposals across the board, we look at their impact on children in the area.

Clearly, during Question Time, I can answer only in the capacity of Minister. The Member mentioned a change in numbers, and that would require a development proposal. The problem is that it is the managing authority, which is the Education Authority (EA), that instigates a development proposal. Given that the Department and, more specifically, the Minister will then give the legal determination on any development proposal, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any potential development proposal, because I could be seen to be prejudging an application. That is a quick way to end up in court, but I understand the Member's point.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, the intake of Saintfield High School, which is in your constituency, abuts and overlaps with the southern part of my constituency of South Belfast. There are real issues with oversubscription across the post-primary sector in South Belfast, and we had an Adjournment debate about that a couple of months ago. Will the Minister give an update on what he is doing to increase post-primary provision in the controlled sector, the integrated sector and, indeed, the maintained sector? We really face a post-primary oversubscription crisis in South Belfast.

Mr Weir: The Member may be stealing Ms Bradshaw's later question — question 7. It is a good way of getting in at an earlier stage.

With regard to sufficient places for those transferring, there is the obvious issue that there is a development proposal from the integrated sector, but, as I said, I cannot comment directly on that. That is a matter for the direct development proposal. I am acutely aware, as I indicated before, that South Belfast in particular tends to act as a magnet for pupils from well beyond its boundaries and, as such, probably has the largest number of pupils coming from outside the constituency.

Even if a development proposal is agreed, it will take some time to work its way through the system. Consequently, the short-term position is dealt with by way of temporary variations. For September 2021, additional temporary places have been approved at Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School and Wellington College; indeed, further places have been approved elsewhere. While, strictly speaking, Lagan College, which, I know, was part of the wider debate, geographically falls within Strangford, it draws strongly from the south Belfast area.

Therefore, further places were approved on that basis.

Students are due to be notified this Saturday, I think, of the allocations, and, if there is further pressure because there has been a lack of allocation for some pupils, there is an option that further places can be made available —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr Weir: — if required.

Ms Bradshaw: Mr Speaker, I was not going to come in, but, while we are on the subject of South Belfast, I want to say that my question was not about the post-primary sector.

Mr Weir: No, I understand that.

Ms Bradshaw: No, you are right. It was about primary schools and the pressures in the maintained sector. I am speaking specifically about St Bernard's Primary School. There are huge pressures there for families in which the eldest sibling got a place but the second child did not. That will cause great difficulties. What is your Department doing to remedy that?

Mr Weir: With primary-school places in South Belfast, again, there has been some allocation of additional temporary variation places. If the Member can bear with me for a moment, I will find the information. This year, additional places have been allocated to St Bernard's, St Joseph's Primary School in Carryduff and St Ita's Primary School. We are acutely aware of the situation with St Bernard's, and the allocations will be confirmed on 12 June. It is up to schools to set their admissions criteria. However, the advice that the Department has been giving for some time — indeed, we tried to work with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) on this — is that siblings have not been prioritised by St Bernard's; rather, the school's top criterion is that pupils are from that parish or the neighbouring parish.

I can understand parents' concern when they do not see a place for siblings. Much of the problem at St Bernard's seems to derive from the way in which admissions criteria have been designed.

We will continue to work on it. The Department can give a temporary variation to any school to increase admissions. However, beyond what was initially allocated to St Bernard's — I think that there was a small temporary variation — no further cases have been submitted by CCMS or the school for additional places. We will look at

any situation, but we can only respond to requests from the school; we cannot retrofit from above with regard to what the number of places should be.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

2. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Education what representations has he made to the Executive Office on repealing article 71 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. (AQO 2162/17-22)

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, you had me worried briefly when you said that question 4 had been withdrawn. I thought that we were heading straight into question 5.

I am committed to delivering equality for all school sectors. I have written to the Executive Office in support of repealing article 71 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (FETO). I know that that has broad support across the Chamber.

FETO is the legislative responsibility of the Executive Office, and any amendment to that legislation would ultimately be a matter for it to address. While my Department will not be in the lead in taking the matter forward, DE officials will facilitate and act as the point of contact through to the education sector and work with TEO on any further consideration of the matter.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that the issue is not directly within his remit, but it ultimately affects the Department over which he has powers. He will know that the issue has been in the news through recent motions and that the parties opposite blocked an Ulster Unionist legislative amendment to remove the teacher exemption in 2016. His predecessor said that, when he was Minister, he wrote to TEO to get the exemption removed, and, last month, the First Minister said that she was not blocking it, which de facto meant that the Executive Office was not blocking it. Will the Minister give us his best guess as to what is holding it up and why it is taking so long to overcome?

Mr Weir: Members probably think that I am frequently in the habit of making guesses, maybe not even believing that they are my best guess. It is difficult for me to drill into what is in other people's minds. I know where you come from and where my party comes from on the

FETO issue. I also know that the Chair of the Education Committee is consulting on private Member's legislation on the issue. I can only indicate that the First Minister — the issue lies with TEO — has stated publicly that the blockage is not on the FM side of TEO. If there are concerns or reservations about proposed legislation and the matter lies with a Department beyond mine, it is probably up to that Department to say what, it thinks, a particular stumbling block might be.

Mr Lyttle: The Education Minister referred to the public consultation that I am conducting on a proposal for a private Member's Bill to remove the exception of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order. Will the Education Minister support the legislation in principle?

Mr Weir: Yes, in principle and, hopefully, in practice as well. Obviously, I have not seen the finished draft of what the Member intends to propose, so I am somewhat limited. I am sure, however, that my colleagues on this side of the House and I will support anything that looks to repeal article 71.

Ms Sheerin: As the Minister and others have outlined, all parties agree that the exemption to the fair employment legislation needs to be removed so that teachers can receive the protections that other workers receive. As an MLA, I engage with teachers from across Mid Ulster who all work hard and have done so particularly over the past year. Will the Minister say whether he is aware of any outside objection to the repeal?

3.00 pm

Mr Weir: I am not aware of any. I am glad to hear what you said, as it suggests that there is broad unanimity across the Chamber. I am not aware of any outside objection, but, because the legislation lies ultimately within the purview of the Executive Office, it may have a greater insight into whether someone is creating concern or disagreement; indeed, that may be smoked out through the consultation on the private Member's legislation. The Chair of the Committee, albeit he is acting in an individual capacity, may get a better insight into whether there is any level of concern or opposition, what the basis of it is and whether there is any rationale behind it, or it may simply be that everybody is in favour of repeal.

Mr McCrossan: I, too, put on record my appreciation of all our teachers, who have worked tremendously hard over the past year

and continue to do great work in supporting our young people.

I am a wee bit confused, Minister. You say that you and your Department are in support of scrapping the exemption. The First Minister has clearly stated that she is in support of scrapping it. Am I right to suggest that it is the deputy First Minister who is holding this up, as the signature of both may be required to move this forward? It is becoming a game of 'Guess Who?'. Can you shed any light on that?

Mr Weir: We have moved from best guesses to 'Guess Who?', which, from memories of my youth, is a game in which you have to establish whether somebody has a beard or is bald etc. *[Laughter.]* I will gaze into my crystal ball. I do not know whether there have been discussions in TEO. I do not know whether there has been any formal position of opposition put forward by the deputy First Minister. All that I can indicate is that my party colleague the First Minister is in support of repeal. I am in support of it. Ultimately, the remit for the legislation lies with another Department, but maybe the Member is suggesting that, if there is a vacancy there, I could unlock that issue, but I suspect that that is not necessarily what he is saying. I cannot speculate on what is happening with legislation in another Department.

Education Authority: Critical Incident Response Team

3. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education how many times the Education Authority's critical incident response team has been called out to schools over the past three years. (AQO 2163/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for the question. It will involve a few statistics. The Education Authority has advised that, over the past three years, from September 2018 to 17 May 2021, the EA critical incident response team has been called out to 145 critical incidents. To some extent, COVID has had an impact on the direct breakdown in the current year, because the critical team will deal with a range of pupils. From September 2018 to August 2019, however, there were 67 critical incidents. From September 2019 to August 2020, there were 51 critical incidents. From September 2020 to 17 May 2021 — the latest figures that we have — there were 27 critical incidents.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for his response. Does the Minister anticipate that, in a post-pandemic world, the effects of isolation may bear out only when children who have

been isolated are back in school for a normal period of schooling? Does he anticipate that there will be an urgent need to set up a counselling service for those children and to have it ready for their return to school, as opposed to trying to respond on an individual basis?

Mr Weir: To some extent, there are probably two separate issues there. There is already an independent counselling service. Question 4, which has been withdrawn, might have covered that matter. We have also recently received some funding for a counselling pilot for primary schools, because the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) currently focuses purely on post-primary schools. That is different from the critical incident team, which is not about dealing with a particular issue involving an individual but more about the impact of a particular critical incident on the children of the school.

The most obvious example is when a traumatic death has taken place. Quite often, the impact will be on the classmates of the person who is involved. Similarly, there can be an impact when a teacher has died. Most pertinently, we have, unfortunately, seen a number of incidents of the suicide of a young person. It is in those situations that the critical incident response is directly involved. However, individual counselling is available through the ICSS.

The Member makes a valid point: there probably was the expectation that there would be a large spike upon the resumption of counselling. That has not really happened. The service has been able to cope with that. However, there is a danger, particularly with COVID, that we may see a certain level of delayed trauma: children may be very good on day one, but where they are on day 101 might be different. We need to be ready for all those situations.

Ms Flynn: I will just pick up on the Minister's last point about the delayed trauma that might impact on children and young people. Recently, the interim mental health champion said that she is fearful of a potential tsunami with regard to children and young people's mental health and well-being. In that context, is the Minister confident that the critical incident response team that is in place is sufficiently resourced and funded for the surge that we might see in coming months and, indeed, years?

Mr Weir: The indications are that we are able to cope with what is there at present. For example, we have been able to draw down

some counselling sessions for the summer and front-load those into May and June. As I said, there was probably the expectation of a considerable spike when children resumed school. At this stage, at least, it seems as though children's overall level of resilience is such that, fortunately, the level of trauma has actually been a lot less than anticipated.

However, with the new emotional health and well-being framework, which is sponsored mainly by my Department but is assisted by the Department of Health, there is an opportunity, as we move ahead to next year, to put greater resources in place for that. If we find that there are additional pressures, there is always the opportunity to put resources in and then try to backfill those, if you like, by way of a bid in a monitoring round, so that we can react as quickly as possible.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for reinforcing that an untimely death, perhaps through suicide, sometimes, brings the greatest amount of trauma in a school setting. With that in mind, what steps or partnerships are at the disposal of the authority's critical incident response team to mitigate further harm, given that the stress can, often, extend well beyond the gates of the school?

Mr Weir: As I mentioned earlier, there were 145 critical incidents during the past three years. Of those, 33 were related not necessarily to suicide but to sudden or unexplained death. The EA critical incident response team is the first point of contact. Follow-ups can be done through professional statutory agencies or, indeed, the expertise that exists in the voluntary sector and various charities. The team can draw down help from those two sectors, but it is the first point of assessment in that.

One of the saddest duties that I have had, which is not the most high profile, has been, during periods when schools have been in session, to try to make a quiet visit to a school when there has been a suicide. One can clearly sense the difficult atmosphere. Schools have been very good at coping with those situations. However, the loss of a young person is always particularly difficult and pertinent, both for their friends and family. In many ways, it goes against the natural order of things. Any death is terrible, but, when an elderly person dies, it is, perhaps, seen as their time. It is very difficult for those who are at the school, their teachers and the family to cope with the passing away of a child who is under 18.

Mrs Cameron: The Minister may already have answered my question, but, obviously, teenage suicides are a terrible tragedy in our society. Will the Minister outline how many of those critical incident school interventions related specifically to suicide?

Mr Weir: There have been indications that, over the last three years, there have been 33 critical incident visits where there has been an unexplained or sudden death. A large percentage of those were probably directly as a result of suicide. However, there is a bit of a disjoint in the numbers, because the critical incident team has to be there on the ground, generally speaking, on the day on which the death has taken place or, at the very latest, depending on notification, the day after. With suicides and other unexplained deaths, often, even if it is very apparent, any official direct recognition would come through the coroner's office, and it will then establish whether it is a suicide or a death by misadventure or some other form of medical sudden death intervention. As such, while the Education Authority will provide the critical incident team, I do not think that it is directly informed of the cause of death by the coroner's office. I referred to 33 sudden deaths, many of which have been suicide, but there is no breakdown of how many of those have been suicide and how many have been other forms of sudden death.

Coláiste Feirste

5. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Education for an update on plans to develop a second campus at Coláiste Feirste. (AQO 2165/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials have been working with representatives from the Irish-medium sector over the last number of years to try to identify a suitable site for the post-primary Irish-medium school in north Belfast. We recently met the principal of Coláiste Feirste and representatives of the Member's party via Zoom. I have also physically been to Coláiste Feirste.

As part of that examination, several site searches have been carried out, and, while detailed consideration has been given to a number of sites, as yet, an appropriate site has not been identified. However, I assure the Member that my Department will continue to work with the sector and go beyond any scoping that we can do to establish the location for a second site.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. I am glad to hear that he is very aware

of the surge in demand for Irish-medium education and, particularly, that there is an oversubscription in Coláiste Feirste, which is the post-primary school in Belfast.

The Minister has given a commitment that he is searching for a site for an extended campus for Coláiste Feirste. Will he give a commitment that the search will continue and that there is a development plan for such a campus?

Mr Weir: I will give more specific details. There have been initial examinations, and, as the Member will be aware, land in north Belfast is relatively scarce, perhaps more so than in most areas. As a second string to this, my officials have engaged with the Strategic Investment Board for it to carry out a search of properties. It is important that we do not necessarily rule out potential sites, particularly when we are looking at a post-primary school that will cover quite a large area. Consequently, the commissioning brief covers the greater north Belfast area and goes into the wider Newtownabbey area, as well as looking at potential sites closer to the city centre.

Mr Allister: The Minister was elected to this House on a manifesto that contained this pledge:

"tackling the preferential treatment of Irish Medium in school build".

Will the Minister write to me setting out the total spend in capital and resource on Irish-medium education since that sector came into existence?

3.15 pm

Mr Weir: I am happy to write to the Member about that. If we are talking about the time since that sector came into existence, then it will clearly stretch back over many, many years. A little bit of work would probably need to be done to establish the exact amount.

Where action is being taken, for instance, at the Coláiste Feirste, it is to meet particular need where there is demand for places. From that point of view, this is not about giving any preferential treatment. It is about trying to treat all sectors equally. For instance, there will probably be temporary arrangements made at Coláiste Feirste this September to be able to deal with that situation as it has outgrown its numbers. In a similar way, in other sectors there are numbers requiring additional temporary accommodation before there can be a fuller move. We have always got to make

sure that there is somewhere physical for pupils to have their education.

Mr Newton: Minister, you said that no sector would be given preferential treatment. Am I right in saying that, when area planning is carried out, the Irish-medium sector is an integral part of the area plan as it is being developed, rather than being treated separately from the area plan?

Mr Weir: Absolutely. The whole point of area planning is to have all sectors around the table at the one time. Part of the problem in area planning was a level of disruption because of COVID. There is still a little bit of further work to be done to find cross-sectoral solutions at times to particular problems. There is still a bit of work needed within sectors to break down a bit of a silo mentality. That work is progressing, and area planning, in terms of all the formal structures, tries to ensure that all the key players from the different sectors are around the same table at the same time.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland

T1. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on any discussions that he has had or any work that his Department is undertaking to help to remedy the breakdown within the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI). (AQT 1391/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. There have been question marks over the General Teaching Council for some time. I am aware of the recent resignations from the General Teaching Council. As part of that, as the Member may be aware, I commissioned from the Department an independent board of effectiveness review that will examine whether the GTC's current composition, structures, standing orders and internal procedures continue to provide a robust basis for its operation. That review is due to report within a number of weeks. Rather than simply trying to fill a particular immediate gap, we need to receive the findings of the review. It was commissioned, and a private company won that commission after a tendering exercise and is, therefore, doing it independently. It is important that, once those findings emerge from the review, there is an expedition of what needs to

happen in terms of the General Teaching Council. Obviously, at this stage, I cannot directly prejudge what the answers will be in terms of that effectiveness review.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for that. Minister, do you anticipate, within that effectiveness review, the charge that was brought to the Education Committee: that there is a risk to children and young people because the General Teaching Council can vet teachers but not remove them from the register? Will that be within the remit of the review, and do you agree with that assertion that was made at the Committee?

Mr Weir: I think there are concerns. There have been concerns for some time about the remit of the council and, indeed, its effectiveness. It is important that action is taken on foot of the review. However, that may also mean that, if there is an area that is not 100% covered by the effectiveness review, that should not place a limitation on what action should be taken. I have been concerned about the potential that exists to bar a teacher who has, perhaps, been convicted of a serious offence that could create child safety issues. That is why any actions that ultimately emerge around changing the dysfunctionality of the General Teaching Council — there are different routes by which that can be pursued — should be comprehensive in nature and ensure that we have solutions for all the problems, rather than being a patch-up job, which is where the GTC is at the moment.

Straid Primary School

T2. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Education whether he has had an opportunity to respond to the joint request from the elected representatives from South Antrim for a meeting with him and the Education Authority in regard to Straid Primary School. (AQT 1392/17-22)

Mr Weir: I do not want to give an inaccurate answer. I am not immediately aware of having personally received that request. I have no problem with meeting the representatives of Straid Primary School, and that, I believe, would be in relation to a development proposal.

There is a particular period in which I am able to meet to discuss development proposals. As such, quite often, that has involved a school or, sometimes, elected representatives. For example, without prejudice to any decision, I have met with the Member's new party leader in relation to Craigavon Senior High School. I will

be meeting representatives of my own party on that issue later on this week. I am always happy to receive those requests, and it is fairly routine that I would receive a range of representations. As the Member is aware, because the Department and, more specifically, the Minister is the decision-maker, those exercises give me an opportunity to hear what is being said by those who are presenting the information. A record is kept of the meeting, which forms part of the evidential base when a decision is taken on the development proposal.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his reply. He has not had the meeting, so he will, obviously, not be aware that we have some concerns about the process in relation to Straid Primary School. The timings and commitments that were given previously by the EA to elected representatives in the area are not being met. Indeed, there is considerable concern in the community, as well as amongst elected representatives, about the approach going forward. Will he look urgently at the situation?

Mr Weir: I will view whatever evidence is there. In addition to meetings, a development proposal frequently offers a window of opportunity and time for people to submit letters of support or to raise concerns, which could also be about the process. I can give an assurance that all the evidence will be looked at before any decision is taken. However, because the Department and I, as Minister, are responsible for that decision, I cannot comment on whether there is merit in any concerns about processes. Nevertheless, that will be looked at.

GCSE: Awarding Arrangements

T3. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education why, in managing GCSE awarding for the incoming second year of the course, he did not follow a similar approach to last year, given that the same challenges remain. (AQT 1393/17-22)

Mr Weir: We are in a slightly different situation. I am a little bit unclear as to the specificity of the Member's question. We have had different levels of disruption to the progress of GCSEs, and that has to be taken into account. It will be best if we can reach a point where, in line with what is happening in other jurisdictions, we begin to move back to a situation where we have examinations. As part of that, be it GCSEs, AS levels or A levels, there is a need to have a similar playing field across the whole of the United Kingdom so that our pupils are not disadvantaged, either by the perception that they are given an unfair advantage in their

GCSEs, which would, then, count against them when it comes to employers or universities, or, indeed, that we create a higher hurdle. Consequently, the work that has gone on reflects where we are with the pandemic and tries to ensure that Northern Ireland's position enables portability and the comparability of our examination results with those of other parts of the United Kingdom.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the consistency that is required across the UK to allow competitiveness. However, a teacher in my constituency has raised the point that she feels two years' work will be crammed into one, which she says will put pressure on pupils and teachers. How has the Minister consulted with teachers on the ground in order to understand the realistic delivery of the courses?

Mr Weir: It should not be a question of two years being crammed into one. We have given a situation with GCSEs that means that there can be unit omissions in the bulk of cases. We also have to realise that, while this year has clearly not been as robust as has been the case elsewhere, teaching has gone on. On the unit assessments, because of the omission of units and the fact that schools will be in a position, through CCEA, to follow a particular pattern, there is no reason in any course why, effectively, two years' teaching should be truncated into one.

We should also remember that, because of the valuable work that our teachers are doing, teaching has gone on throughout the pandemic. Given the initial experiences of roughly a year ago, when I think everybody was probably scrambling to try to make sure that they could fill the gap, the preparation of remote learning has been a lot better, as has, indeed, acknowledgement from September of last year onwards. That has meant that we have seen a much more consistent pattern of teaching, and I think that is very much to the credit of teachers and staff. I do not think that any pupil should be disadvantaged, particularly when they are compared with those who are doing GCSEs in a different jurisdiction.

Educational Welfare Officers: Pay Parity

T4. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Education what engagement he has had with educational welfare officers and their representatives, who are seeking pay parity with their colleagues in Health and Social Care, given that he will be aware of their ongoing campaign and the fact that those officers

provide crucial support to some of the most vulnerable students and their families and their work will be of particular importance as we emerge from the pandemic and begin to confront the many emotional health issues that it has caused. (AQT 1394/17-22)

Mr Weir: Directly speaking, I think that there are established procedures in which pay disputes can be dealt with. I am not the direct employer of the educational welfare officers, so I think that it would be wrong for me to try to parachute into an industrial dispute where I do not have the power to produce a particular settlement. A lot of good work has been done by educational welfare officers, and a lot of good work is done in a range of activities.

Mr Gildernew: Given your acknowledgement of the complex issues that educational welfare officers are equipped to deal with, Minister, have you given any consideration to investing in more educational welfare officers in order to help us emerge from the pandemic?

Mr Weir: There will always be an assessment. I welcome the Member's commitment to lobby the Finance Minister to provide additional support to the Department of Education, and it is good that we are all on the same page. Clearly, there is a commitment to try to resolve the pay issue, and, as such, from the point of view of the numbers, that will also reflect where there needs to be agreement on the basis of the workload that each educational welfare officer undertakes. That will show a pathway to how many, if any, additional workers are required.

Facemasks: Post-primary Settings

T5. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education who will take the decision to remove the requirement for the wearing of facemasks in post-primary education settings and what criteria will need to be met. (AQT 1395/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for that question. Ultimately, as with any lifting of restrictions, the matter is down to the overall Executive position and, indeed, the task force's position. While there is some evidence that wearing face coverings will reduce levels of transmissibility, I am sure the Member will also be aware — *[Interruption.]* There seem to be distractions to the right and to the left today.

Balanced against that is the fact that, particularly for relatively young children, there is a period of time in class that goes beyond the

requirements that adults such as the Member and I face.

This imposition should be kept to an absolute minimum. The Department of Education has put its position to the task force: the Department wants it to be entirely voluntary, as it was at the very start. No one is denying anybody the right to wear a mask if they so desire, but the Department believes that it is time to move within that.

3.30 pm

The requirement has been lifted in England. Medical officers indicated to the Department that, when we reached a level of community transmission similar to that in England when the requirement was lifted there, they would support that occurring in Northern Ireland. We are getting to that position. For our young people, the sooner we can move back to as much normality as possible, the better.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. I know that the Children's Commissioner shares the view that it is time to remove the requirement. Can we look to the Executive meeting on Thursday for approval to be given for that requirement to end?

Mr Weir: Potentially. It is not always that the Children's Commissioner and I find ourselves in agreement; indeed, I suspect that the Member might not always be on the same page as her either. I do not know whether this is a virtuous circle.

The matter has been put to the task force. It will bring proposals for the meeting on Thursday. It is Monday, and Executive members are not notified as early as this of what has emerged from the task force. I hope that we can move to a voluntary position as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up. Will Members please take their ease for a few moments?

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

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2021-22

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £10,342,800,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC), the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR), the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) for the year ending 31 March 2022 and that resources, not exceeding £11,843,690,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2022 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2021-22 that was laid before the Assembly on 27 May 2021. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr O'Toole: I will not detain the Assembly all that long. Obviously, I cannot, given that this is a time-limited debate, but I will bore everyone, including the Minister, tomorrow.

As has been said, we in this place make something of a habit of debating Budgets, Supply resolutions such as this and money Bills. Frankly, it could and should be said that the heat generated is in inverse proportion to the light shone for the benefit of the people whom we serve. We are possibly getting on for close to a dozen Budget statements and Supply resolutions or Budget Bills that I have debated as the SDLP's finance spokesperson in the Assembly since I started last January, which is remarkable because it is barely a year and a half since I came in here. In all that time, as I have said repeatedly, we have not been able to debate a joined-up strategic Budget. That is a

matter not just of great regret but of immense frustration.

Some of that is, of course, down to the fact that, as the Minister has said before and will, no doubt, say again today, the UK Treasury has failed to provide us with a multi-year Budget. That is, as it were, on it. The Treasury needs to provide us with the tools to make a multi-year Budget, but we are not powerless here. There is not much point in our being here if we are not at least going to debate our priorities and seek to deliver long-term plans against them. I will say more about it tomorrow, but it is worth saying again as we pass the Supply resolution — yes, we will support the Supply resolution associated with the Main Estimates — that we need more strategic direction. It is simply not enough to say that we have to wait for London to provide us with the resources. We need London to provide us with the resources because that is how we are funded, so I am not being disingenuous, but there is a chicken-and-egg situation. It is not beyond us to sit down and, for example, come up with a draft plan for funding over a five-year horizon the crisis in our health service. We should all, whatever our political party, be committed to doing that because one in four of our citizens is languishing on a waiting list. That is not just regrettable but totally unconscionable and unacceptable; it would be unacceptable in any other jurisdiction.

We sometimes wonder why people have such a low opinion of this institution. In part, it is because they do not see us addressing the issues that matter to them, and few things matter more to people at the minute than addressing our waiting list crisis. I would rather have been debating with the Finance Minister, as I said fairly directly a couple of weeks ago, at least a draft plan or a set of intentions for how we will fund the waiting list crisis in our health service over the next few years. We do not have that yet, and nor do we have a thought-through economic recovery plan to get us out of the COVID crisis.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will happily give way, yes.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member outline any alternative suggestions that were put forward by his Minister to the Executive on the Budget?

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

Mr O'Toole: I am aware that there was a discussion at the Executive. Of course, I am not on the Executive, so I was not there to hear exactly what that discussion was, but I know that we have consistently raised the need for a more joined-up and strategic approach to funding for all these questions. We are genuinely and sincerely open — indeed, we have written to the Finance Minister about it — not to playing party politics but to sitting down and discussing how we better allocate moneys to deal with the health crisis.

I will touch on a couple of other things briefly because time is limited, but I will bore people more tomorrow. What we are approving today involves a high number of COVID allocations. It is welcome that we have moved swiftly, and I welcome the hard work done by civil servants on allocating COVID moneys, but there must be a degree of risk around some of those allocations. It would be helpful to hear from the Minister whether he thinks that the hundreds of millions in COVID allocations that we are approving today will all be spent and, if they are not spent, where, he thinks, they could be reprioritised to. Could they, for example, be reprioritised into our health service?

Some fairly big-ticket items have been approved, including one involving a ministerial direction from the Economy Minister for the high street voucher scheme. It is a large amount of expenditure, and there is still a significant question mark over the economic impact of that scheme. A ministerial direction was attached to it, so we need to hear more about that.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has moved to set up a fiscal council, but I would like to hear more about the fiscal commission. I would also like to hear more about how, he thinks, those institutions will help us to bring more rigour and strategy to the process. We all agree — certainly, I have said it repeatedly — that we need much more strategy in our approach. Again, I will speak at much greater length about that tomorrow.

Finally, though not finally for me, there is the protocol and how we deal with the opportunities, how we prioritise and take advantage of those opportunities and how we deal with the broader consequences of Brexit, of which the protocol is one.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr O'Toole: I will draw my remarks to a close now, Mr Deputy Speaker. We know that there is a significant loss of funding. It would have been

helpful to have a clear line of sight in the Budget statement or the Main Estimates of how much EU funding has been lost. For now, however, we will support the resolution. I will say more, possibly more robustly, in the Budget (No. 2) Bill debate tomorrow.

Mrs Cameron: I am speaking as a DUP member of the Health Committee. There is no doubt that the challenges facing our health service are unprecedented, and, as such, we must look for unprecedented levels of support for our health service. We have all heard the figures for our waiting lists, and they are heartbreaking. Every person on the waiting lists represents a health need. Every one of them, because of the wait, is living with the worry and pain of a worsening condition and with doubt about their health outcome. Above all else, it is our duty to ensure that we do all that we can to lift that burden from the shoulders of those whom we represent in this place.

Additional allocations through monitoring rounds, such as the £50 million set aside in June, are very welcome. They are only a drop in the ocean of what is required, however. There are unprecedented demands on our health service: the resumption of services; the need for reform; and the need to remunerate our staff at an acceptable level for the work that they do, the care that they provide and their professionalism, skill and expertise. The needs of patients and all staff must be met.

I welcome the proposed summit on waiting lists that was agreed at the party leaders' forum last week, but we need to be in no doubt that the talking done at the summit will need to be resourced. We must share the political will and find consensus to make significant inroads into the mountains of referrals sitting on desks around our health service. I hope that we can all set aside our party political interests and back up our claims that waiting lists and our health service need to be our top priority. I fear, however, that we may hear some speaking out of both sides of the mouth, with people saying, "We regard the health service as our number-one priority" while pursuing a narrow political agenda at the behest of the loudest voices in our electoral base. That is a test for this place. It is a test for leaders really to decide what is important and to work for all of the community rather than for the few.

In that vein, we must address another budgetary challenge facing our health service, and that is the impact of the protocol. Significantly, a £10 million resource bid has been made to address the impact of pressures associated with EU exit and the protocol,

including medicine price rises. We would welcome a more detailed breakdown of where those costs are rising, to what extent the 12-month derogation is masking further financial and logistical problems and the fuller potential impact of the Department having to reorientate to source supplies from markets outside the United Kingdom.

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate the Member's giving way. I agree with her that we need to look at the issue of medicines. I have never denied that. The Member indicated that there are costs associated with Brexit more broadly, and I am sure that the Finance Minister will indicate that himself when he speaks. Will she agree that the costs associated with the protocol are significantly outweighed by the broader loss of funding from Europe?

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

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Deputy Speaker for the extra minute, which I will not be needing. The protocol as it impacts on the delivery of healthcare is a protocol that is not fit for purpose.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the issues is that a six-month call needs to be made to the providers of medicines that are coming to Northern Ireland. We are now past the halfway mark of this year. Does the Member agree with me that, because of the Northern Ireland protocol, there are real concerns about the future security of medicine supplies to Northern Ireland?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for his intervention. I completely agree with him.

The protocol is not fit for purpose, is not as good as it gets and is not the best of both worlds. It is damaging to our constituents, and, as such, I urge others in the House to work with us for better.

The next number of months are going to pose more challenges from COVID. Thankfully, however, we can now place more focus on other challenges that the health service is facing.

So many have paid a huge price for the restrictions placed on the delivery of healthcare in the last 12 months: cancer patients, stroke victims and heart surgery candidates, to name but a very few. It is now time to give priority to them, politically and pecuniarily.

3.45 pm

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Supply resolution motion today. The AERA Committee recognises the challenges in planning future Budgets, the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant financial difficulties posed by Brexit. The Committee recently took evidence from the Department on the budget plans for 2021-22 and the plans for the June monitoring round. While the Committee welcomes the continuation of recurrent funding for many of DAERA's core work programmes, several outstanding economic challenges need to be addressed urgently in order to ensure that our public bodies and rural communities are supported to recover and modernise in the next financial year.

As I outlined in the Budget debate several weeks ago, the Committee is pleased to see the development of some important investment proposals over the next financial year, including an investment of £9.8 million in 2021-22 in order to support the agri-food sector as it emerges out of the pandemic; the roll-out of a new surveillance scheme, co-led by DAERA and the Belfast Trust, to facilitate early detection of coronavirus in waste-water outlets; and a £2 million investment to support green growth strategies in rural communities.

The Committee also welcomes the commitment from the Department to contribute £7.5 million in capital funding to Project Stratum, to support, in collaboration with the Department for the Economy, the roll-out of high-speed broadband across rural communities. That is a vital and worthwhile project to enhance infrastructure, connectivity and capability in rural areas and will be essential in driving equality and improving livelihoods in rural communities. However, the Committee is concerned about the significant economic challenges facing our agriculture and environment sectors and urges the Department to be mindful of the current and future pressures that will emerge over the coming year and to take appropriate action to ensure that those sectors are supported.

It is crucial that our rural communities be provided with sufficient investment to support the transition to eco-friendly practices and that such innovations are encouraged and incentivised in the sector so that the farming community can do its fair share in helping to mitigate the effects of climate change. It is essential that DAERA be provided with the investment needed to ensure that sufficient

resource and staffing levels are in place at our ports of entry to comply with the checking of goods as they are imported from Britain, in accordance with the protocol, particularly given that those requirements could increase over the next year. It is also vital that there be appropriate support for businesses and industries that may encounter any delays or disruption as a result of checks.

The Committee is particularly concerned about the projected £19.5 million shortfall in DAERA's budget this year, which is due to a loss of EU funding that could have been rolled over. That deficit is a direct result of the British Treasury's decision to net off £14.4 million of ring-fenced EU funding against other manifesto commitments and a failure to fund £5.1 million towards programmes to support disease eradication. While the Department has confirmed to the Committee that it anticipates having sufficient funding this year to meet pillar 1 and pillar 2 farm payments, the £19.5 million shortfall represents a significant resource opportunity loss that could have been directed to support innovations and developments in our rural communities. That is being compounded by the lengthy time frame to launch a consultation on a new rural policy framework. Whilst the Committee welcomes the recent progress from the Department on that, we have been calling for the consultation to be brought forward for many months. Had more progress been made, it may have been possible to launch or pump-prime new strategies for this financial year. The delay in engaging in that is unfortunate. I hope that the consultation will generate viable strategies for future economic development in our rural communities.

The Committee welcomes the planned capital investment of over £90 million in 2021-22 that will support improvements in research and development strategies, ICT infrastructure and rural development programmes. However, it is essential that the Department be supported to access any additional capital moneys that may become available over the next year to boost our rural development framework and ensure that our agricultural industry can continue to modernise its equipment, infrastructure and estate to deliver innovations and best practice.

The Department has advised the Committee that it does not intend to make any bid against the June monitoring round as it has sufficient budgetary allocation in this year to cover its resource and capital expenditure. However, given the challenges highlighted by the Committee, the Department is urged to actively horizon scan for pressures and areas where securing additional resource could improve

capability and policy development in our rural and environment sectors.

The Committee also welcomes the recent moves by the Department of Finance regarding the establishment of an independent fiscal council and hopes that that body will be granted sufficient autonomy and powers to support the development of multi-year and sustainable budgets across economic sectors. That is welcome progress against New Decade, New Approach, and it will, hopefully, provide better assurance and scrutiny and build greater levels of trust among the public with regard to expenditure.

On behalf of the Committee, I close by highlighting the challenges associated with the Budget planning process and why we are having these debates and discussions on financial planning now, when the budgetary forecasts for this year have been, largely, agreed. The Assembly should be engaged in Budget planning as early as possible in order to allow Members sufficient time and latitude to challenge the projected strategic expenditure of Departments and to help steer them towards initiatives that will have the most policy benefit and outcome.

During tomorrow's debate on the Budget, I will speak in my capacity as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs.

Ms Bradshaw: I will focus my comments on health, but I will make an early comment on the process used in what we are debating. Ultimately, the Estimates are for legislation, policy and service delivery over the financial year — in other words, a period of one year. However, we are already more than two months into that period.

Waiting lists should probably have been the biggest issue for the past decade, never mind the past few days. Let us consider how inadequate it is for a Budget to be over a single year and based on a single year of programmes and allocations, when we face a crisis as acute as the crisis that is before us, with hundreds of thousands of people waiting for up to six years or more for treatment and diagnostics. Last week, when departmental officials came before the Health Committee, members from various parties asked many questions about waiting lists. Unfortunately, because of the one-year set-up, it is difficult to recruit staff, and the crisis very much hinges on the vacancies that exist. To tackle a problem that has developed over years, and which has resulted in waiting times that are measured in years, will, inevitably, take years. In the short term, we need to have funds

available for targeted interventions as soon as the clear evidence for them becomes apparent. In the longer term, we need a guaranteed transformation package that is about reforming the whole system and improving primary care options so that fewer people end up on waiting lists in the first place, and so that those who do end up on them do not experience the appalling waiting times that are being experienced currently across many specialities.

Let us consider something else that emerged on Friday: the fact that the level of physical activity in young children in Northern Ireland is the worst of any comparable country. We were already well aware of that. It emerged from a report to the Education Department and Committee, but it has a profoundly worrying impact on the overall health of our people. It is a health matter, but not a penny in the Health budget has been allocated towards tackling the issue. The Estimates state that the Department of Health spending is for promoting good health and well-being. The example of spending on physical activity in schools would, unquestionably, contribute to that objective. Our system of budgeting is designed in a way that ignores that. We are assessing Estimates that are broken down by Department even though we have a Programme for Government that is about breaking areas down by outcome. In the end, our entire budgeting process is about just that: the process. Does it work?

I turn now to the immediate issues. My proposal to the Health Committee for a Committee inquiry into waiting lists, which, I was pleased to see, the Deputy Chair Pam Cameron supported, is designed with reform in mind. I want the granular detail of why we in Northern Ireland have got into such a bad situation, compared with the rest of the UK and the South, to be examined. We are spending over £6 billion a year on healthcare. I want to understand how the healthcare system got into such a state by looking at the financial and human resource management and at all aspects of the estate. Waiting lists do not have to be part of the system. We could have a much more responsive system based on better-resourced primary care and regional specialisms, minimising waiting times and providing taxpayer-funded universal healthcare that is free at the point of access. Never has it been more important to look across the silos and base our spending on outcomes. Those outcomes include a health service that is not as vulnerable to a pandemic, that does not rely on making people wait so long that some services are effectively not delivered at all and that can never again be described by the Health Minister himself as being in serious trouble.

To conclude, our job today is to safeguard the finances of Northern Ireland and, most of all, the people of Northern Ireland. We trust that we will very much help to do the latter by voting through the Estimates. We must urgently consider, however, whether this is the best way that we can do that. We must also consider how we can deliver much more effective outcome-based budgeting to deliver a truly universal health service and to deliver in areas such as children's physical health or developing primary care hubs in a way that is genuinely transformative in the longer term. Thank you.

Mr Catney: There will always be pressures on the amount of public spending that can be provided. You just have to look at the funding bids that have been put forward by most Ministers, which show that the amount for which they bid was many times more than the amount that could be allocated to them. I do not underestimate the difficulty of making those decisions or the difficulty that the limited resources will create for the running of major departmental programmes.

Let us look, however, at what the Budget includes. We are about to vote on £13 billion of departmental resource spending and £1.8 billion of conventional capital, with around £74 million of financial transactions capital and £170 million of reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) capital. The Treasury has signed off on a number of additional allocations: £411 million from the Chancellor's statement, plus another £224 million of Barnett consequentials, as well as additional carry-over of resources that were left unspent in 2021. The Secretary of State is yet to sign off on those, but it is expected that they will be included through in-year monitoring, and thus there is £687.4 million of additional allocations. It is expected that an additional £306 million associated with funding packages such as NDNA and confidence-and-supply will be paid by the Treasury, although that has not yet been confirmed. On 20 May 2021, the Minister issued a written ministerial statement indicating that a further £114 million had been made available by the Treasury. The Department has already advised that a further £14.9 million resource, £33.6 million capital DEL and £19.3 million financial transactions capital is to be allocated in the June monitoring round.

All the Departments received income from the EU that was used to fund European programmes. There are some concerning shortfalls post-Brexit, however. The Department advised that the UK Government's spending review will provide funding for farm support direct payments of £315.6 million and fisheries

funding of £3.1 million in 2021-22. Thus, there is a shortfall of around £15 million in farm payments. The Department also advised that it is expected that the PEACE PLUS programme will provide replacements for Peace IV and INTERREG funding. The Department indicated that limited information has been provided on the planned Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). The Department suggested that the SPF will not provide for the replacement of EU structural funds in 2021-22, which will lead to an anticipated shortfall of around £69 million. Of that shortfall, £45 million is understood to sit with the Department for the Economy. Finally, there is £6 million from the Irish Government for the A5 road capital project.

4.00 pm

My somewhat long-winded point is this: we have the highest per capita public spending of anywhere in the United Kingdom. Is it, therefore, acceptable that Departments fail our citizens in so many areas? We have the highest per capita spending on health, and yet our waiting lists are out of control and many times longer than those in other parts of the United Kingdom that have less funding. In fact, the more money that we put into health services, the more inefficient they seem to become. We have historically lower levels of productivity in business, lower birthrates and lower wages. Those are not the indicators that you want if you wish to lead in many ways or rebuild an economy post-COVID.

We have a benefits system that spends billions to treat claimants with contempt, and excess them to within an inch of their lives, in order to try to weed out a relatively minute number who try to cheat the system. Instead, we could use that money to tackle the overbearing poverty. That is the only proven way of actively helping those on benefits. We spend and spend without a plan, or even a notion of a plan. We throw money away on ineffective programmes —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Catney: — and severely underfund the projects that could make the most difference.

If you want to improve the prosperity of Northern Ireland, that is what we need to tackle, but it will take proper scrutiny and consultation, not £13 billion of spending rushed through in a matter of weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Your time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: The debate on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2021-22 requires Members' consideration and scrutiny. Members, right across the House, have indicated that this is extremely difficult for numerous reasons, as outlined.

We have many financial difficulties and pressures, right across the Departments. We have serious problems in Northern Ireland, and they are so severe that we should not pretend that it is business as usual. Yet, the Finance Minister seems to pretend exactly that. Sinn Féin seeks to portray a crisis in the Republic of Ireland, while its Ministers here in the North say, "Nothing to see here. Let us just carry on as normal."

Last week, I was accused of politicking and electioneering. I make no apology for calling out the elephant in the room. The SDLP has no interest in blocking allocations that are much needed, but we have consistently raised concerns, inside and outside government, about this Budget. The SDLP Minister is effectively taking a budget cut, so of course we wanted a better Budget. Let us remember that the SDLP has one vote in the Executive.

As I have said, there are multiple problems. The health service was unable to meet the needs of our citizens before COVID. The health waiting times, and the length of waiting lists, are off the Richter scale. It is absolutely appalling and embarrassing. Meanwhile, we are faced with climate change on a scale that risks enormous damage to the health of the population globally.

Mr McHugh: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, OK. Thank you.

Mr McHugh: Whilst the SDLP has only one vote in the Executive, do you accept that the Budget was agreed by all of the Executive?

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

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, I do. As I indicated, we have no interest in blocking allocations of money that are desperately needed by Departments, but we have one vote. We would do things differently if we had more.

As I said, you would not realise the extent of our problems, if you were to look at either the Finance Minister's Budget or the Economy Minister's plan. I will give a little example of why things are so frustrating. Earlier this afternoon, I asked the Economy Minister to outline the

economic impact assessment and multiplier-effect details of the £145 million high street voucher scheme. I specifically asked how the scheme would support job retention and business sustainability. Unfortunately, the Minister was not in a position to give me those details, as no full economic impact assessment was available. Yet the Minister has made an allocation of £145 million for that scheme with no clear understanding of the economic impact. Honestly, I find it unbelievable. In a way, it illustrates the rather chaotic manner in which money is spent in Northern Ireland. It is really not good enough.

We all know what we need to do. We must create a resilient and flexible health service, reskill our workforce across the whole economy, restructure our energy industry and, at the same time, find ways to support thousands of jobs at risk of being lost, particularly at the end of the furlough scheme. That will be particularly difficult for those sectors that will have a longer recovery period, and I am talking about the aerospace industry, the travel industry and the event management industry. We need to find a way to ensure that we support those businesses beyond furlough.

As I said, this is a time when dynamic leadership is required, and that is not what we see here today. We need not a steady-as-he-goes Finance Minister but one who seizes the moment by recognising that real change is needed and who oversees a major reconfiguring of the Budget in response to the massively changed situation that we are now in. With all the generosity in the world, this Budget is not it. This is not the time for slight bits of reform here and there.

While I am talking about substantial reform, I wish to make a comment about the role of the Utility Regulator, as the motion specifically references it. I look forward to the new Economy Minister, whoever that might be, bringing forward proposals to redefine the role of the Utility Regulator, because it is an extremely important position. As our economy changes shape, instead of the regulator having a legal duty to promote the gas industry, the role must change. It must prioritise the rapid decarbonisation of the energy sector, end the use of fossil fuels and promote a market in which renewable energy sources are readily available and affordable and in which much faster progress is achieved on making homes energy-efficient and properly insulated. We urgently need effective plans to make social housing, owner-occupied homes and the private rented sector all fit for the climate challenges that we collectively face.

We need plans for the future, just as we need a Budget that looks forward, not one that simply looks backwards and gets photocopied for the next year. This is a Budget that fails people, including those who need healthcare, those who need hope for the future and those who need jobs that make our society a better place. Budgeting in Northern Ireland needs a complete overhaul.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close, please.

Ms McLaughlin: I will indeed.

We need to carefully rethink the impact and value of every pound that is spent. Is the spending having a positive and productive impact? Is it improving lives and livelihoods? If the Minister does not know the answer —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: — he should not spend the money.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his comments. I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to join colleagues in supporting the motion on the Supply resolution and to make some brief observations as a member of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee. As a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, I will make some additional comments on matters relating to justice.

As other Members said, this has been an incredibly difficult year, but, despite the challenges that we have faced, as we emerge from the catastrophic coronavirus crisis, our immediate priority must be, as I have said before in the House, avoiding further disasters.

As I said, I will keep my comments brief, but I must raise in the Chamber again the pressing need to dramatically reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and to avoid the devastating tipping points that would shatter the global economy and pose existential human threats. This is a crucial juncture in our history. As we get back on the path to recovery from the pandemic, we must integrate solutions to both crises in a coherent response. We must take the opportunity to create green jobs and to propel the economy towards sustainable growth and increased resilience. It is, therefore, vital that high-line budgetary provision is targeted specifically at environmental protection and tackling the climate emergency. It would appear

that we are not quite at that stage at this juncture.

I will move on to matters relating to justice. Funding to progress outstanding New Decade, New Approach targets for policing are welcome. I note the significant unmet pressures in the Department, and I commend the Department of Justice for securing the additional resource to, first, secure 7,000 officers for the PSNI and, secondly, to enable the police to begin recruiting an additional 100 officers this year. It will be a matter for future Budgets to ensure that that is baselined and built upon. We have made some progress but not as much as we might like, but given the current financial situation and other pressures, it is commendable that the Department is at least able to start moving in the right direction as opposed to regressing, which might have been the case in such a challenging year.

Again, I thank the Minister for his contribution, and I am pleased to support the Supply resolution motion.

Mr Allister: Traditionally, and without fail, we hear much lip service in the House to the need to address the huge needs of the Health budget. I do not gainsay or dissent from that whatsoever. Under devolution, our health has suffered greatly, not least because of the reduction of nigh on 2,000 beds and all the accompanying staff who have been removed from our system. No wonder, then, that we have waiting lists that are crippling the service.

When I hear all that lip service to spending on health, it causes me to look at the Budget and to ask this: have we gone for efficiencies? Are we in the business of ending squander? On the very day that we hold this debate, we all get a missive from the Chair of the Procedures Committee telling us that we now have a proposal from that Committee to spend £321,000 on translation services in the Chamber. A sum of £321,000 would employ 10 new nurses per annum, yet the priority of the Procedures Committee, or of the majority who are represented on that Committee, is to take that money and spend it on needless translation services. There is not a Member who does not speak or understand English. Yet, in the depths of a health crisis and a money crisis affecting health, we have a proposition that we should squander an amount such as that on fitting out this place with 10 interpreters so that people in pursuit of that vanity project can, when they wish, speak in Irish or, if any Members spoke it, Ulster Scots and have the vanity of knowing that it is being translated into English, and vice versa. What a total waste of much-needed

money. Yet that is the sort of project that some in the House prioritise above fixing and improving the health of our citizens.

What comfort is that to the man to whom I spoke at the weekend? He waited six and a half hours for an ambulance to arrive at his home to take his wife, who had fallen, broken her femur and smashed her hip, to hospital. The ambulance did not arrive until 3.00 am. What am I to say to that gentleman? "Oh well, there are more important things that we need to spend money on: translation services for Irish and Ulster Scots. Get your priorities right, man. Do not worry about your wife lying in agony on the floor. We do not need to fix the health service until we have provided translation services". Really? Then the House wonders why it struggles with credibility in the community.

We were awash with money for COVID. What did we do with most of it, or, at least, with some of it? We decided that Royal County Down golf club needed £1.5 million. Golf clubs needed £4.5 million. The IFA needed £6.5 million. The GAA needed £7.5 million. The health service did not need that money; of course not. Now, the health service does not need the money that might employ 10 or a dozen nurses. The House has a different priority: a shamefully political priority of promoting the Irish language over the health of its citizens. Shame on the House.

4.15 pm

Mr Carroll: Saying that the Estimates and budgetary process are simple, straightforward and easy to navigate is telling porkies. That is not just my view or my party's view but a view that is widely held. The Chair of the Finance Committee stated his dissatisfaction with the process, which I share, especially as he described its "opaqueness" and its "confusing" nature. That said, the Estimates process will, obviously, form the basis of the Budget for this year. When you trawl through it, many questions arise. As Members have said, the process is far from clear or straightforward, and I absolutely concur with those comments. For example, there is a gap of around £300 million in the DFC net resources this year compared with last year. At first guess, you may think that that is due to COVID and reduced demand or necessity, but, when you dig deeper, you see that there is a huge reduction in grants to the Housing Executive. Why? No reasoning or explanation as to why that is the case is given in the Estimates document or the accompanying documents. I ask this question: is this a reduction in order to speed up the

privatisation of the landlord function, which the Communities Minister previously indicated that she wanted? I hope not, but I honestly do not know.

We also know that the resources allocated to the community and voluntary sector and the arts have decreased. We need to invest more, not less, in those sectors. There is also a reduction in resource provision for the Commissioner for Children and Young People at a time when young people's rights and the need to support them is stronger than ever. I question that as well. At the same time, agency services have increased under these Estimates and the Budget. We need to reduce spending on agency firms and to stop funding an unfair system for workers and taxpayers; instead, we need to redirect that money into beefing up the public sector and providing secure long-term jobs with proper terms and conditions.

In the section under the Department for the Economy, there is some very worrying news indeed. There is a significant reduction in provision this year compared with last year's Budget. Why? The resources sought for 2021-22 are 36.9% lower than the final net provision for 2020-21. We face massive challenges of deprivation, wealth inequality and health inequality. Surely now should be the time to throw conventional economic wisdom out the window and adopt a fundamentally different approach that looks at putting money and wealth into the hands of working people and people on welfare etc. Also, under the Estimates section for the Department for the Economy, it mentions:

"recoupment of costs in respect of processing mineral and petroleum licences; application fees for mineral and petroleum licences".

You may ask what that means, but, to me, that suggests that the Department is continuing to allow the practice of fossil fuel licences and petroleum licences to go ahead. At a time when we have a massive environmental crisis, we need to keep fossil fuels in the ground.

When you move on to Health, there is some additional money, which the Chair referred to, but it is not recurring and, ultimately, is nowhere near enough to meet the huge challenges faced by staff and patients now and going forward. From my reading of the quite hefty Estimates document, there appears to be a reduction in what the Estimates and provisions were last year in the following sections: hospital, paramedic and ambulance, dental services, health support services, and fire and rescue

services. Why is that the case, given the scale of the crisis in our health service? The provision sought for 2021-22 is 6.2% lower for Health than the final net provision for 2020-21. With all our waiting lists and our mental health crisis, why is that the case? Why are the Minister and the Department not shouting more loudly than they are for extra resources and support and making more bids etc? When it comes to dealing with the waiting list crisis, the Committee learned that most, if not all, of the extra money allocated over this year will go directly to the so-called independent sector, which is really the private sector. Some people on waiting lists may not care who treats them, but that approach directly funds the two-tier health service, which says, "If you can afford to pay, you will be seen and treated". That is a despicable state of affairs in a so-called modern society.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Carroll: I will do. The truth is that we are being asked to endorse Estimates that will allow for a standstill Budget, as the Minister says. In real terms, that means a Budget that reduces public services and does not meet the —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: — challenges faced by workers going forward. For that reason and many more, I will oppose the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarrfaidh mé ar an Aire Airgeadais ceann a chur ar an díospóireacht. Beidh suas le ceithre bhomaite is tríocha agat, a Aire. I now call the Minister to conclude the debate. You have up to 34 minutes, Minister.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Supply resolution debates can often cover many aspects that do not always relate directly to the subject that is being considered. On this occasion, the background of how we emerge from the COVID pandemic has helped focus most, if not all, minds on the importance of the public expenditure decisions that we debate in this place. I will endeavour to address as many points as I possibly can in the allotted time.

First, I thank the Finance Committee for its agreement to support accelerated passage for the important legislation that will come along with the Budget. Its Chair referenced that in his remarks. He and quite a few other Members

raised the issue of the complexity of the Budget process — Mr Carroll raised it at the end — and I get it. We will want to look at that in the time ahead and, indeed, have already begun the process. We will put through legislation on financial reporting, which is the first stage of what will probably be a lengthy process to try to streamline, align and make accessible and understandable, not just for Members but for the public at large, the complexity of our Budget process. There is no denying that it is a complex process that needs to change.

The Chair of the Finance Committee asked about the fiscal council. As he knows, it is currently meeting and consulting a range of stakeholders. There will be a session with the Committee in the near future. Following that range of consultation by the fiscal council, I expect to have a final set of terms of reference agreed and in place by the end of the summer. We are considering a possible legislative time frame. The Member is correct to say that that will be challenging in the time frame that we have left. Interestingly, in Scotland, I think, and other places, a fiscal council was in place for a number of years before legislation was enacted. At the end of the summer, the question will be asked as to whether we try to rush through legislation or bring it to the point at which it can be done in the incoming mandate to ensure that it is got right.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his remarks. I assure him that the Finance Committee will endeavour to do everything that it can to put the fiscal council on a legislative footing during this term. All Committee members realise that such legislation is vital, and we must get it through.

Mr Murphy: If that is the case, and it is possible, of course, I would be content to look at accelerated passage. We just need to ensure that we get the legislation right. That means seeing the outcome of the consultation over the summer and what the final terms of reference for the fiscal council will look like.

The Chair asked about the council's carrying out an assessment of the Executive's revenue streams and spending proposals and of the sustainability of the Executive's finances. It will do that. How it does so, however, will be a matter for the council itself, because it is an independent body. That will include reporting on its first annual assessment of the Executive's

revenue streams and spending proposals, how those allow the Executive to balance their Budget, and the sustainability of the Budget going forward.

I referenced the review of the financial process. That will be the first stage in untangling some of its complexity, I would like to think. It will be a complex and lengthy piece of work but is, nonetheless, a piece of work to which we are committed.

The Chair asked a question about the high street voucher scheme, I have been advised by the Economy Minister that the roll-out of the voucher scheme is expected at the start of the autumn. Everybody in the North who is aged 18 or over will be eligible to apply for a prepaid card that has to be spent locally on the high street. The Economy Minister has advised that the scheme is currently at the procurement stage. She has stated that the card must be used at a bricks-and-mortar business in the North. It cannot be used online. The timing will be in line with the experience elsewhere, in that, as people have probably experienced, there has been an initial surge in spending since reopening, and that will probably taper off in the autumn. My assumption is that the voucher scheme has been timed to take place in the autumn, when an additional boost will perhaps be needed for the high street.

If people wish to argue against it, as Sinead McLaughlin appeared to be doing, they need to take up that matter with the Economy Minister, but the Executive have agreed that this is part of an economic recovery package that will have a beneficial impact on the high street.

A number of Members asked about the victims' payments scheme. We have given a commitment that payments will be made to successful applicants under the scheme. That provides reassurance and confidence to victims that payments will be made when they fall due under the terms of the scheme, regardless of where the funding comes from. Headroom has been included in the Main Estimates that accompany the Bill to ensure that there is no delay in making those payments. We are still of the view — I raised this recently with Treasury in London, and the Executive agree — that the British Government should provide funding for the scheme. The offer that the Secretary of State put forward fell considerably short of what is necessary. On the basis of the estimates — the Chair asked about those — from the Government Actuary's Department, the overall cost is anywhere between £600 million and £1.2 billion over the lifetime of the scheme.

Those are the estimates that came from the Government.

Mr Frew and a number of Members raised the issue of the alignment of the Programme for Government with the Budget. Matthew O'Toole asked a question about strategic planning and strategic direction. The spring before last, when the Executive came back into office, they set out with a series of strategic planning days and awaydays. Then, the pandemic came and knocked everything sideways. I want the Executive to get back to that. We have been told by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to expect that we will do a multi-annual Budget from this year on. We have not been told what the quantum will be, so, in that sense, planning is not just as straightforward. However, I want the Executive to get back to those strategic discussions. We will assist them with projections of the costs of priorities, but the Executive need to plan over the summer and into the autumn for a multi-annual Budget. That is the territory that we want to be in, and we will play our part in assisting with the costings of that.

There is no big expectation of huge increases in the Budget, but we do not know what is coming until the spending review is complete. It is incumbent on the Executive to agree strategic priorities, to plan those out over the years ahead and to commit funding to them. People are frustrated by the lack of ability to do that since we have been back, but nobody is more frustrated than those who sit round the Executive table and want to be able to plan in advance. If people remember, that is the exercise that we had on a number of away sessions early last spring; that was our clear intent. As I said, the impact of the pandemic just knocked everything sideways. Obviously, the objective is to prioritise, to align with the Programme for Government and to set out clear Budget spending over a number of years so that Departments will know clearly what they have.

Maoliosa McHugh and Caoimhe Archibald mentioned the extension of the furlough scheme. There are no proposals or even sector-specific extensions that we are aware of, although we continue to raise it with Treasury in our discussions. It is clear that not all sectors will be able to fully reopen, given the social distancing and other mitigation measures that are required. It is important that they continue to support businesses, so we will keep that dialogue ongoing with Treasury.

A number of Members mentioned the Health budget in general and, specifically, waiting lists.

The Budget did not provide the Department of Health with a specific allocation for waiting lists for reasons that I will get into, namely that the Executive decided not to reprioritise given the level of money that we had and the time frame involved. However, the Department sought and received £430 million of COVID funding. That included £250 million to support the rebuilding of the health service as we begin to emerge from the pandemic. It has been allocated a further £50 million in-year as part of the May COVID expenditure exercise. The Department has the flexibility to use that COVID-related funding. The Health Minister has the ability to use it to tackle waiting lists, which have been exacerbated by COVID.

We have had the discussion at Executive level — this is important, and Mr Carroll, among others, mentioned it — about the need for recurrent funding in order to employ people. As Jim Allister outlined, that cut to the Health budgets over all those years of austerity removed beds and posts from hospitals, which are essential for dealing with waiting lists in the long term. Simply throwing money to the private sector to try to bring down waiting lists on a temporary basis means that we end up going back to the same problem.

4.30 pm

The Health Minister and I are in full agreement, as are the rest of the Executive, that long-term recurrent funding is needed. The COVID money is for one year only and has to be spent in-year. It does not provide that long-term funding. Nonetheless, it is a welcome addition to help the Health Department to cope with some of the significant pressures around waiting lists, as everything else.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. I thank the Minister for his comments in relation to the strategic priorities. For a long time, I have had the view that we need a priority framework. Members will have heard me say this in the House before: this place seems to want to do everything and does not know how it will fund it all, particularly in relation to health. What is it? Is it Bengoa, or is it a restructuring of health? The reality for all Members is that, if it is Bengoa, that means that there are services in each of our constituencies that will not be there. I would like to have some insight from the Finance Minister's point of view. Is he prepared to fund the Bengoa report, which basically means that we go from 11 acute hospitals to six? Is that the trajectory of improving services that we are looking at?

Mr Murphy: First, it will be the Executive's decision on how to improve. The improvements required in health are a mixture of all those. Bengoa gave a plan. There are restructuring plans. There are specific plans to tackle the waiting lists and elective services. It needs to be a combination of all that.

The Executive need to have a clear and costed picture from the Health Department as to what that looks like in the future. Better services are the ambition, co-designed with people who work in the health system. Access to those services is a key issue, because we do not have the infrastructure here to give people access to all the services. That has to be balanced with that. It is easy just to pick a figure and say six hospitals or 11 hospitals: we have to have access. That is a key part of the debate.

With regard to some other points that were raised, I have dealt with the issue of simplifying the Budget. Andrew Muir raised the point about the infrastructure advisory panel. The concern that has been expressed about that is the overlap between an infrastructure commission and the duplication of work already undertaken by bodies such as the Strategic Investment Board and my Department's construction and procurement delivery role. We need to get some clarity that we are not creating additional bodies at a time when we are reviewing arm's-length bodies and have given a commitment in NDNA to rationalise the arm's-length bodies that we have. I have no doubt that there is a good argument to be made for such a body, but we need to make sure and see where it fits into the scheme with other public bodies. I expect that to be worked through in the not-too-distant future.

In the last debate, the SDLP launched a "We're in the Executive, and we're not in the Executive" approach to the Budget, so that the Members from that party could criticise all that there was, even though they went into the Lobbies and voted for it. I thought that the real danger of trying to ride two horses at one time and falling in between them would have brought some sanity, but it appears that that is still their strategy. Fair enough, if they think that it will work for them.

The criticism was that there is no vision. That was a recurring theme two weeks ago: there is no vision in this document, no aspiration. We could write a narrative for that document. I could get departmental officials to write a flowery narrative, and it could be all motherhood and apple pie. That might be something that pleases the SDLP because it

generally has a priority of style over substance. The substance is — this is the reality that you are dealing with — that we were told, all last autumn, that we were getting a multi-year Budget. We were then told, on 25 November, that we were not, that we were getting a one-year Budget and it was a flat-cash Budget. As other people said, when they looked through the Estimates, that, in effect, presents itself as a cut for some Departments.

The Executive collectively were faced with a choice. If we wanted to meet some priorities, we had to decide to reprioritise the allocations to all Departments. That meant that some Departments would have got more and a lot of Departments would have got less. We decided that, in the time available to us, given the very late outcome of the spending review, we did not have time to do that exercise in the way that would do it justice, and we decided to do a rollover budget for every Department.

On that basis, I am at a loss as to how I could have presented some grand vision, if that is what people would have liked. Effectively, we told every Department, "You will have the same amount of money. If you want to do new things, you will have to stop doing some of the things that you are doing".

The SDLP needs a reality check. As I said, it is playing the issue of being in the Executive and not being in it. That is fair enough: if it thinks that that will work for it in the run-up to an election, I say, "Knock yourself out". However, at least in some cases, the SDLP needs to be accurate. I think it was Daniel McCrossan, in one of his interventions — no, actually it was Sinead McLaughlin who said that, effectively, the Infrastructure Minister got a cut in her budget. She got a 19% increase in her capital budget and an increase in her resource. I think it was about a 21% increase overall. We should at least be honest when we throw some of those figures around. If the SDLP wishes to oppose the Budget or vote against it or speak against it but vote for it, that is something that it can talk to the public about and maybe try to get them to understand. At least it should get things right.

I was told by Colin McGrath that we had not provided any money for health pay. We allocated an additional £52 million for Agenda for Change pay to maintain pay parity with England and an additional £85 million to be provided through NDNA. As I said, it is one thing to criticise but it is another thing to make those criticisms factually correct. Sinead McLaughlin, I think, said, first, that I had said that there was nothing to see and that we were

not roaring and shouting: I do not know anybody who has complained more about a lack of finances in this Building than me. They say that we are accepting this and that we are carbon-copying one year into the next: I have been to multiple meetings with Treasury, alongside Finance Ministers from Scotland and Wales. I was in the Treasury three weeks ago talking to the Chancellor about the lack of budget that we have. At the meeting with the Prime Minister last week, the deputy First Minister raised the issue of rebuilding the health service and the need for substantial investment. There is absolutely no way that we have said that this Budget is fine or that there is nothing to look at here.

We will have an open-ended debate tomorrow, so I look forward to the propositions about doing things differently. If you want to do things differently, take the Budget amount that we have, take the tables and work your way through them tonight and tell me where you would take money off and where you would put it in. I will be happy to listen to that tomorrow. You will have an open Floor tomorrow, so you can take all the time that you want to respond to that. There is no point in talking about things like reconfiguring the Budget unless you bring forward propositions to do just that.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for giving way. We are talking about £13 billion. I have never been in the Executive, but I believe that it is made up of nine Ministers: three from Sinn Féin, three from the DUP and three from the other parties. That means that, collectively, the six votes that you carry with the DUP are the lead vote-maker in the Executive. That is a simple mathematical equation.

Mr Murphy: All of that would be relevant if there was a vote on the Budget in the Executive, but there was not. Your Minister did not vote against it or speak against it. I was in Executives with previous SDLP Ministers. The previous leader voted against the Budget. I think that Mr Storey was in the Executive when she disagreed with the Budget and voted against it. I think that her party even voted against the Budget. None of that is relevant, because you did not oppose it.

If you are going to say that all of the decisions that we have taken are wrong and that the Budget needs to be reconfigured and the priorities are all wrong, there is an obligation on you to tell us where you will get the money from. As I said, there is an open-ended debate tomorrow on the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill, and I look forward to hearing propositions from you in relation to how you

would do things differently. All of the Executive agreed the Budget without a vote and without division at all. Every Executive Minister supported it. If every one of us is wrong, please tell us what you would have done differently with the same amount of money that we have to use.

A number of other points were raised. As usual, Jim Allister thinks that the problem for the health service is funding for the Irish language, but that, I suppose, is a debate for another day. Gerry Carroll asked a number of questions. A lot of them were about other Ministers, who will have to answer in relation to their areas. Ministers have autonomy within their Departments. They have the ability to spend money themselves, and I am sure that they can answer to that. The overall point is the same, which is that a standstill Budget is an effective reduction. That is what we are dealing with here.

I will draw my remarks to a close, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank you and other Members for your patience. The Assembly's approval of the motion on the Main Estimates for 2021-22 is a crucial stage in securing the public expenditure that Departments need to continue to deliver services during this critical time.

Failure to pass this Supply resolution would put at risk the continuation of public services for the remainder of the financial year. I therefore commend the Main Estimates 2021-2022 to the Assembly, and I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that it is established practice that the vote on this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Is Mr Carroll content that that be noted as a dissent?

Mr Carroll: Yes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As there are Ayes from all sides of the House, with one dissenting voice, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated and the motion approved.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £10,342,800,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC), the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR), the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) for the year ending 31 March 2022 and that resources, not exceeding £11,843,690,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2022 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2021-22 that was laid before the Assembly on 27 May 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members, please take your ease while we move to the next item of business.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: First Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 24/17-22], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of a certain sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2022; to appropriate that sum for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of that sum; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for that year; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I inform Members that the Speaker has received a letter from the Committee for Finance informing him that the Committee is satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2).

Members, please take your ease while we change the Chair for the next item of business.

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

4.45 pm

Committee Business

Nature-friendly Farming

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the vital role that nature-friendly farming must play in tackling the nature and climate emergencies, at the same time as providing a profitable future for the sector; believes that future agricultural policies for Northern Ireland must enable a transition to profitable, sustainable, nature-friendly farming, in order to provide nutritious food, increase farm business resilience and combat the nature and climate emergencies; and welcomes the comments by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that future agricultural policy should ensure an industry that is environmentally sustainable and that displays improved resilience to external shocks.

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

Mr McAleer: The AERA Committee welcomes the opportunity to highlight the vital role that farming communities in the North play in supporting the economy and in protecting, sustaining and developing our environment. The Committee believes that nature-friendly farming practices are crucial for the long-term viability and success of our agriculture sector and that farming communities must be adequately supported to adopt such measures so that they can continue to thrive in the future.

The importance of agri-food production to our society cannot be overstated. Our local farmers return well in excess of £2 billion worth of produce annually, and the high quality of our dairy, beef and crops are recognised across our markets and those of neighbours as some of the best in the world. Our agriculture sector is essential in supporting local employment, particularly in the food and drinks industry, and

in enabling rural communities to survive and prosper.

However, our farming sector faces stark challenges and uncertainties. The fallout from Brexit continues to present a threat, with the likes of the impending free trade agreement between the British Government and Australia likely to undermine our competitiveness and access to markets, along with the uncertainty about funding for direct payment due to the loss of EU finance. The agriculture sector also faces a slow recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as local farmers seek to recoup the losses from the drop in consumer demand over the past 18 months, so the sector will remain vulnerable to any future economic shocks for some time. The challenge of climate change, which affects us all, also poses some significant questions for farmers about how they can maintain output whilst contributing to strategies to reduce negative effects on our environment.

In order to weather those challenges, it is vital that our local farming communities are supported to be resilient, sustainable and productive in their activities, and the Committee believes that nature-friendly farming should be at the core of future strategies that enable that. Embracing nature-friendly farming means that local farmers should be encouraged, directed and supported to engage in practices that not only deliver high-quality and safe produce but help our ecosystem to thrive and flourish. In recent weeks, the Committee has heard from a range of stakeholders about the importance of ensuring that our agriculture sector is sustainable economically and environmentally. Nature-friendly farming presents an opportunity to deliver that. There is the potential for each and every farmer to engage in nature-friendly farming through simple measures that include hedgerow restoration, tree planting and placing wild flowers at field margins. There are many examples of local farmers actively engaging in sustainable practices that have helped to improve the organic health and biodiversity of their land, leading to better productivity and reduced costs.

Many opportunities are presented by nature-friendly farming. For example, through measures to restore the land's capacity to store and sequester carbon, farmers can play their part in tackling the effects of climate change. There is also a potential economic benefit to farmers of developing produce via sustainable methods, given the rising market and demand for nature-friendly products and the increasing interest from consumers in the origin of agri-foods and the eco-effects of what they are buying. A shift away from intensive farming

measures and overproduction, including the excessive use of fertiliser and animal feeds, may also help to improve the long-term sustainability and viability of our natural land resources, thereby ensuring that our farming communities can continue to produce goods and be productive for years to come.

However, our farmers cannot do that on their own, and the Committee recognises the challenges faced by our sector in making changes at a time of uncertainty. That is why our farming communities must be actively and appropriately supported to make a just transition to engage in nature-friendly farming.

In particular, consideration will have to be given to how future payment schemes manage the dual aims of agri-food production and engaging in eco-friendly practices, as well as to how farmers can be incentivised and rewarded for nature-friendly farming activity.

Farmers will also need to be supported through formal training, continuing professional development and ongoing knowledge exchange in order to identify and deliver sustainable practices on their farm and share ideas and innovations with peers. Schemes must be developed to ensure that work practices will be replicated speedily and effectively throughout the sector, with farmers being supported by grants and the provision of adequate resources to undertake pilots.

Government-directed policy oversight is essential, and it is vital that the importance of nature-friendly farming and its benefits are recognised and included in the planning and development of future agricultural strategy. The Committee welcomes comments by the Minister that future policy will focus on delivering improved resilience and environmental sustainability in the agriculture sector and that the overarching aim of the Department's future rural policy framework is to create a sustainable rural community where people want to live, work and be active.

The role of nature-friendly farming and the potential opportunities that it can bring to our farming communities must be recognised in future strategic planning, and our local farmers must be fully equipped and supported to transition to eco-friendly practices that will help them to be economically and environmentally productive in the decades ahead.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr William Irwin to move the amendment that stands in his name.

Mr Irwin: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Northern Ireland" and insert:

"must ensure the continuation of a transition to profitable, productive, sustainable, nature-friendly farming, in order to provide nutritious food, increase farm business resilience and combat the nature and climate emergencies; and welcomes the comments by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that future agricultural policy should ensure an industry that is environmentally and financially sustainable, while increasing productivity and that displays improved resilience to external shocks."

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to move the amendment, which suggests some minor changes to reflect the fact that farming is already in transition. The amendment also seeks a balance between environmental and financial sustainability. As someone who has been involved in farming for many years, I fully understand the importance of working with nature and ensuring that farming is complementary to the countryside and the environment. From my experience of a lifetime of farming, I am firmly of the view that farming and the environment go hand in hand. It must be said that without the thousands of hours of hard work by the farming community right across Northern Ireland, our environment would be in a very different state today.

Managed farmland accounts for up to 75% of land in Northern Ireland. Farming in its purest form, the production of food, provides a very important service to the environment and the maintenance of the countryside while providing a vital service in feeding the population. That said, there are, of course, many challenges associated with climate and having a sustainable agri-food industry, and the broad thrust of the amendment focuses on the importance of balance. We need an industry that is financially and environmentally sustainable. The two go hand in hand.

In recent weeks, indeed, a series of debates and questions has centred on climate, and, in the contributions, farming has been a key part of the debate. In previous contributions, I have urged a sensible approach to climate change

and the future sustainability of farming. I have urged against hurrying down a path whereby over-ambitious targets are set that do more harm than good in the longer term. That remains my view.

The Committee, as part of its study of nature-friendly farming, heard a few weeks ago from DAERA officials. In their presentation, they referred to the future of agriculture and an agricultural policy. They outlined the Minister's four priorities on the issue. Those are supportable objectives, sensible and reasonable, to enhance the industry and best equip it well into the future. The four priorities are interdependent, and it is widely acknowledged, by the Minister and the Department, that nature-friendly farming is at the core of that outlook and forward plan.

The agri-food sector is a success story in Northern Ireland in terms of its employment provision and general worth to our economy. The economic aspect of the debate cannot be overstated, and a thriving and responsive agri-food sector is critical to Northern Ireland's economic stability now and in the future. A thriving agri-food sector has very positive economic knock-on effects.

As I said, it is important that, when decisions are taken that have the legislative power to compel the industry to take an action or meet a target, such instructions are balanced, achievable and come with support measures in place to assist the industry to take that course of action. Indeed, Minister Poots has, in a relatively short time, delivered on a number of commitments such as the small woodland grant, the Forests for our Future programme and the farm business investment scheme, which has provided vital support to our farmers in the move to low-emission spreading systems. He also supported farmers to purchase equipment to increase the precision of the use of inputs like GPS for fertiliser spreading and the protein crop pilot. Those are only some examples of announcements that the Minister made this year.

In the past, we had EU directives, which, in many cases, required considerable action from farmers. The Department has recognised the best way to achieve the necessary outcomes, and a model of financial support has been introduced to assist with that transition and the use of technology to achieve the targets. That is a proven method of ensuring a level of success, and it also has the knock-on effect of assisting other industries — for example, if a machinery purchase is required. Recent support schemes have had a very welcome additional beneficial

effect in the manufacturing and engineering sectors, and that is a good news story. Approaches like that must continue with the required actions from the agri-food sector to tackle climate change. Support and assistance for any transition must be forthcoming.

As a farmer and someone who listens acutely to the farming industry, I am all too aware of the issues of resilience and the need to limit the impact of what are referred to as "external shocks". It can be difficult to mitigate external forces that are totally outside the control of an individual and the effect that that can have on a business. There is certainly merit in trying to improve the resilience of the agri-food sector, especially as we move away from the EU support model and seek to take advantage of the opportunities that continue to arise from Brexit.

During the pandemic, and despite the predictions that agriculture would suffer after Brexit, it has been widely noted that our agriculture industry has performed very well and has risen to the challenge of COVID. The sector has continued at pace throughout the pandemic to ensure that the needs of consumers are met. The demand for agri-food produce continues to be strong, and that is important for security of supply and the maintenance of our supply chain system in Northern Ireland. Any future changes to the operation of the agri-food sector must have a firm focus on security of supply. The less we rely on other global markets for our produce, the more secure our supply chain can become.

The Minister has stated that he has a focus on an:

"efficient, sustainable, and responsive supply chain".

All those attributes can improve general resilience.

On climate change, I note from previous contributions that we have a private Member's Bill, and DAERA's Bill is also coming. I urge a reasoned approach to climate change. The input of the Climate Change Committee, which makes a very sensible set of suggestions, should be used as a benchmark to move forward in a manner that reflects the broad direction of the amendment and ties in many aspects of nature-friendly farming in the process.

Mr McGlone: The SDLP supports the motion and I hope, too, the amendment. It is important to say that the vast majority of farmers want to

play their part in tackling the nature and climate emergencies. Indeed, many of them already do so. I am sure that Mr Irwin is one of those people. Many still need to be incentivised to make the necessary changes to transition to profitability, sustainability and nature-friendly farming to combat those emergencies. Seventy-five per cent of our land is managed as farmland, and agriculture remains the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the North at 27%. That share is expected to increase to 35% by 2030 as a combined result of the improved performances of other sectors and a reduction of only 3% in agricultural emissions. That is not sustainable.

Nature-friendly farming practices provide a template for farm businesses to remain productive, profitable and sustainable while addressing the climate emergency and enhancing biodiversity. The AERA Committee has heard about that extensively from farm businesses.

5.00 pm

The farming model that agriculture policy to date encourages has, in fact, contributed to the long-term decline in the health of our natural environment, with biodiversity loss, rising greenhouse gas emissions and declining water and air quality. I was out late last night for a walk when I ran into a neighbour, who remarked that, on one of the small roadways that he used to walk every evening — we live in a rural area — he used to hear various birds but that they are no longer there. That was a very acute observation by someone who would know.

There is an economic benefit to farm businesses adopting nature-friendly practices. Better business planning can reduce costs and improve their ability to withstand economic shocks. Nature-friendly farming systems can also deliver a more diverse farmed landscape, as well as premium products. Restoring healthy soils is key to maintaining a sustainable food production system that can protect the environment and boost the economy. Supporting pollinators and other beneficial insects can improve crop productivity. Natural pest management can be a more effective long-term solution than artificial pesticides, given the damage that some of them have done. Restoring functional natural processes in upland areas, watercourses, wetlands and floodplains can protect against flooding and provide drought resilience. Local food supply chains are more secure and reduce the environmental cost of transporting products. I do not know what the environmental

consequences of a trade deal with Australia might be or whether it will cause a domino effect among some South American countries, but, rest assured, the environmental and financial cost of transportation from those countries is much greater than that for local produce. It is not rocket science, but it might require a change of mindset for some.

We have the opportunity to build a new farming system that is fit for the future and that supports profitable, productive farming, which directly tackles the climate crisis and enhances biodiversity. We need to take the lead in supporting a new model of farming and encourage those farmers who need encouragement to adopt its practices, because we know that many are deeply committed custodians of the land that they own and farm. We need policies to incentivise some farmers to deliver the public benefits that nature-friendly farming can deliver.

As a member of the AERA Committee, I have heard from the advocates of nature-friendly farming, and it was inspirational to listen to them and hear about their efforts. I have also heard from departmental officials. There is much on which they agree. The difference, however, is perhaps one of focus. Our role as Members of the legislative Assembly is to ensure that the focus of the Executive's agriculture policy is in the right place, and every indication is that it has been. It has been unerring up until now. We must ensure that we have the policies in place to support farmers who have already made the necessary transition and that we incentivise those who still have to follow their lead. I support the motion.

Mrs Barton: Nature-friendly farming demonstrates a way of farming that is helpful to wildlife, the environment and the climate while still producing top-quality produce. That farming includes organic and conventional farming methods working together to highlight the fact that farming and nature can be sustainable together, ensuring that the countryside is both productive and bursting with wildlife.

Nature-friendly farming aims to promote the best practices and to demonstrate what can be accomplished for nature and the environment while producing the greatest and best produce. Those who practise nature-friendly farming strongly believe that agriculture needs to be not only profitable but sustainable, with farmers receiving adequate payments and support for undertaking environmental and nature-friendly activities. Those farmers are committed to demonstrating to the public the value of their product and the need for government to ensure

that there is support for a number of interventions, including incentives such as well-funded environmental land management schemes and environmental productivity grants.

Fields and grass are the main assets on most farms in Northern Ireland and the growing of grass for food and fodder has to be maximised for the greatest financial return. With nature-friendly farming, there is encouragement to leave a margin to encourage good hedgerow, so wildlife and biodiversity habitats start to become more important. As hedge growth is encouraged, a programme of hedge management starts to emerge with the cutting of hedges in rotation only every three or four years for the benefit of our wildlife. Meanwhile, the berries and fruit that grow are a vital supply of food for the birds and animals, thus encouraging more birds and animals into the countryside. Hopefully, Mr McGlone will see the return of some of the birds that, he said, were missing from the countryside.

In Northern Ireland, we have a number of focused, nature-friendly farmers who have diverse agriculture specialisms and produce a variety of produce, which is not all edible but is all nature-friendly. Those range from keeping a suckler cow herd to arable farming to the rearing of goats, the production of beef and sheep and the growing of Christmas trees. While the Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion and the amendment, it must not be forgotten that all farmers shape our landscape by creating the environments that support our economy, rural communities, tourism and recreation. Those farmers manage 78% of the land in Northern Ireland. All farmers have an inherent interest in maintaining their land and protecting the environment to ensure long-term productivity on their farm and enable the natural assets to be passed to the succeeding generation in a better condition. In supporting nature-friendly farming, a balance must be established between climate, biodiversity, food production and rural development. With the ever-increasing demand for food worldwide, its production must be balanced with nature, creating environmental sustainability. The use of more efficient methods of managing carbon emissions must be taken into account, as must the importance of fair prices being paid to ensure that farms are economically sustainable.

Mr Dickson: I rise to support the motion, but we will not support the amendment. I thank the Members involved in bringing the motion to the House.

We face a huge task. The challenge of the climate emergency will require us all to change

our lives to secure and improve our living standards and those of the generations that will follow. That is why it is important that we balance sustainability with productivity. Our farmers continue to play an essential role in environmental recovery and in protecting our wildlife and biodiversity. We all accept that, ultimately, farming needs to be sustainable and that land becoming unproductive due to a lack of sustainable practices benefits no one. As our nature-friendly farming lobby puts it, "Nature is good for business", so we need to ensure that we are not depleting our natural environment but protecting, building and enhancing it and recovering much of what we have destroyed.

Agriculture is a key industry in Northern Ireland. We produce some of the best and highest-quality agri-food products in the world. In meeting that standard, we must make sure that the processes that we use are nature-friendly. It is vital that the Assembly and Executive make the future of agriculture policy central to the issues going forward. Farming is under threat. It is under threat from our own Government, who are trying to impose on us world trade deals that will have serious and detrimental effects on farming in Northern Ireland, because most of our farms are comparatively small and family-run. We need to maintain and support that and fend off the onslaught from the large factory farms. It is an asset that, with the right support, small farms may be better suited to changing practices quickly and leading the way in nature-friendly farming practices. We need to provide the right support and advice to our farmers to do that, rewarding them for taking measures to rewild and to improve the management of land.

In April, the Alliance Party produced our green new deal, which outlines our policies for moving forward towards a zero-carbon future in a just and sustainable manner. We proposed a number of actions to move us towards sustainability and nature-friendly farming. For example, we want to expand the environmental farming scheme to promote habitat restoration and the planting of trees and hedgerows, as well as protecting current woodland and peat bogs. As I have said before, we produce exceptionally high-quality food in Northern Ireland, so there is an opportunity to develop agriculture, food and tourism, a subject that was talked about in the House earlier today. We want to see concrete support and funding guidance from DAERA and the Department for the Economy to promote and expand the sector, particularly as tourism seeks to recover from the impact of COVID-19. We want to see an increase in the promotion of local sustainable produce, invest in food markets and farm shops and reduce food miles, producing

greater connection between our producers and our consumers.

I note my concerns, however, about the impact of Brexit on farming. I have already said that, last week, in response to a question for written answer, the Minister commented:

"leaving the EU will have created some uncertainty regarding agricultural funding."

That is quite an understatement, Minister. If we do not have replacement funds for EU funding nor control over the spending of those funds, many of our aspirations for nature-friendly farming cannot and will not be realised. I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide an outline of where exactly the funding will come from and where we are with that and what engagement he has had with the United Kingdom Government.

Leaving the EU and the potential for quota-free trade deals across the world present real and present risks to farming in Northern Ireland. Judging by his public comments, I know that the Minister agrees that other nations' farming systems are far more industrialised and intensive. If such trade deals are to be signed, we need to ensure that we provide the right level of support for our farmers so that we can compete and maintain our high standards. Farmers need leadership and direction. The Agriculture Minister has spoken of his support for providing future opportunities for nature-friendly farming, but we still wait to hear the practical, on-the-ground details.

The DAERA briefing to the Committee notes that we have an opportunity to redefine our agriculture policy for the first time in over 50 years and that we can build sustainability from the outset. We need much more development of that policy from the Department. Right now, it feels as if there is a vacuum that the common agricultural policy used to fill. There are real opportunities out there, and we should not be negative about the consequences of doing nothing.

Mr M Bradley: Northern Ireland has a unique opportunity to redefine its agriculture policy for the first time in almost 50 years. It is an opportunity to develop a framework that is better suited to local needs and long-term sustainability in the industry. I note that Minister Poots's vision for future agriculture in Northern Ireland was centred around four outcomes:

"An industry that pursues increased productivity as a means to sustained profitability

An industry that displays improved resilience to external shocks, which are becoming ever more frequent and to which the industry has become very exposed

An industry that is environmentally sustainable in terms of its impact on, and its guardianship of, air quality, water quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity

An industry which operates within an efficient, sustainable, and responsive supply chain."

The Assembly should endeavour to help the agri-food sector to be the best that it can be across those four areas. Nature-friendly farming is central to that. Farmers are pivotal to delivering on environmental outcomes. The DUP has always supported policies that deliver a profitable, sustainable and productive agri-food sector. The Minister has delivered a wide range of programmes such as reforestation, small woodland grants and farm business investment schemes, while recognising the positive role that farmers play in sustaining and improving our environment: carbon sequestration, habitat creation, biodiversity etc. The Minister is also bringing forward a climate change Bill that is based on independent scientific advice and evidence and will set achievable but challenging targets that will require significant financial support.

We need a just transition for our farmers in delivering environmental change: not just transition, but a just transition.

5.15 pm

While the motion is focused on farming, farming is only part of the solution. Business, transport, government and society have a vital role to play. Urban areas are also key. We could all be doing a lot more to protect biodiversity and wildlife. The farming industry is also exposed to trade deals and imports, with no guarantee of a level playing field. We expect our farmers to go above and beyond and yet compete with imports of a lower environmental standard and lower cost. I reference Brazil and the decimation of the rainforest as one destructive influence.

Consumers will continue to want the product. If we in Northern Ireland reduce production, we may run the risk of land abandonment, where

farms are no longer profitable. That would be a loss of land that needs to be managed and protected to enhance the environment and wildlife.

I take a point from Mr McGlone's contribution. As a young boy growing up, I listened, every evening and afternoon, to the sound of the cornrake, cuckoo and grasshopper. These are sounds you do not hear any more. That needs to be addressed. Nature-friendly farming will help wildlife of all sorts. I support the motion.

Ms Sheerin: I rise in support of the motion as written and, at the outset, I declare an interest as one who was raised in a farming family in the Sperrins. My background, growing up in a rural community, gives me a keen understanding of the challenges that face farmers, as well as the vital role that they play in society. I understand the economic value that our farmers bring, not just as local producers but as a driver for other industry, such as contractors, machinery dealers, vets and pharmaceutical agents.

Our farmers are the custodians of the countryside and, as such, whilst working the land to make a living, they are also in the front line in the fight against climate change. It is somewhat ironic that farmers are tasked with responsibility when it comes to tackling the climate emergency, given that their livelihoods are probably the most affected by weather and that they are at the mercy of it. I say that as somebody who grew up watching the forecast religiously every evening when there was silage to be cut or hay to be saved, hoping for a spell of dry weather.

It is no surprise that, as a representative of Mid Ulster, 30% of which is considered to be severely disadvantaged, I have a particular interest in the naturally climate-friendly farming that we see in mountain areas. I wish to see the people that are engaged in hill farming supported in doing so. As such, the reintroduction of the areas of natural constraint (ANC) payment would go a long way to make small-scale sustainable farming a viable and realistic option for local people, who cannot make a livelihood without government support, forcing them to look at less climate-friendly methods.

When you walk through the Sperrins, as I have done, you see the natural ecosystem aided and enhanced by the presence of livestock. The sheep and cattle that graze our mountains in small numbers make up a part, not just of our human food chain, but of the precariously balanced wildlife contributing to the growth of

heather and other foliage that other, smaller animals rely on. Agriculture might be a small part of the problem in contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, but it is also a part of the solution. That is an important point to make for a multitude of reasons, not least that we produce food for almost 10 million people and we have a tremendous place, on the island of Ireland, for doing so.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we all witnessed the vulnerability of the short, just-in-time supply chain and the absolute importance of having our local producers. This is particularly true of the primary producers, who are essential for the production for local markets. Oftentimes, they farm with a low intensity, with small numbers of livestock over a lot of land and, therefore, big opportunities for carbon sequestration. People saw during the pandemic that high-quality food continued to be on their table, and the health benefits of eating locally produced meat and vegetables cannot be overstated. There are important lessons that we, as Members of the legislative Assembly, must learn from the pandemic, such as the dangers of our over-reliance on imports. Without our primary producers — our agriculture industry — we will not be in a position to just turn the tap back on if needed. If we ever experience another global crisis, of whatever description, proper, long-term, targeted support for our farmers is needed to help them meet climate change targets.

Whilst the aim of the agriculture industry should be to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions, agriculture should not be scaled back to lower greenhouse emissions, as this would lead to imports of food from other countries where farming systems have higher carbon footprints. We need to be careful that we do not inhibit production and offload the problem somewhere else.

The reality of climate change means that every sector — indeed, every individual — in this country will have to change certain habits and practices. However, if we base those changes on just-transition principles, we can ensure that nobody is left behind and that we all benefit from the opportunities that a carbon-neutral society can deliver.

I am very pleased and relieved to see the change in the Minister's attitude over the past number of months towards the need for climate action, and I trust that he will now begin to put action to his comments and work with industries and other parties to ensure that our farmers are supported in making environmental improvements while protecting their livelihoods

and the generations of tradition. We will support the motion but not the amendment.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the motion. Farming in Northern Ireland could be about to change significantly for the worse. The threat comes from the likely free trade deals with Australia and, subsequently, New Zealand and future trade deals with the United States.

Northern Ireland's farming and food production sectors have been placed in needless peril. The guilty parties are the Brexit Leave campaign and, I am afraid, the DUP. We knew that part of the objective of Brexit was to leave the common agricultural policy, to lose farmers' direct support payments and to buy cheap food on the world market. Those in the Leave campaign choose to pretend that this was not the reality, but that reality has come home to roost. It has now become very obvious to everyone.

Farmers in Northern Ireland face a major reduction in much of their GB market. That market is incredibly important for Northern Ireland farmers because almost 60% of their production heads to GB. In future, Northern Ireland farmers will, it seems, be competing against Australian producers, who have the advantages of much larger farms and enormous economies of scale. Meanwhile, the risk is that environmentally friendly farming practices that support animal and consumer welfare will be undermined in the future by imported products, including hormone-treated beef, pig meat contaminated by high levels of antibiotics, and chlorinated chicken.

The Ulster Farmers' Union is one of the many organisations that is very worried about the impact of the British Government's negotiations with Australia and the United States. It says that the British Government must ensure that UK farmers are able to continue to produce food to world-leading standards, which they are proud to uphold, while allowing them to compete fairly both at home and abroad. An even stronger warning has been issued by the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association. In evidence that it gave recently to the House of Commons Committee, it said that Brexit — the hard version that has been implemented by the British Government — has the potential to decimate the farming industry, which plays a major part in the Northern Ireland economy.

The challenges facing our farming industry go beyond Brexit. Let us remember that we rely on agriculture to be a core part of our move towards a net zero carbon and environmentally sustainable economy. More imports brought from across the world do nothing to achieve

that objective. This is the moment to promote what we have. Our farms are much more environmentally sustainable than those of many of our international competitors. Let us ask consumers to support and sustain that production by, where possible, buying local produce that is environmentally friendly and organic.

Over the last decade, we have seen serious harm inflicted on the farming sector in Northern Ireland. Farm incomes have fallen substantially. We need food processors and big supermarkets to recognise the market strength that they have and not exploit it. They need to pay fair prices that allow farmers a reasonable market. Too often, farm produce is bought at prices below the cost of production. As a result, many farmers have been forced to leave the sector, while others make very low incomes.

This is about the welfare of our farms and our farmers. It is also about the appearance of our countryside. It is about the welfare of our animals and treating them with care and avoiding causing them pain. It is also about the welfare of our consumers by recognising the role of fresh and nutritious produce in the health and physical well-being of our population, whose best interests we are here to represent. I urge the Assembly to support nature-friendly farming and not just to support the farmers but all our constituents.

Ms Bailey: I am pleased to support the motion at what is a pivotal time of opportunity and change for farming in Northern Ireland. It is also a time of crisis for our natural and ecological systems. Agriculture and related land use are the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland. We know that those sources make up 27% of total emissions, but that figure is predicted to rise to 33% by 2030. Outside emissions, the impact of intensive agriculture on our natural systems is startling. Ninety-five per cent of our lakes fail water framework directive standards, many of our priority habitats are in an unfavourable condition and, out of 240 countries, Northern Ireland ranks twelfth worst in the world for biodiversity.

Of course, farmers have a unique and vital role to play in tackling climate and ecological emergencies. Farming can deliver improved water and soil quality, biodiversity and flood mitigation. It can also help to restore nature while supporting a more productive and resilient food system. As we set the direction of agricultural policy for the future, we have an opportunity to reshape how we deliver for the environment while supporting, diversifying and

improving farm incomes. Furthermore, any future agricultural policy must be underpinned by bespoke, Northern Ireland agricultural legislation in order to provide a legal framework and a mandated timeline for the introduction of a model of public money for public goods for agricultural payments. Future agricultural policy must mainstream nature-friendly farming by supporting those farmers who already do good work and by helping others to transition to more nature-friendly methods. Any scheme must be practical and accessible, making it easy for farmers to be financially rewarded for delivering environmental outcomes.

Environmental indicators must extend beyond greenhouse gas emissions to look at, amongst other things, soil and water quality and biodiversity. The Climate Change Bill, which is going through the House, includes measures for those things, and subsequent agricultural policy should reflect them. Farmers must also be paid more at a market level for producing a quality product that is farmed with high levels of animal welfare on land that is managed in a nature-friendly way. The European green deal is set to create a system of footprint labelling on food, giving consumers information on details such as where food comes from and its nutritional value, sustainability and environmental footprint. There is no reason why we cannot have something similar in Northern Ireland.

I want to touch briefly on the need for a food strategy in Northern Ireland. A report released last Thursday showed that low-income families in Northern Ireland need to spend almost half their weekly income if they are to afford healthy food. Households on a low income struggle to make a limited budget go further and tend to eat less well, which leads to health inequalities, including higher levels of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

Northern Ireland has a rich heritage of food production, an economy heavily reliant on food and agriculture and such pride in the quality and traceability of our food, yet so many of our population do not have access to locally produced, healthy food, and many of our farming families live below the poverty line. Our focus must shift from the intensive export-focused, production-focused and volume-focused agricultural model to thinking about how we can best deliver healthy, affordable food to Northern Ireland, improve farm incomes and resilience and address the nature and climate emergencies.

I will not support the amendment. It implies that the agricultural transition to nature-friendly

farming is already under way. Moreover, I cannot support any amendment that supports increasing agri-food productivity in Northern Ireland. We have already intensified way beyond what our natural systems can cope with, and we are seeing widespread ecological collapse now as a result.

Increased productivity will not address any of the problems that we have spoken about today: climate breakdown; ecological destruction; declining water quality; widespread habitat destruction; rural, urban and farming poverty; and a lack of access to locally produced, healthy food. I support the motion.

5.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Edwin Poots, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The Minister has 10 minutes.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As I made my way to the Chamber, I passed the statue of Lord Craigavon. I thought about how it is a wonderful privilege to be here debating this issue, as a leader in unionism, 100 years after the first sitting of the Northern Ireland Parliament and how it is a great opportunity to carry on the tradition of unionism, even after those 100 years have passed.

I welcome the debate, as it provides me with the opportunity to assure the House that I am committed to ensuring that, moving forward, we have an agriculture policy that enables the transition to profitable, sustainable farming, continues to provide nutritious food, increases farm business resilience and delivers the environmental outcomes to which we all aspire. I do not recognise the agriculture in Northern Ireland that Ms Bailey has just talked about. The annual farm-gate value of our industry is over £2 billion. It produces enough to meet the dietary protein requirements of 10 million people. We want to feed the world; Ms Bailey wants to starve the world.

When you add that significant food processing sector to the fact that the majority of what we produce and process is sold outside Northern Ireland, you begin to appreciate how important our agri-food industry is not only to our economy but to our customers in Great Britain and elsewhere. The importance of the agri-food sector has been highlighted throughout the COVID pandemic, which reinforced the importance of resilient supply chains and the tremendous work that our farmers, in particular, do.

As many outlined during the debate, the sector is no less important to the health of our local environment, our air quality, water quality, biodiversity, soil health and landscape, all of which are heavily influenced by agriculture. We have to accept that that influence is not always positive, but the important point is that it can be positive going forward, and we will address our environmental challenges only if agriculture and farmers are part of the solution.

The UK Government are committed to the whole of the UK achieving net zero carbon by 2050, and we are debating Northern Ireland's fair contribution to achieving that goal. Whatever that target is, it will mean a radical change for our economy towards a more economically and environmentally sustainable model that is based on innovation, the recognition of the true value of the environment and the development of our people so that they can drive that new economy.

My Department has been incentivising and will continue to incentivise environmental sustainability. My Department currently offers a range of support measures aimed at delivering nature-friendly farming. The environmental farming scheme (EFS) aims to protect and enhance biodiversity and water quality, mitigate climate change and sequester carbon. After four annual intake tranches, 5,000 farmers are participating in the scheme across around 55,000 hectares of land. In addition, group projects fund external facilitators to provide farmers with additional advisory support. Currently, more than 500 farmers are supported in five EFS group projects targeting environmentally designated land, water quality, priority habitat and species in specific areas.

I firmly believe that education is critical to improving the future performance, sustainability and resilience of the agri-food industry. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) continues to deliver knowledge transfer, innovation and technology transfer programmes. In the DAERA estate itself, CAFRE is an exemplar of the promotion and demonstration of sustainable productivity and resilience. CAFRE's estate's primary measure of sustainability is through its linking environment and farming (LEAF) marque accreditation. CAFRE is independently verified as having achieved LEAF accreditation since 2006, and the LEAF principle of integrated farm management is a whole-farm approach to sustainable farming that enriches the environment and engages the local community. It reaches into all aspects of farming and includes the areas of soil health and fertility, crop health and protection, pollution control,

resource use and efficiency, animal husbandry, energy efficiency, water management and nature conservation, as well as community engagement. Each of the farm centres at CAFRE demonstrates the broad spectrum of environmental technologies, with the dairy centre showing the industry nutrient management practice to minimise the loss of nutrients to water and air.

That includes a constructed wetland scheme and artificial wetland, which acts in a similar manner to the biofiltration action of natural wetlands, and all mitigating measures to minimise the impact of ammonia on nearby habitats are demonstrated in its buildings and the management of its animal manures.

The hill farm centre is focused on biodiversity, where the upland habitat is managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services in tandem with sustainable livestock reduction, grazing management of appropriate suckler and sheep enterprises, and predator control programmes are used to demonstrate positive habitat management and have led to significant improvements for blanket bog vegetation, hen harriers, red grouse, breeding waders and the Irish hare. Blanket bog is being managed and monitored for reservoir quality services and flood alleviation through partnership projects, and re-wetting programmes have now started.

As I have said many times in the House, Northern Ireland now has a unique opportunity to redefine its agricultural policy for the first time in 50 years and to develop a framework that is better suited to local needs and will underpin long-term sustainability in the industry. Any future agriculture regime must promote productive, efficient practices through greater innovation and capacity. As we move forward, we must join up our environmental ambitions with farm economic activity. We need to invest time, money and effort in recreating and redefining our support schemes and tools. I also recognise the key role that the food supply chain's primary agricultural production and food waste will have to play in reducing carbon emissions. The prevention and reduction of food waste across the food supply chain is a key area of focus for DAERA as we move towards achieving ambitious targets for carbon reduction and recycling. Resource efficiency must be a key objective in driving better economic and environmental outputs. Input use should be minimised, recycling maximised and waste streams dealt with sustainably. Innovation and technological advances must be part of the solution. Legislation and regulation must keep pace with technological advances. At times, outdated or narrowly defined

regulatory frameworks hinder the adoption of new thinking and innovation that can deliver efficiency and environmental gains.

I will make a few specific comments on future farming policy. In the past, EU CAP payments have been vital to sustaining the industry in Northern Ireland and underpinning its competitive trading position. That support must continue now that we have left the European Union. The expectations that are being placed on farmers are increasing, and we must ensure that the public goods that are provided are adequately financed. We all agree that we need to do more. However, to achieve that, we must recognise the need for additional funding in line with the delivery of additional outcomes. Previously, I have shared with the House my vision for the future of agriculture. We want to help the farm sector to be the best across four areas and to be an industry that pursues increased productivity; is environmentally sustainable; displays improved resilience; and operates in a fully functional supply chain. Nature-friendly farming is central to that. Future policy must allow farmers to have the best possible tools at their disposal to deliver on environmental outcomes.

The ability to develop our own local policies opens the way to create a new dynamic for key stakeholders across the food, agriculture and environmental spectrum and to work with the Northern Ireland Government to chart a new way forward with common purpose. As we go forward, I want to devise support schemes that provide opportunities for all Northern Ireland's farmers. Schemes and support are needed to help farmers to develop their businesses no matter what they farm, become more efficient and maximise the sustainable returns that they achieve from the assets at their disposal. Those assets include the environmental assets on the farm. I believe that farms, especially those on hills and in other disadvantaged areas, are well placed to play a major role in delivering more of the environmental outcomes that people who live in Northern Ireland want and that we owe to future generations. Farmers should be properly rewarded for delivering those environmental outcomes.

We will work with farmers, land managers and environmental stakeholders to co-design a new approach to agrienvironment measures that is focused on delivering outcomes and a lasting legacy. We have the opportunity to create a new approach where management of the environment becomes a profit centre in the farm business rather than a cost centre. That offers a way forward where better economic and environmental performance are the two

inseparable goals of any farm business. Farmers should be able to compete with imports on a level playing field when it comes to environmental, animal welfare or, indeed, labour standards. It is absolutely critical that any future trade deal reflects those important issues.

As we look to the shape of the future support regime, I see a role for a simplified area-based support safety net that is set a level that does not blunt innovation or productivity. It should embrace some of the recommendations of the sustainable land management strategy. I see a role for coupled support, targeting, in particular, suckler cow and breeding ewe producers. We need to explore how coupled support can be designed to better drive economic and environmental performance. I am also keen to examine how genetics and a livestock data programme can be embedded in that to improve the economic and environmental performance of our grazing livestock.

We need to expand investment and knowledge tools to support better nutrient management and reductions in carbon, ammonia and nitrates emissions. We need to explore the possibilities of encouraging the farming of carbon through a range of measures, including land management techniques and increased woodland planting.

There is also a need for continuing professional development, which is absolutely vital in farming as we move forward. It is also important to say that I see a better role for succession planning.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

In conclusion, business as usual for many farmers will not be an option. The future is about deliverable food and environmental outcomes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Harry Harvey to wind on the amendment.

Mr Harvey: I support the amendment standing in my name and that of colleagues. Today's debate has been useful and has given Members an opportunity to have a discussion on the vision for agriculture in the years ahead. We have considered where we want to go with a greener, more sustainable and more productive sector for the future. As has already been outlined, we as a party have always supported policies that deliver a profitable and

productive agri-food sector that is also sustainable.

I will now address a few of the comments made. Mr Declan McAleer said that our farming is world class and that all farmers can play their part, whether big or small. Mr William Irwin said that there is a need for a balanced approach that has to be achievable. He also had concerns about external forces. Mr Patsy McGlone said that the vast majority want to play their part and that farm businesses can remain profitable and productive. He said that that is most important.

Mr McGlone: I thank Mr Harvey for giving way. On one of the key elements of the amendment, which Mr Irwin commented on, and to which you have also referred, can you clarify for me how the balance between increased agri-food farming activity and reducing the environmental impact of agri-food and farming activity can be achieved? Can we get some clarity on the amendment?

Mr Harvey: I take your comments on board, Mr McGlone. The Member also mentioned areas where birds no longer sing. That was an interesting one, and we look forward to hearing them singing again. Mrs Barton mentioned being helpful to wildlife, incorporating best practices and the importance of hedgerows. She also mentioned the rearing of goats and Christmas trees, which is very good.

Mr Dickson was not happy with the amendment and had concerns for farming as a result of Brexit. Mr Maurice Bradley talked about redefining the agriculture policy. He mentioned air, water and soil quality and said that he wanted things to be the best that they can be. He also said that there are some great schemes available.

Ms Emma Sheerin said that she was reared on a farm in the Sperrins and that we are custodians of the countryside. She mentioned naturally climate-friendly farming and our need to support our farmers' production. She also talked about how good food was produced during the pandemic.

Ms Sinead McLaughlin spoke about her concerns for trade deals with Australia and America and said that she has concerns over imports. Ms Clare Bailey said that it is time for change for farmers here and that she has concerns about high emissions. She talked about the vital role that farmers can play, biodiversity and improving farm incomes. She also mentioned food labelling and the need for

a strategy for it, and she voiced her concern for low-income families.

Minister Poots welcomed the debate and mentioned the 100 years of a Parliament here. In a short time, the Minister has delivered a wide range of programmes, such as Forests for Our Future and the small woodland grant scheme, as well as the work carried out on the farm business investment scheme and initiatives to protect pollinators. Many of the schemes already support our farmers in moving towards low-emission, nature-friendly processes and procedures. That is the model of collaborative working that we must progress in order to encourage and support the sector to develop further.

5.45 pm

On nature-friendly farming, I agree with other Members that we must first acknowledge the work that those within the sector have been doing for decades. Those within the farming community and agri-food sector have a love for nature and our environment. It is their bread and butter. Healthy farmlands produce healthy farm businesses, as our farmers have known for generations. As such, it is important that we recognise the positive role that our farmers have played, and continue to play, in sustaining and improving our environment through habitat creation, waterways maintenance and carbon reduction. In recent years, the sector has engaged well with departmental schemes aimed at improving our natural environment. I know that that will continue as the Department seeks to ensure that future policy works to create an industry that is both environmentally and financially sustainable.

The Ulster Farmers' Union recently made the point that focusing on one of the sustainability pillars without considering the others will result in imbalance and lead to difficulties. I firmly believe that we can move towards greater environmental sustainability whilst achieving greater economic sustainability for the sector.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up, I am afraid.

Mr Harvey: OK. Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr John Blair, who will have 10 minutes.

Mr Blair: I start by thanking Members for their contributions. I will reflect briefly on those contributions, but I also want to strive to

dedicate sufficient time to the intent of the motion.

The Committee Chair, Declan McAleer, in opening the debate, reminded us of the importance of the agri-food sector to Northern Ireland. It is one of our greatest assets, sustaining approximately 100,000 jobs and adding £1.5 billion to the Northern Ireland economy as well as, of course, providing high-quality food.

William Irwin, in moving the amendment, referenced previous comments by the Minister about working towards more resilience. He also spoke of the Climate Change Bill. Patsy McGlone talked of farmers willingly playing their part in tackling the climate emergency, and said that many of them are also great advocates for nature-friendly farming.

Rosemary Barton mentioned the strength of nature-friendly farming and her belief that agriculture has to be sustainable as well as profitable. She helpfully mentioned birds and biodiversity, and related those to tourism and recreation. Maurice Bradley made a telling comment that farmers are pivotal to delivering on environmental outcomes. I am sure that Members across the House would agree with that. Emma Sheerin talked about biodiversity in the Sperrins, and its link to farming life there. Clare Bailey, in supporting the motion but opposing the amendment, said that this is a time of opportunity and change but also of challenges. She referenced the Climate Change Bill that is already before the House.

I turn now to speak as the Alliance Party agriculture, environment and rural affairs spokesperson. I feel compelled to remind Members that nearly 30% of Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions are from agriculture, compared with 10% in the rest of the UK. That reflects the importance of agriculture to our economy as well as the demand for quality food.

With around 25,000 farms in Northern Ireland, most of which are small and family run, the Alliance Party is committed to supporting our farmers in embracing environmentally beneficial farming practices, reducing their carbon footprint and better using and protecting natural resources and biodiversity. That commitment was outlined recently in my party's policy document 'Green New Deal', which my colleague Stewart Dickson mentioned. The document describes the essential role that farmers play in driving nature's recovery. I have, with colleagues, met the Ulster Farmers' Union on the matter, so I am acutely aware of the

huge efforts already being made by farmers to tackle environmental challenges.

Agriculture was, as we said, the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions for Northern Ireland in 2018, at 27%. That share, and these are the important figures, is expected to increase to 35% by 2030 as a result of the improved performances of other sectors, and with a 3% reduction in agricultural emissions. So, setting the context and setting the proportion here is very important.

Agriculture Committee colleagues also mentioned that the Committee has worked with the Nature Friendly Farming Network on a motion to protect our natural environment — we have it here today — and to tackle the climate emergency, while providing a profitable future for the sector. Future agricultural policies, which is an issue that I raised at Question Time recently, must enable a transition, whilst providing nutritious food and increased farm resilience. Farmers who contribute to sequestration and take invaluable actions in the battle against climate change must, therefore, be assisted. We need new and better ways of rewarding them for their efforts as they continue to make progress. I note that the Minister responded very positively and talked about making bids in that regard when I asked that question previously.

The central plank of our future policy must include environmental land management and sustainable farming incentives to pay farmers for actions that they take to manage their land in an environmentally sustainable way. That could include schemes to encourage catchment-sensitive farming, integrated pest management and sensitive hedgerow management. Local nature recovery will pay farmers for actions that support that recovery, creating space for natural habitats on farms and encouraging cooperation between farmers. The landscape recovery component will support the delivery of landscape-scale projects to deliver ecosystem recovery for longer-term land use change. That will help us to meet our targets to plant 30,000 hectares of woodland by 2025, to create and restore peatland, to protect 30% of UK land by 2030 and to reach the net zero targets that we aspire to.

Nature-friendly farming is not only better for nature but ensures that our land remains productive so that we can go on producing food forever. Nature is good for business and is essential for our future. There is increasing recognition that environmental production practices are essential for robust supply chains; in short, to ensure that we have good food on

the table. There is a massive opportunity to roll out nature-friendly farming at scale as part of a future domestic agricultural policy. That will help to deliver a range of important public policy objectives at the same time as providing resilient, sustainable and productive farm businesses.

I repeat that the Alliance Party remains absolutely committed to nature-friendly farming and will be a champion for schemes that, through a new environmental land management system, will reward farmers for their efforts. We will support the original motion, and we will not support the amendment, because it focuses on productivity over the environment, it credits departmental work that has not, as yet, reached the stage that some of us would like it to be at, and, quite bizarrely, those who tabled the amendment have not sought, at various stages, in Committee meetings and discussions to highlight the need for such amendments.

In closing, I want to issue a reminder that climate change does not recognise boundaries, nor does it differentiate between communities. Now is the time for us, together, to set new measures and take big steps. I commend the motion to the House, and I oppose the amendment.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that we will have to have a Division. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members to continue to uphold the social-distancing rules and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber. Clear the Lobbies.

Before I put the Question, I remind those Members present that, if possible, it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division.

Question put a second time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I remind all Members of the requirement for social distancing while the Division takes place. I ask you to ensure that you maintain a gap of at least 2 metres between yourself and other people when moving around the Chamber or the Rotunda and particularly in the Lobbies. Please be patient at all times, observe the

signage and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks. Clear the Lobbies.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 36; Noes 48.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr M Bradley and Mr Harvey

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Brogan and Mr Dickson

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Bradshaw voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Ms Bunting voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey [Teller, Ayes], Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt [Teller, Noes], Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan [Teller, Noes],

Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Ms Bailey voted for Ms Sugden.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the vital role that nature-friendly farming must play in tackling the nature and climate emergencies, at the same time as providing a profitable future for the sector; believes that future agricultural policies for Northern Ireland must enable a transition to profitable, sustainable, nature-friendly farming, in order to provide nutritious food, increase farm business resilience and combat the nature and climate emergencies; and welcomes the comments by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that future agricultural policy should ensure an industry that is environmentally sustainable and that displays improved resilience to external shocks.

Private Members' Business

Defamation Bill: First Stage

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to introduce the Defamation Bill [NIA Bill 25/17-22], which is a Bill to amend the law of defamation.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Adjourned at 6.14 pm.

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