



# Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 8 March 2021  
Volume 136, No 6

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 March 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

### Tributes to Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Mr Speaker:** Members, we start our business by expressing our condolences following the passing of our former colleague Jimmy Spratt. I know that we were all deeply saddened to hear the news of Jimmy's death on Thursday. Jimmy was well known for his long career of over 30 years in public service as a member of the RUC and as chairman of the Police Federation. He then entered the Assembly in 2007, and that is when I got to know him, as we both represented South Belfast at the time.

As well as being constituency colleagues, Jimmy and I worked together in many capacities, including as members of the Policing Board, on the then Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, on conflict resolution work in Asia. Jimmy also chaired a number of Committees in the Assembly, including the Regional Development Committee for three years in the 2011 mandate.

We obviously came from very different political backgrounds and perspectives, but I had a great respect for Jimmy, as we developed a strong working relationship; indeed, what I would call a friendship. I enjoyed working with Jimmy very much, as he was a straight talker with a good sense of humour. You were never in any doubt about where Jimmy stood on any given issue, but you could always do business with him, and he was clearly committed to making the Assembly work during his time as a Member.

In recent years, Jimmy spoke openly about his long battle with cancer. In doing so, he demonstrated his strength of character, even when he was seriously ill, and many of us admired him for that. I express the condolences of the Assembly to his colleagues in the Democratic Unionist Party. All will recognise today that a family is grieving. I know that I speak for all in the Assembly in recording our

sincere sympathies for his wife, Lynda, his four sons, his daughters-in-law and his grandchildren. Jimmy was a strong family man, and I hope that his family can take some comfort from memories of happier times.

**Mrs Foster:** Thank you very much. Mr Speaker, for your kind words about our dear friend and colleague Jimmy Spratt.

The news of Jimmy's passing was expected, but it still hit very hard when I was told last Thursday morning. He had fought cancer in such a stoic way with his wife, Lynda, always by his side, but the fight came to an end on Thursday morning and it was time to leave this earthly world.

Jimmy and I were not what a lot of people expected from DUP MLAs. He was a Presbyterian and I was an Anglican. He used to joke about that with Dr Paisley, and he laughed when Ian asked me how the Anglicans were, as if I could answer for the whole Anglican communion. We both joined the party around the same time, and Jimmy's service in the RUC was also something that brought us together as my father had served in the police as well.

Jimmy joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 1972 when the IRA campaign of violence was at its bloodiest, and he served in the police for 30 years. Towards the end of his time, as you said, Mr Speaker, he became chairman of the Police Federation after having been involved there for a number of years in other functions, and he was a great advocate for his fellow officers.

When he retired from the police, the desire to serve the community was still there, so he joined the DUP and was elected to Castlereagh Borough Council. He became group leader of the DUP team on the council after Peter Robinson left the council chamber, and he really enjoyed his role as a councillor and group leader. In 2007, he was elected to serve as an MLA for South Belfast, and, as you have reflected, Mr Speaker, he held many positions in this place during his time here. He stepped

down due to ill health in 2015, but he still kept a keen eye on what was going on up on the hill.

When devolution returned to Northern Ireland in 2007 after the St Andrews Agreement, Jimmy and I sat behind Dr Paisley and Peter Robinson in that now famous photograph in the Long Gallery at Stormont, when the DUP leadership met the Sinn Féin leadership for the first time. Jimmy believed in devolution and knew the work and sacrifice that were needed to make it happen. He had lived and served through the Troubles and had seen the death and destruction that they had brought, and he wanted to make Northern Ireland a better place for all.

There were and are many challenges in keeping Northern Ireland moving forward in the right direction, but Jimmy never shied away from that challenge. When I needed help, I rang Jimmy, as I did not so long ago, and he was always willing to help, even when he was not well. He was an incredibly brave man, and he showed that bravery throughout his life, not least in his final battle. I will miss his mischievous smile, his dry asides and his determined, clear counsel, but I am thankful to have had Jimmy as a friend and colleague — the kind of friend who thought nothing of jumping in a car and coming to Enniskillen to canvass for a day.

To Lynda and the family, I send my love and prayerful support. We all know that there will be difficult days ahead but there will also be days of joyful remembrance. Jimmy had a strong faith in the risen Lord as his saviour. I watched his funeral service online. and I smiled when his minister, the Rev Mark Brown, said that Jimmy had instructed him to leave people in no doubt about the need for salvation. Jimmy was giving clear advice, even though he had passed.

I want to finish with two verses, if I may, Mr Speaker. As the Bible says in Philipians 4:7:

*"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"*

and in Matthew 5:4:

*"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."*

**Mr O'Dowd:** On behalf of Sinn Féin, I want to pay our tribute to Jimmy Spratt. My experience of Jimmy mirrors yours, Mr Speaker. I got to know him through the Assembly, and it was a classic example of the fact that peacebuilding is not something that simply happens between

Governments, political parties or communities: it has to be at a personal level. Jimmy's background was very different from mine, and I never thought that I would be standing here and paying tribute to a former RUC man. However, Jimmy was the sort of character who was firm in his own beliefs and could express them, but he did so in a way that did not antagonise or inflame the situation.

I never doubted for one moment that Jimmy was a unionist, but I always believed that he was here, as many are — with the greatest respect to everybody in the Chamber, we are all here trying to do a job — to try to make this place work for everyone. As I said at the start of my tribute to him, he is a classic example of how peacebuilding is achieved: at a one-to-one level as much as at Government-to-Government level.

I always found Jimmy to be courteous but firm. As I said, he was a political figure who could give his point of view without inflaming or antagonising the situation. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I pass on deepest sympathies to his wife, Lynda, and his four sons.

**Ms Mallon:** I offer my condolences and those of my party to the Members opposite, who knew Jimmy Spratt as a close friend and trusted colleague. Having recently experienced the loss of a colleague, we know how difficult that process is, particularly in the current circumstances. I know that the First Minister, in particular, will feel Jimmy's loss sorely. On behalf of the SDLP, I send heartfelt condolences to Lynda, Jimmy's wife, and their four children. The loss of a family member has been made so much more difficult by the pandemic. I hope that, when this is over, they have the time and space to remember Jimmy together.

I did not have the opportunity to serve in the House at the same time as Jimmy Spratt, but I did have the pleasure of meeting him on a number of occasions as a councillor, and he always found time to speak to me. At our most recent meeting, at the funeral of Councillor Rosaleen Hughes, who was a great friend of Jimmy's, he even found time to give me some valuable words of encouragement. I always found that Jimmy saw the person, not just the politician. The warm tributes paid by his colleagues today are testament to a man who dedicated himself to making this place work and serving the needs of the people whom he represented.

In the febrile political environment that we experience today, we could all learn from

someone who made his arguments directly, passionately and honestly, but who also demonstrated respect and humility when listening to the experiences of others. It is clear that he was held in respect right across the political spectrum. There is no doubt that Jimmy felt a lifelong call to public service. As a police officer, councillor, MLA and, I have no doubt, a source of advice and counsel to successive First Ministers, he has made an indelible impact on our shared community.

**Mr Butler:** It is a privilege to offer, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, condolences to Jimmy Spratt's wider family and friends and his colleagues in the Democratic Unionist Party. I did not know Mr Spratt personally. However, I have heard many a testimony to Jimmy over the years since I entered politics. Every time, he was described, as Mr O'Dowd said, as straight and firm, proudly unionist but non-antagonistic, and someone who, perhaps, could be best described as a constituency politician. No greater tribute can be paid to a politician.

As someone who served for 20 years in the Prison Service and the Fire and Rescue Service, I want to pay a personal tribute to someone who followed that line of public service throughout their working life and worked for the betterment of the public. The stories that emanated from Jimmy Spratt's life and which were shared at his funeral and by the First Minister, should give comfort to his family that his memory will be long held in high esteem right across Northern Ireland and the communities that we all represent.

Jimmy had a long battle with cancer. As the First Minister said, his death was not unexpected. However, every time, regardless of the house that we come from, a death like that is hard to take. Our thoughts and prayers are with Lynda and her four sons. Finally, it is incredibly comforting, if you have a faith, to know that, when someone passes, they have a future in Jesus.

**12.15 pm**

**Mr Dickson:** I knew Jimmy Spratt many years ago from my work in the Labour Relations Agency when he was chair of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland and represented that body in very difficult and challenging employment negotiations. That is where I first came across Jimmy Spratt in his professional role. I was also well aware of him as a local councillor, and we met at various council events through the Northern Ireland

Local Government Association and other council organisations.

When I came to the Assembly, he had already completed one term and was the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, the first Committee that I joined in the Assembly. He was open and generous in the way in which he allowed Members to participate in all the work of the Assembly. He encouraged us. We did not always agree; we did not always meet eye to eye on the various issues in front of us. However, the way in which he engaged with Members was always excellent, no matter which party they came from.

For me, and in a very personal way, it was the bravery with which Jimmy spoke up about his battle with cancer. Cancer is a very difficult thing to talk about in public, and he stepped forward and did that. I will always remember that he sent me a very personal note when I received my diagnosis. To Lynda and his family, on behalf of the Alliance Party, I extend our condolences. Thank you.

**Mr Stalford:** In the Second Epistle of Paul to Timothy, we read:

*"the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day: and not only to me, but to all who crave his appearing."*

I rise to pay tribute to a life of public service. Mr Jimmy Spratt faithfully served his constituents as a Member of the Assembly, but he also served in the police during some of the darkest days of the Troubles. I recall Jimmy telling me some of the stories of a dark time for this country before I was born. He served to protect the community in those dark days during that very difficult time.

Jimmy was a firm unionist, and there was no disguising that. He joined the Young Unionists in Moneyreagh as a young man but went on to serve as a Democratic Unionist councillor, the Mayor of Castlereagh, an Assembly Member and as the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, as has been said.

He was blessed in life to have a loving family: four sons, his wife, Lynda, and his grandchildren, who would have been such a comfort during the final days of his life. I wish to place on record my deepest sympathy to his family at this very sad time.

**Mr Allister:** I wish to join the tributes to Jimmy Spratt. He clearly had a very enviable full life of service, and, as has been commented, some of that was in the police during the darkest of times, and anyone who does that is deserving of the gratitude of us all. When it came to his final months and years of life, he showed great stoicism and courage in the manner in which he fought the dreadful disease of cancer. His conduct in that fight was exemplary. Now that he has passed, though his colleagues in the House will miss him, he will be missed most by his family: his wife, sons and extended family. I wish to extend my sincere condolences to his family and to his political party, where he was held in high regard and will be deeply missed. Above all, it is his family who will miss him, and I join in the condolences and expressions of sympathy to them.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I will say a few words, having had the privilege of serving on the Policing Board with Jimmy Spratt. I can relate to the First Minister's comments about his mischievous sense of humour, because, many's the time, he would have tipped me a wink before he started to wind up some senior police officers at the board through his questioning and probing. I pass on my sincere condolences to his wife, Lynda, and his sons. Funerals are a very difficult time at the moment. When people are ill, family members and friends cannot go to give comfort in the way in which we would hope. My sincere condolences to his family, friends and colleagues in the DUP. I always found Jimmy to be a gentleman, and he was quite dapper in how he dressed. His sense of humour always appealed to me, and I know that he will be missed by many.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the tributes —. Sorry, I call Robin Newton. Apologies for that.

**Mr Newton:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Tributes have rightly been paid to Jimmy Spratt today for his service. It was a privilege to know Jimmy and to be with him in his political life and, indeed, in the Assembly. We shared membership of the same Democratic Unionist Party branch, and Jimmy was always in attendance before his illness.

The funeral service encapsulated many things about Jimmy, and the Members who have spoken today, from the First Minister down, have encapsulated many of Jimmy's attributes. First, he was a man of faith. He believed in God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He believed very much in his family, and it was extremely important to him. Jimmy enjoyed no greater

pleasure than to have his family around him, particularly his grandchildren.

Members have mentioned his service in the RUC, and I suppose that his life could be summed up in many ways by that one word: service. Service to his family, service to his employer — the RUC — and, more latterly, service to the people of his constituency. Indeed, he served not just his own constituency. He was an elected representative on the council, and, when he became an MLA, he served further afield by helping to produce legislation and so on. He was proud to serve as the Mayor of Castlereagh Borough Council, as it was then. As has been said, he took over the leadership role of the DUP group on the council when Peter Robinson stood down. My goodness, what a burden that would have been to follow in the footsteps of Peter Robinson.

Jimmy fought a long fight against cancer. He made, and was willing to make, his points of view known on his illness and on the pandemic, and he appeared on television on a number of occasions to make those points.

I extend my condolences to Lynda, to his four sons and, indeed, to the wider family. Jimmy's life can be summed up as a life well lived.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the tributes to Jimmy Spratt.

### **Public Petition: Urgent Provision of a Detox and Centre of Excellence for Addiction for the Derry City and Strabane District Council Area**

**Mr Speaker:** Karen Mullan 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 Mullan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, for accepting this petition. Today, I bring forward an online petition, which is signed by over 9,000 people, for a detox centre and centre of excellence for addiction in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. On International Women's Day, I present this petition on behalf of a very brave and inspirational young woman called Tamzin White, who recently lost her mother, Louise, to a long battle against alcohol addiction.

Louise was only 40 years of age. She was a mother to three beautiful daughters: Tamzin, 18 years old; and two younger girls, Farrah and

Lola-May. Louise was also a much-loved daughter, sister, aunt and friend.

Yet again, because of addiction, a family has lost a loved one who should have had her whole life in front of her. This has been a campaign and a clearly identified need in Derry for many years. Along with many citizens of Derry, I call on Minister of Health Robin Swann to listen and to make plans for the delivery of the much-needed services for many suffering families and individuals. 'New Decade, New Approach' clearly refers to additional funding to support an addiction centre in Derry. That is a clear commitment that all parties in the Executive signed up to in January 2020. Other Members for Foyle and I have raised the issue in the Assembly and will continue to do so.

I am sure that every Member in the Assembly today knows of a relative, friend or colleague who is battling or has battled addiction. Addiction is no longer an affliction that brings shame on a family or community; it is a disease, like many others, that we as a society battle every day of the week. We need to ensure that we, as legislators and the Government, provide the services and treatments that our citizens need and deserve.

It may be too late for Louise, but, for many others, it is not too late. I appeal on behalf of Tamzin: do not let this commitment that we all made last January be another false dawn. The people of Derry and the north-west region need the service, and we need it now. Finally, I appeal to Minister Swann to give the issue his immediate and serious attention, to deliver the detox centre of excellence that was promised in 'New Decade, New Approach' and to keep his offer to meet Tamzin.

**Mr Speaker:** In light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in her place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office later. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once I have received the petition, I will forward it to the Minister of Health and send a copy to the Committee.

## Matter of the Day

### Withdrawal Agreement Grace Periods

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Declan McAleer has been given leave to make a statement on withdrawal agreement grace periods that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

**Mr McAleer:** Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to raise this very important Matter of the Day.

I want to pick up on the solo run made by the Minister in ordering that construction at the ports be stopped and on the decision by the British Government to unpick aspects of the withdrawal agreement. They did it unilaterally and outside the partnership and the agreed intergovernmental arrangements that they have with the EU. That is bad business, and it contravenes an international agreement. It will have a bad impact on our businesses here and on our international reputation as a region to do business with.

Unfortunately, the need for checks has arisen as a result of Brexit and the divergence of the UK from the EU. If we did not have any divergence, we would not have any checks. The majority of people in the North recognised that and wanted to remain. My party wanted to remain, and the majority of the House wanted to remain. That did not happen. The backstop, which could have prevented checks, was also rubbished. We have ended up with the protocol — the withdrawal agreement — and now we have a situation where the British want to unpick parts of that international agreement; indeed, we have the AERA Minister, Gordon Lyons, going on a solo run and ordering the stopping of the construction of the ports facilities. He did not run the decision by the AERA Committee, nor did he run it by his senior officials, who are now seeking legal advice on the matter.

The economic importance of our ports is absolutely huge. From Belfast alone, there were 550,000 freight trips across the Irish Sea last year. Of the trade from the North to Britain, 70% goes through Belfast.

Making the decision on the ports and, indeed, on tweaking aspects of the protocol outside the agreed intergovernmental arrangement is, as I said, bad business and represents bad faith.

**12.30 pm**

DAERA has been preparing the ports since the Command Paper was published last year. The contracts were awarded in October, and DAERA is now negotiating with Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) on the status of those contracts, which are now in place. I accept that there were implementation issues at the outset in January, but the message that we, as a Committee, get is that things are improving, the Trader Support Service is improving and businesses are getting used to the common health entry documents. There are still some issues to deal with. Some 57,000 units have passed through the ports since it began, and businesses are calling for calm heads and a clear plan. On the revocation of article 16 —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr McAleer:** — they do not want the prospect of World Trade Organization rules.

The decisions by the Minister and the British Government could have a huge impact on our local businesses.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr McAleer:** It is important that we raise that.

**Mr Stalford:** It is important to start from first principles: we do not consent, have not consented and never will consent to the provisions in the withdrawal agreement. Extending grace periods is, insofar as it goes, perhaps positive, but it is not enough. The protocol should be abolished and consigned to the wastepaper bin where it belongs. Frankly, I find it bizarre that elected Members of the House are demanding that their constituents be punished and that provisions that make it harder to establish businesses and to trade should be — what was the phrase? — "rigorously implemented". It is for the parties that argued in favour of the protocol to justify that to their constituents and justify why they are in favour of barriers to the biggest market that we have: the UK domestic market.

The only conclusion that people will come to is that the pro-protocol parties have a higher fealty and allegiance to the European Union than to serving the interests of their constituents. The

idea of the European Union is more important to the parties that argue in favour of the protocol than making life better for their constituents. Having spent four years demanding the provisions and their rigorous implementation, some, at least, had the political nous to try to back-pedal from some of it by saying, "Oh, these are just teething problems". That was the argument that was used. When issues like this are raised, it is apparent that rigorous implementation is the position of the pro-protocol parties.

What does that mean? It means that it is more difficult to start businesses, to trade and to engage in economic activity that would benefit the community. Members opposite arguing that it is a good thing for Northern Ireland does not at all stand up to scrutiny, and people can see that.

The Member who spoke before me mentioned the need for cool heads. Can I suggest that he visit Iveagh House and suggest "cool heads" to the Foreign Minister of the Irish Republic? Mr Coveney's contributions in the media over the last week do not demonstrate a cool-headed approach: quite the contrary. Some could say that he is deliberately inflaming the situation.

I finish by congratulating my Executive colleague Gordon Lyons on the action that he has taken. It reflects the fact that the unionist community in Northern Ireland will never, ever, consent to living under the protocol.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am glad that the matter has been brought to the Assembly. To answer the previous point, I say that the people of Northern Ireland did not vote for Brexit in the first place. We have a set of arrangements that reflects our unique status. People can constantly bang the table and gin up anger about the protocol, but, if they do not address the basic reality and starting principle that a hard Brexit — leaving the single market and customs union — creates the need for a threshold between the European single market of half a billion people and the UK market, we will get nowhere. Those realities exist. They have been created by the UK Government — successive UK Governments — and, as the Member opposite has decided to turn it into a political slanging match, have been enabled by the Democratic Unionist Party, who held the balance of power at Westminster for two and a half years.

In relation to the grace periods, no one is opposed to businesses having more time to prepare, but there are two things. First, we on this side of the Chamber and others who voted for the motion tabled multiple motions in the

Assembly last year to give businesses more time to prepare and call for the transition period to be extended. That is exactly what we asked for, but the UUP, DUP and TUV voted against that. They literally voted against more time for businesses to prepare.

With regard to the specific extension of the grace periods, as I have said, businesses have struggled to deal with changes that were forced through at short notice, but, as the previous Member said, it is exaggeration and distortion to claim that the world is falling down around us. These are difficult changes in North/South and east-west trade, but businesses are coming to terms with them. The way to go about securing easements and making the protocol work is not through constant provocation and threat, as the new UK Minister seeks to do. That will only put Northern Ireland in the middle of a difficult relationship between the UK and the EU. That is not in anyone's interest.

Over the weekend, I heard the First Minister say that she had heard business groups welcoming the extension of the grace periods. That is true: several business groups have welcomed it. They have also said that they did not want it to happen like this, because they know the damage that it will do to UK/EU relationships. If you can find a single business group that wants the protocol to be junked and walked away from, then bring them here; I would love to hear from them. What I hear from businesses is that they want certainty and stability. The constant ramping-up of tension, whether in London or Belfast, is not doing anyone any good. We need to make this work, and it can work for the benefit of all our citizens.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr O'Toole:** We are a unique place and a unique society, and there is no getting away from that. We have to make this work and make it work properly.

**Mr Beggs:** The Northern Ireland protocol is adversely affecting many businesses, particularly smaller businesses that are being overloaded by the bureaucracy. Many of their suppliers in GB no longer supply them. That is the reality of what is happening. Prices are increasing. There has been a total ban on many goods coming into Northern Ireland. Our garden centres cannot even order plants: British soil is not deemed to be acceptable here. On 1 April, with new restrictions on parcels coming into Northern Ireland, virtually every online retailer would be adversely affected.

Just last week, the permanent secretary of DAERA indicated that 20% of documentary inspections in the entire EU were happening because of the Northern Ireland protocol and that it would increase significantly on 1 April, when the so-called grace period came to an end. Northern Ireland would face a similar number of checks to the rest of the EU. This is a bureaucratic nightmare that the EU has introduced, affecting Northern Ireland. The EU needs to get real and stop trying to impose such ridiculous conditions. Why some other parties want to have barriers to trade I do not know. The first so-called grace period was due to end on 1 April. There is another one on 1 July and another on 1 December. There are huge problems for businesses and trade, and the EU has been dithering in recognising them. Let us remember that, if a company wants something delivered in three weeks' time, they need to order it, sometimes, with several weeks' lead time, and then there is the distribution beyond that.

The EU has been too slow to get rid of its ridiculous procedures. I fully understand why the United Kingdom Government have acted, and I am pleased that they have. The EU has introduced disproportionate procedures to protect its single market. Where is the unfettered access that was granted to Northern Ireland? They have certainly not introduced a light-touch system; it must be one of the most bureaucratic systems ever thought about.

It has absolutely no regard for the joint nature of the Belfast Agreement and the impact that its proposal is having on unionist opinion. It says that it introduced the system in order to protect the agreement, but it has disrupted the Northern Ireland economy and trade. It is making unionists very concerned about the current political status, which it has changed without their permission. I fully understand why the British Government have taken that action. What we do not want is the removal of the grace period. The Northern Ireland protocol has to go so that we can let something be introduced that can give a degree of protection to Europe that it says it needs but without the bureaucratic nightmare that has been introduced.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Dickson:** The Alliance Party supports the extension of the current grace periods for Irish Sea border checks. However, very serious concerns remain over the way in which the UK Government have unilaterally acted to extend them rather than achieve a way to work with the

EU. That is a matter of serious concern. It is even sadder to hear in here today those voices that welcome the breach of an international agreement. Those people need to stop and think about what they said. They are welcoming a breach of the law by a Government whose international reputation will, undoubtedly, be damaged by their actions. That has already been highlighted by the United States of America and others.

The Government should be taking this time to achieve sustainable long-term solutions and mitigations in the operation of the protocol. For my party, the priority should be the conclusion of bespoke UK-EU agreements, which are veterinary agreements in this case, that are along the style of the Swiss model and extending that.

While the announcement of an extension of grace periods might superficially be attractive in the short term, it has very serious long-term consequences. Breaking the law, particularly international law, always has. It will bring further disruption to the United Kingdom. Businesses in Northern Ireland want and require stability and legal certainty. The actions of the Government and those who rail against the protocol are doing the very opposite. They are destabilising business and bringing legal uncertainty to the situation.

However, Northern Ireland is not alone in that, because the damage will also happen to the rest of the United Kingdom. Too often, we look at ports like Larne, Belfast and Warrenpoint, and we jump up and down when Ministers make decisions about what they want to do here, but we should also look at ports in England and at how they relate to business across the continent. They are suffering equal and similar problems, all of which have been brought about by the pig-headedness of the United Kingdom Government in their negotiations. Any punishment of businesses sits entirely at the feet of those who sold Brexit and defeated the backstop in a parliamentary decision.

**Ms Bailey:** Here we go, yet again, discussing the impact of Brexit when many of us knew — all of us knew — that it would bring no benefits and certainly no settlement for Northern Ireland. When we hear that businesses are adversely impacted by the protocol, the question needs to be asked. Businesses were going to be impacted no matter what the arrangement. This is not about where the border is if you want to stand up for businesses, because if it was a land or a sea border, businesses will still be affected. We need to acknowledge that that

argument is a party political one and not one that is set up for helping any businesses. Brexit is bad for Northern Ireland, and the protocol is the minimum standard of protection for us against the harshest outcome of the hard Brexit that Boris Johnson sought.

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

**Ms Bailey:** No, I will not.

Any solution for issues arising because of the protocol need to be sorted out with the Joint Committee. Nobody in the House should be fooled that the EU or the United Kingdom Government are looking for the best outcome for Northern Ireland when they are rolling out the programme for Brexit. That is not the reality, because, every which way, Northern Ireland is set to be harmed.

#### 12.45 pm

Should we need to be reminded, Boris Johnson even told Donald Tusk in a letter that the UK supports a backstop that applies "unless and until" something better is found. Those opposing Brexit, those opposing the protocol, those opposing where we are today and those bringing judicial reviews to our courts need to step up and start telling us what is better because I want to hear it, businesses want to hear it and people want to hear it.

My colleague from South Belfast Christopher Stalford, who has left the Chamber unfortunately, said that we need to step up and represent businesses and people. Does he need to be reminded that over 70% of people in South Belfast unanimously rejected Brexit? Where was his representation then?

The issue needs to be solved in the Joint Committee. We need to acknowledge that there is no good outcome for Northern Ireland and that, in mitigating what we have and what we will continue to see, it needs to be firmly put to the Joint Committee, and the EU and the UK Government need to step up and start looking after the interests of Northern Ireland rather than their own agendas.

**Mr Buckley:** Northern Ireland unionism is a broad church, both communal and political. It has many opinions and people differ on many issues, but one thing that it stands in absolute unison on is that the Northern Ireland protocol must go. It is in conflict with the economic, political and peace settlement in Northern Ireland.

Extended grace periods are to be welcomed for the simple fact that they give some immediate certainty to businesses that are calling for them. They allow the Government to pursue urgently the replacement of the Northern Ireland protocol, but let us be clear: tinkering, small fixes and grace periods that will kick the can down the road simply will not be good enough. Real solutions are needed, and that starts with the heart of the issue: the replacement of the Northern Ireland protocol. It has caused political and economic instability in Northern Ireland.

Let us look at the economics. It is bad for business and has created trade impediments with our largest market, which is the internal market of the United Kingdom. I hear Members asking businesses that do not agree with the protocol to come forward, but they obviously do not want to listen because concerns about the protocol have been placed on record from day dot. People are worried about their businesses and their ability to trade with their own internal market of the United Kingdom.

Let us look now at the politics. I have heard many Members, notably the proponents of the protocol, talk about the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement being the peace settlement upon which the current Northern Ireland operates today, but they were silent when, via the protocol, the Government used the very agreement that they champion and removed the safeguard for the unionist community — the principle of consent — and they did not even bat an eyelid. They do not want to listen to unionist concerns. It is anathema to them, but I can tell you very clearly that there is a great deal of unease in our community because of the violation that the protocol has caused to the Northern Ireland peace settlement.

The EU is threatening legal action against Her Majesty's Government when it is, in fact, the EU that has altered the terms that many Members claim are the settlement upon which Northern Ireland is governed. However, all that seems to be irrelevant to the pawns of the European Union who sit in the House pontificating about how Europe has our best interests at heart. They do not recognise the fact that there are two communities in Northern Ireland and that one of those, the unionist community —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Buckley:** — sees this as a direct violation of its rights as equal members of the United Kingdom. That has to be addressed.

**Mr Allister:** Grace periods are designed to ameliorate some of the harsher edges of the protocol for some time. However, when even those grace periods provoke the fury of Sinn Féin and other protocol parties, it is abundantly clear to many in our community that those parties care nothing about the people or businesses of Northern Ireland. They demand not only the rigorous implementation of the protocol but more rigorous pain for the people of Northern Ireland, more rigorous pain for our consumers and the more rigorous destruction of our businesses. That tells us a great deal about the protocol parties and about where their sympathies and priorities lie.

Let us be clear: derogations, easements and grace periods may, in their own place, contribute something, but they do nothing to address the core issue, which is a constitutional one. It is the fact that Northern Ireland has been abandoned to a foreign customs union code, a foreign single market for goods and a foreign VAT regime, all overseen by foreign laws and administered, ultimately, by a foreign court. That is a transfer of sovereignty. I am staggered that, in this House, those who proclaim themselves to be democrats — Sinn Féin, Alliance, SDLP and the Greens — are totally complacent with the fact that almost two thirds of the laws that govern our economy are now made not in Belfast or London but in Brussels. We make no contribution to these laws, we have no say in them, and we do not pass them. Yet those who call themselves democrats are silent. That is the essence and the nub of the obscenity of the protocol. That constitutional change denies the people of Northern Ireland, through their elected representatives, any say over all those laws that govern our daily lives. If people are democrats at all, they should be up in arms about the denial of human and political rights involved in the fact that we are now governed by foreigners.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** Our laws are made not here or in London but in Brussels, yet those who sit here cheer that on. Shame on them.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the discussion on the Matter of the Day.

## Assembly Business

### Standing Order 34: Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill

**Mr Speaker:** As this is only the second time that the Assembly has considered a motion under Standing Order 34, I will explain the procedure. Standing Order 34(5) restricts the debate to two Members. Only the proposer of the motion and a Member who opposes it may make a brief statement. I have ruled that the time limit for each statement will be five minutes, as was the case on the first occasion.

Standing Order 34 also states that, after both statements have been made, the Question must be put without further debate. Members should not try to make interventions, and I will not take any points of order until this item has concluded. The motion does not require cross-community support.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I beg to move

*That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill is compatible with human rights.*

**Mr Speaker:** You have five minutes to propose the motion.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am particularly grateful, on International Women's Day, to those women who have campaigned so courageously for women's rights.

The proposer of the Bill argues, fundamentally, that the current regulations are discriminatory and therefore a breach of human rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Since it is entirely right to establish what those rights are and legislate accordingly, it is essential, before proceeding with the legislation, to explore the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's view on whether the Bill is compatible with human rights obligations and whether Northern Ireland may currently be in breach of the convention with regard to the rights of the unborn child.

All human rights are a balance, and it should be noted that, in 2008, the chair of the convention, Theresia Degener, said:

*"Disability rights and gender equality are two components of the same human rights standard that should not be construed as conflicting".*

She also noted that using the convention in any effort to restrict or prohibit access to safe abortion:

*"constitutes a misinterpretation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."*

The question arises as to how the convention should be interpreted in that regard.

One further UN convention is of relevance to the Bill, as it specifically seeks to amend regulations arising from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 and applied in the United Kingdom since 1986, with reference to the report on the 'Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' of 2018. To be compatible with international human rights standards, therefore, Members will want to be assured that the amendments to the relevant regulations proposed in the Bill are compatible with the recommendations to the CEDAW report, as contained in paragraphs 85 and 86 and as explicitly required in Westminster legislation.

Mr Speaker, will you ask the gentleman behind me to stop speaking, please?

**A Member:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Allister:** Apologies.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Section 9(1) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 is specific in requiring the Secretary of State to ensure the implementation of paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report. Paragraph 85(b)(iii) of the report directly addresses the balance of rights in this legislation. It requires legislation to allow access to abortion in the case of:

*"Severe fetal impairment, including fatal fetal abnormality, without perpetuating stereotypes towards persons with disabilities and ensuring appropriate and ongoing support, social and financial, for women who decide to carry such pregnancies to term."*

As such, it needs to be noted that this piece of legislation does not distinguish between severe and fatal, but it does require the ending of stereotypes and ongoing social and financial support for women who decide to carry such pregnancies to term. It is right to seek advice on exactly how that is to be understood in terms of the international human rights obligations arising from it.

Members may also welcome advice on the human rights implications of the Supreme Court judgement of 7 June 2018, even though it was, at the time, obiter dictum. It was endorsed by the High Court in Belfast in October 2019, and it clarified the incompatibility of the then existing law on abortion in Northern Ireland with human rights obligations. Moreover, Members may welcome advice on any potential implications for economic and social rights arising as an unintended consequence of the Bill.

The motion is not a commentary on the intention of the Bill, which provides for a welcome discussion on how best to ensure the ongoing support for women to take babies to term, if available, as well as around the urgent need to stop the perpetuation of stigma around such conditions as Down's syndrome. Rather, it is a request for clarity on the best way to ensure that disability rights and gender equality are treated and advanced in legislation and public policy as part of the same internationally recognised human rights standards.

In closing, it is appropriate, on this day, to note that women's rights are central to the issue. The question is about how they are to be interpreted. We should never underestimate how important that is. In addition to the lack of support throughout their life for women who choose to carry pregnancies to term in the event of a diagnosis of severe impairment, there is clear evidence that the impact of female-specific health conditions, such as heavy menstrual bleeding, endometriosis and pregnancy-related issues on women's lives, including on workforce participation, productivity and years lived in good health, is overlooked. Furthermore, since the Bill is predicated on disability rights, it is to be hoped that the motion will have the full support of the Assembly —

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up.

**Ms Bradshaw:** — and that the advice of the Human Rights Commission can be provided promptly. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Jim Allister, who seeks to oppose the motion. The Member has five minutes in which to do so.

**Mr Allister:** There is such a compelling irony in someone rising in the House to invoke the cause of human rights in order to protect the bringing of death to the womb. The unborn should be in the safest possible place when they are in the womb, yet abortion, of course, makes it the most dangerous place for some. Then, to suggest that, somehow, one should invoke the issue of human rights in order to protect the bringing of death to the womb is not just absurd but an irony beyond description.

**1.00 pm**

It is an irony that is added to by the very bringing of this motion in circumstances in which it makes no difference. A motion under Standing Order 34 will not stop the Second Stage debate on the Bill. It will not, if the House approves the Second Stage, cause the Bill to be stopped from proceeding to Committee Stage. It will not bring into play views that otherwise would not be heard, because every Bill that comes to the House, particularly one of this nature, as of right and of necessity, will go to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for its views as a consultee.

Here we have a motion demanding that something that will inevitably have to happen anyway be done. It really is such empty grandstanding to bring such a motion to the House. The Human Rights Commission will be consulted. It will have its say. It does not take Ms Bradshaw to table a motion to cause it to have its say, so it really is grandstanding of a particular nature on this occasion. When you add to that the invocation of the very notion of human rights in the context of bringing death to human beings, it is quite, quite out of place.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill is compatible with human rights.*

**Mr Buckley:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I share the concerns of the Member who spoke previously about the grandstanding nature of the motion. The Speaker will know that the Health Committee has already requested the views of the Northern Ireland Human Rights

Commission, something that my party supported. That therefore begs the question of why the Member felt it necessary to bring the motion to the House today. Can the Speaker confirm that the Human Rights Commission, as a statutory consultee, automatically receives all legislation that is introduced in the Assembly? Furthermore, will he confirm that the passing of this motion has no impact on the Bill's proceeding to Second Stage?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for his point of order. I have already made it very clear that the Human Rights Commission is advised of every Bill that comes to the Chamber immediately after its tabling. The Human Rights Commission therefore was advised of the Bill on the afternoon that it had its First Stage.

**Mr Buckley:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, can you also clarify that it will have no effect on its moving to Second Stage?

**Mr Speaker:** It will not have any effect on the timing of the Bill's Second Stage. That is correct. I suppose that, in one sense, it means that, although the Human Rights Commission is a formal statutory consultee and will no doubt make its contribution to the debate in due course, under the Standing Order 34 action, once the Human Rights Commission provides a document, it will be provided to the Speaker. I will then make sure that that is delivered to every Member of the Assembly.

I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments, please.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In case you are about to vacate the Chair, I should raise this matter while you are in the Chair. Perhaps you are not vacating the Chair. Mr Speaker, will you convey to the Assembly Commission, which you chair, the very great hurt and anxiety caused to innocent victims by its callous refusal, because of the Sinn Féin veto, to allow the illumination of Parliament Buildings on Thursday night, when we have an international day that marks the sufferings of innocent victims of terrorism? Can you please convey that to the Commission?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will know — he has drawn attention to the fact — that I chair the Assembly Commission, but, as he is also aware, I have no vote on the Commission; I take no part in the decision-making. Even though I have not put a single proposal to the Commission over this past period in respect of any particular request, the Assembly Commission has considered these matters

intensively for quite a while. I am pleased that my adviser has been key to discussing the issues with the members of the Commission. I do not accept that the Commission acted callously. The Member has put a point on the record, although, as he will know, it is not a point of order. Nevertheless, he has made his point in the Chamber. I am sure that those who may wish to listen to it will do so if they so desire.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is a growing trend in the Chamber to abuse Standing Orders by raising points of order. That is a classic example of it. Will the Speaker undertake to look at how Members use points of order in the Chamber?

**Mr Speaker:** I try to give latitude to all Members when they raise matters of importance, but, on occasion, that has been abused and misused. If I have to restrict points of order or cut them off, I will not hesitate to do so. There are one or two Members who want to make sure that they get their voice on the record. That is fine, but you can do it outside the Chamber if it is not a point of order. I try to give people as much latitude as possible, but my patience is tried occasionally.

I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

## Executive Committee Business

### Health and Social Care Bill: First Stage

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I beg to introduce the Health and Social Care Bill, which is a Bill to dissolve the Regional Health and Social Care Board; to make provision for and in connection with the exercise by the Department of Health and Health and Social Care trusts of the functions of the Board; and for connected purposes.

*Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.*

**Mr Speaker:** That constitutes the Bill's First Stage. It shall now be printed.

Members, take your ease, please.

### Budget Bill: Consideration Stage

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As we approach Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill, can you confirm that a budget Bill is no different from any other Bill in that it is subject to amendment? Pursuant to Standing Order 38, a Bill can be amended, provided that the amendment is:

*"relevant to the provisions of the Bill and ... not ... in conflict with the principle of the Bill as agreed to at Second Stage."*

I therefore express disappointment that the amendments that I tabled to bring into the Budget Bill provision for some grants in respect of the Northern Ireland centenary, which, amazingly, is totally absent from the Bill, are not to be debated. Did they offend Standing Order 38?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member is straying well beyond what is supposed to be in a point of order. I remind the Member that it is not in order to challenge rulings of the Speaker, who, following appropriate advice from officials, determined that no amendments would be selected in this case.

I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

*Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]*

**Mr Speaker:** No amendments have been selected for debate. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the eight clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

*Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.*

*Long title agreed to.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members, take your ease for a moment.

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

## Committee Business

### Protection from Stalking Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

**Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):** I beg to move

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 10 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill [NIA Bill 14/17-22].*

1.15 pm

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

**Mr Givan:** The Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill began on 9 February 2021. The Bill contains 20 clauses and is divided into three parts. Its primary objective is to improve the operation of the justice system by creating a specific new offence of stalking that recognises the experience of victims and the behaviour associated with stalking. It also creates an offence of threatening and abusive behaviour that can be triggered by a single incident. Both of those offences have stronger and more appropriate penalties that will provide better protection than under the current harassment legislation and reflect the seriousness of the crimes. There is also important provision in the Bill for special measures for all victims of stalking when giving evidence, together with stalking protection orders. Critically, the onus will be on the police, rather than the victim, to apply for the orders, and they will enable the police to proactively intervene, disrupt stalking behaviours before they escalate and protect victims when there is immediate risk to them.

To assist its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee has issued a call for evidence through media notices in the main newspapers and the Assembly website and has written to a wide range of key stakeholders and organisations seeking views and comments. We expect significant interest. Despite the current COVID-19 restrictions impacting on Assembly business and the continued need to adhere to social distancing, the Committee intends to undertake detailed scrutiny of the Bill and will take oral evidence on the key issues brought to our

attention to ensure that the legislation is as robust and effective as possible and that any current legislative gaps are fully addressed. The Committee is particularly keen to hear from victims of stalking behaviour on their experiences and their views of the Bill. Stalking is a fixated, obsessive, unwanted and repeated behaviour that often escalates quickly and can be terrifying for victims. The effect of such crimes is clear, can have a profound and lasting impact on victims and cannot be minimised in any way. It is essential that victims have a voice in shaping the legislation.

On 25 February, the Committee discussed the timetable for the Bill and agreed to seek an extension to the Committee Stage until 10 December 2021. That time frame is necessary to provide the Committee with the time to undertake the scrutiny in relation to the Protection from Stalking Bill that I have just outlined and to provide maximum flexibility to complete the Committee Stages of the Bills that are already with the Justice Committee or that will be referred to it in the near future. This Bill and the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill are with the Committee at present. In addition, the Second Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill is scheduled for tomorrow and therefore could be with the Committee by Wednesday. According to the legislative timetable previously provided by the Department of Justice, the justice (miscellaneous provisions) Bill is also due to be introduced this month. That will be a large Bill covering a disparate range of policy areas to which, the Department has indicated, further provisions will be added by way of amendments during its passage through the Assembly. The Committee will therefore have four Bills to manage over coming months. Given the limited time until the end of the Assembly mandate, it will not be possible for the Committee to undertake work on each Bill sequentially. Work on the Bills will also have to be balanced with other work that the Committee is required to complete and issues that arise unexpectedly.

At Second Stage, I highlighted the pressing need for this legislation to provide the necessary tools for the criminal justice agencies to tackle stalking behaviour, take into account patterns of such behaviour over time and bring perpetrators to justice. I assure the House that the Committee will endeavour to finish the Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill earlier, if that is possible. However, the extension until 10 December provides us with the required maximum flexibility to manage the heavy legislative programme that we have to complete and to prioritise work on particular

Bills at certain times, if that is necessary. I commend the motion to the House.

**Ms Dillon:** I concur with the remarks made by the Committee Chair. We support the extension. It is prudent of the Committee to ask for the extension. There is no doubt that we will need it. This is an important Bill, with quite a number of clauses in it. If the domestic abuse Bill is anything to go by, the Committee will have some, hopefully, good and positive suggestions in relation to the Bill.

I would like to point out that we in the Committee will endeavour to complete the Committee Stage with as much urgency as we can. We want to see this important legislation in place. I am sure that the Chair, other Committee members and MLAS across the House are in the same position as me and have been lobbied in their constituency office because people are suffering as a result of stalking behaviour but we do not have the correct legislation to protect them. It is important that we get the Bill through its Committee Stage and through the House as quickly as possible. However, it has to be right. It is extremely important that we get the legislation that we put in place right. We must ensure that we have optimum opportunity for scrutiny and that stakeholders have the optimum opportunity to have their say and to come to the Committee in order to make sure that what we put in place is right for those who are at the centre of this: the victims. It is important not only that the legislation is right but that it is passed as speedily as is humanly possible.

**Ms S Bradley:** I also concur with and support the Chair and Deputy Chair's words on the matter. The SDLP supports the extension. Whilst we rightly have a stringent process for building up legislation, Members will know that the consultation with stakeholders begins almost prior to any suggestion of a Bill being introduced, and I know that that work is ongoing with different stakeholders and different Committee members. I agree that we need to bring the Bill to the table and get it to the stage where it is an Act as quickly as possible, but we must do that responsibly and in a way that, we know, will have absolute effect for those who are really struggling with the terrible act that is stalking, which is difficult to live with. The more I learn about it, the more disturbing it is to see how people try to function in their daily life with a stalker in their midst, with some of them maybe not even aware of it for some time.

I concur with the words spoken in the House today, and I put it on the record that I will work

with members to make swift work of the legislation.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak.

**Mr Givan:** I concur with the comments from Sinéad and Linda. The Committee will expedite its role as quickly and efficiently as possible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 10 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill [NIA Bill 14/17-22].*

## **Standing Order 112**

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures):** I beg to move

*Leave out Standing Order 112(8) and insert:*

*"(8) Except where paragraph 8A applies, a notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30 am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M's behalf.*

*(8A) This paragraph applies where M becomes aware, in the course of a sitting day, that he or she is required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance. Where this paragraph applies a notice under paragraph (3) may be given to the Speaker after 9:30am but such notice:*

*a. must be given as soon as possible and in any event a reasonable time before any vote on the item or items of business to which the notice applies; and*

*b. must state when M became aware that he or she was required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance."*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have five minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to move the motion, which proposes to amend Standing Order 112. Standing Order 112 is part of the current temporary measures in place to facilitate Assembly business during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It relates to the deadline for giving notice that a Member wishes to vote by proxy on a particular sitting day.

Currently, Standing Order 112(8) states:

*"Notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M's behalf."*

When the Committee agreed a range of new and temporary Standing Orders to facilitate the continuation of Assembly business in March 2020, one of the most important considerations in agreeing the temporary provisions on voting was the need to maintain social distancing in the Chamber and Lobbies. Standing Order 112, which introduces proxy voting arrangements, was designed with that consideration in mind, to stop a large number of Members passing through the confined space of one of the Lobbies during a Division.

At the end of last year, the Committee discussed the continuing pressures on plenary business, including the need and subsequent legal requirement to self-isolate in certain circumstances. During the discussions in Committee, concerns were raised that, under the current arrangements, a Member who is in attendance in Parliament Buildings who had chosen not to nominate a proxy to vote on their behalf and who then received a notification to self-isolate after 9.30 am would be compelled to leave the Building and be unable to vote on that day. Subsequently, the Committee agreed that no Member or party should be disadvantaged in that way. The Committee agreed that this set of circumstances, in which the current COVID-19-related health regulations compel a Member to self-isolate and to leave Parliament Buildings on a sitting day after the deadline, had not been envisaged or, indeed, was not a consideration when Standing Order 112(8) was drafted, agreed by the Committee and then introduced by the Assembly. With that in mind, the Committee agreed at its meeting on 16 December 2020 to consider an amendment to Standing Order 112(8), and it sought legal advice on the matter. At its meeting on 17 February, the Committee received legal advice on the draft amendment, and it was content that the amendment addressed the Committee's

concerns. Subsequently, it agreed a draft motion to amend Standing Orders.

The amendment provides that the deadline of 9.30 am to nominate a proxy no longer applies to a Member who becomes aware in the course of a sitting day that he or she is required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance. In those circumstances, a Member may give notice to nominate a proxy after 9.30 am. However, it is important to emphasise that such notice must still be given as soon as possible and, in any event, in reasonable time before any vote on the item or items of business for which the notice applies. It will also be necessary in those circumstances for Members to inform the Speaker when they become aware that they were required to self-isolate. Members should therefore be in no doubt that, if they have not given notice in reasonable time before a vote, it will not be possible for there to be a proxy vote on their behalf on the matter. The position is unavoidable as a period of time is required to carry out the necessary administration to enable a proxy vote.

For the purposes of clarity, the deadline that is being amended today applies to a Member who is nominating a proxy. Standing Orders do not set out a deadline for Members who hold proxy votes from nominating another Member to carry out those functions. However, if it is ever necessary to nominate another Member to carry out those functions, that will also need to happen in reasonable time before any vote. Should the Assembly agree to amend Standing Order 112(8), it is clear that renewed guidance may need to be issued with regard to the change. I have written to the Speaker to that effect in order to offer any further information on the Committee's deliberations on the matter, if it is required.

Finally, as I have said previously in the House, the Committee will carry out its role. It will continue to keep Standing Orders under review and make amendments when or if required. I commend the motion to the House.

**Ms S Bradley:** I put on record the SDLP's support for the motion in the hope that no Member has to use it and that we are facing brighter and more positive times. However, it is prudent to make the provision.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** To make a winding-up speech on that exhaustive debate, I call Mr Tom Buchanan.

**Mr T Buchanan:** As was outlined, the amendment has come to the House today after concerns were raised by the Committee with regard to Standing Order 112. I will not go over the technical aspects of the proposal as that has been covered in the Chair's introduction. However, I will summarise. The proposed amendment will allow a Member to nominate a proxy to vote on their behalf after the deadline of 9.30 am in the specific circumstances of self-isolation. That applies after 9.30 am, when they have been compelled to leave the Building. Where that happens, the Member will give notice as soon as possible and, in any event, a reasonable time before the vote on the item of business to which the notice applies. The Member must also state when they became aware that they were required to self-isolate.

### 1.30 pm

The temporary provisions exist to ensure that Assembly and Committee business can continue during the pandemic. They were agreed by the Assembly in March 2020, and that work was, necessarily, undertaken at pace. At that time, the Committee acknowledged that further amendments could be required to enhance the provisions as we take the pathway out of the pandemic. The proposal before the House is an example of the Committee's reviewing the temporary provisions, reacting to ongoing circumstances and offering proposals where necessary.

As the Chairperson explained, the Committee was concerned about cases arising in which Members who intended to be in the Building on a particular sitting day received notification to self-isolate after 9.30 am on that day. In such cases, the Member would be compelled to leave the Building but would not be able to nominate a proxy to vote on their behalf on that day. Today's amendment seeks to address that situation.

The other temporary provisions remain as introduced, in that there is no specific deadline in Standing Orders if a Member holding proxy votes needs to pass authority to another Member. Sinéad Bradley, the only other Committee member to speak in the debate, gave the full support of her party to the measure. She looked forward to brighter days as we move out of the pandemic, which is a sentiment that we all reiterate. We are all looking for brighter days as we come out of the pandemic.

I remind Members that today's proposed amendment is to the temporary provisions in Standing Orders. However, as mentioned

before in the House, the Committee continues to consider the instances in which proxy votes could be retained on a more permanent basis and how that might be reflected in Standing Orders. I commend the motion to the House.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*Leave out Standing Order 112(8) and insert:*

*"(8) Except where paragraph 8A applies, a notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30 am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M's behalf.*

*(8A) This paragraph applies where M becomes aware, in the course of a sitting day, that he or she is required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance. Where this paragraph applies a notice under paragraph (3) may be given to the Speaker after 9:30am but such notice:*

- a. must be given as soon as possible and in any event a reasonable time before any vote on the item or items of business to which the notice applies; and*
- b. must state when M became aware that he or she was required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance."*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members should take their ease for a few seconds to allow a change at the Table.

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

## **'Skills Strategy and Economic Output Micro Inquiry': Committee for the Economy Special Report**

**Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the Committee for the Economy's special report providing evidence from stakeholders to inform the forthcoming skills strategy; supports the development of a cross-departmental and inclusive approach to skills development; recognises the need for*

*collaboration between the public sector, employers, industry and all levels of education to ensure that our people have the right skills and access to lifelong learning; and calls on the Minister for the Economy and her Executive colleagues to use this evidence in planning for the new skills strategy.*

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

**Dr Archibald:** I am glad to speak as Chair of the Committee for the Economy and to move the motion.

The Committee undertook this mini-inquiry to seek views from a range of stakeholders on what the framework for the new skills strategy should cover, strategically and practically, and produced this special report highlighting a range of themes.

We met a range of 50 stakeholders including industry bodies, employers, recruitment specialists, universities and colleges, student reps, the third sector representing people with disabilities, older people and women, social enterprise, trade unions, qualification awarding bodies and Departments. That afforded us an excellent insight into what the framework for a new skills strategy should be to help to rebuild our economy on a local and global platform. I put on record my thanks to those who participated for their time and effort and to the Committee staff for their work in organising it and compiling the report.

The Department's new skills strategy will be a key driver for economic growth, particularly as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, and has the potential to make a vital contribution to the economic recovery and to enable us to build resilience into the economy. The strategy's design must support individuals, communities and industries to adapt to the demands of the global economy as well as to meet the changing needs of the local economy.

Recent research highlighted that over one third of adults here said that they had not taken part in learning since leaving full-time education, which is much higher than in England, Scotland or Wales. Stakeholders spoke passionately to us about building a culture of lifelong learning, where there are lifelong learning opportunities for all. That may or may not involve formal qualifications but would certainly benefit

workers in terms of confidence, resilience, setting personal goals and making a contribution not only to their employers but to their families and communities.

There is no doubt that that will require further investment and a range of delivery channels, including within the community, at universities and further education colleges, and to be driven by employers who can co-design that learning to improve profitability and employee well-being. We were urged to ensure that there is a focus on delivering a skills-for-all approach. To do that, the strategy must be inclusive and provide support mechanisms to help people of all abilities to have access to rewarding work, where they continually build their resilience and confidence, and to deliver great benefits for employers.

We should push forward a targeted plan to help families that face intergenerational low educational attainment and worklessness to build confidence. We need to give them the financial and emotional support required to get into the kind of work that is rewarding but also provides opportunities for training and advancement in their chosen field.

Our workforce need to be offered flexibility in how, with employers, they develop responsive and productive businesses. For a long time, people with disabilities, older people, women, carers and other disadvantaged groups have struggled to participate to their full potential in the labour market. Therefore, conditions need to be flexible, and we need sectoral agreement between government, employers and unions for the likes of childcare and the payment of benefits while learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted skills areas where there are gaps, particularly in digital skills and STEM qualifications. We need to turn our attention to providing an incentive to bridge the gaps by making sure that people know about the opportunities. That is where enhanced career services fit in, giving advice to people of all ages about what they could become involved in.

There are many citizens with excellent transferable skills who could easily move into new sectors and have lots to offer employers. We heard particularly about older people who, out of necessity, continue to work, and those who were made redundant in certain sectors heavily affected by the pandemic. Employers tell us that they are looking for particular soft skills, such as communication, creativity and problem-solving. They may be able to train people who have those skills to become

successful employees, making valuable contributions in a global market.

We want to see those people having the opportunity to reskill and upskill to achieve their potential. A vital ingredient will be ensuring government investment in helping, particularly SMEs, to establish learning and development programmes for staff to develop and upskill. We need greater investment in training to develop junior members of staff into middle managers and future leaders, and that will require access to courses in management, leadership and enterprise skills.

Many different issues are connected to closing the identified skills deficit and to ensuring that our people and communities are equipped with the skills and capabilities that will bring them satisfying, well-paid and worthwhile work, with support and pathways for continued professional and other development throughout their working life.

The Committee has heard calls from many stakeholders for the delivery of a skills strategy to address skills gaps, promote entrepreneurship, increase productivity and reduce unemployment. Industry has alerted us to a shortage of skills in STEM subjects, so we need to address that and promote them to potential employees, particularly women, who remain under-represented in many STEM subjects and careers. To establish what government can do better, stakeholders have asked us to ensure that the skills strategy, the upcoming 14-19 review and the 20-24 strategy are well connected and do not operate in silos. They must be part of a broader goal to encourage higher productivity for the economy, build confidence and resilience in communities and grasp the opportunity now to set a strategy that caters for people to learn from 17 to 70 years of age.

Our young people in particular need to be given a better understanding of the context of the working world with which they will engage. That could include providing a greater degree of knowledge about the sustainability of workplaces, careers and the wider community. When we look at the modern role of universities, it is important for them to provide civic leadership and to work with the wider public sector to ensure that higher learning is engaged with local communities and workplaces. Universities, schools and colleges can and should be hubs for co-design and co-creation of public policy alongside government at all levels, local communities and groups, as well as individuals.

There is a pressing need to look for ways in which to fund education that are sustainable and inclusive, and where attendance is determined by ability and not just the ability to pay. The universities here are well placed to take a bigger role in the development of our communities and in the creation of societal wealth, in addition to generating job opportunities.

When we look at how government delivery currently works between the public and private sectors, we can see that the pace needs to be quicker and more agile in order to limit the disconnect between the two. The Committee has recognised that the Minister for the Economy's recently published economic recovery action plan focuses on skills as one of its four key pillars. In keeping with that, our micro inquiry has also highlighted the fact that investment in skills will help businesses rebuild and grow their markets, protect and strengthen their supply chains and maximise new opportunities for job creation. It will also help people to avail themselves of new and better employment opportunities and accelerate the growth of sectors that are of strategic significance.

We must deliver on the policies that are needed to help stabilise the economy right now and to make it grow in future in a way that improves its responsiveness to the needs of our communities and businesses. The skills strategy is an important bedrock for achieving that outcome, and it must fit the needs of citizens now and in future.

I will now make some brief remarks as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. The new skills strategy has to find a way in which to bring together priorities, objectives and strands of delivery in a coherent way, remembering that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for delivering skills. For me, one of the key things from the inquiry report is the need for inclusivity and the skills-for-all approach. We need to remove barriers to learning and training and ensure that those who are far from education and work have pathways to achieving. It is really important that young people who face additional challenges have the type of support that they need. That goes beyond training and teaching, to mentoring and well-being support.

Where there are models of best practice, those should be mainstreamed and adapted. Community education has a really important role to play and needs to be supported appropriately. Removing barriers also means ensuring that the additional challenges that are faced by women are recognised and

addressed. As is highlighted in the report, it is very important that, to support sustainable economic development, people have the opportunity to access flexible, agile, motivating, satisfying and properly rewarded work. Strengthening workers' rights is the other pillar for helping to achieve that, and delivering on the commitments in New Decade, New Approach would be a good start in that regard.

It is widely recognised that, coming out of the pandemic, ensuring skills development opportunities will be very important in supporting those who have lost jobs to find new work opportunities, to help those who are in roles that have irreversibly changed because of the new ways of working adopted and to support new business development and work opportunities. There needs to be a particular focus on opportunities for young people, who are in the most badly affected demographic.

Sinn Féin wants every young person to have the opportunity to be in work, training or education.

1.45 pm

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

**Dr Archibald:** Skills underpin so much. The new skills strategy will be key in helping to drive the economic recovery. I look forward to its publication. I commend the motion to the House.

**Mr Stalford:** I want to associate myself with almost everything that the Committee Chairperson said. The report is a good piece of work. It highlights some of the serious issues that we will have to tackle. I welcome the fact that the motion recognises that the solutions to those problems cannot come from one Department alone but that what is required to get to grip with the economic situation that confronts us is a cross-governmental approach, embracing not only the Department for the Economy but Finance, Education and almost every facet of government and the Administration here.

At the start of the COVID crisis, we were told that we were facing the very real possibility of 15,000 deaths in Northern Ireland. Mercifully, that figure has not been realised. However, what we are facing is the very real possibility of up to 100,000 job losses as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee, rightly, highlighted the response to COVID-19 and the economic recovery that, we hope, will

follow as an area of work in the report. There is no getting around the fact that serious economic damage has been sustained by the Northern Ireland economy because of the strictures that we have all had to live under in order to beat COVID. It will require flexibility, imagination and innovation as we come out the other side of that in order to rebuild the economy.

I will share with the House just one figure that, I think, should give us a glimmer of hope. Even during the crisis, more than 1,000 new jobs have been created in tech. Northern Ireland is a leader in that area. We need to build and expand on that and approach new areas. One important issue is the need to improve the careers advice given to young people in schools, as the school that someone goes to almost determines the careers advice that they are given. That is wrong. For kids at grammar schools, there is an automatic assumption that they will pursue some sort of academic route. Actually, a culture has now been created where almost everyone is encouraged to pursue an academic route, the consequence of which is that we now have a massive deficit in trades and vocational occupations. That skills gap will need to be filled as we develop the economy.

The Chairperson referred to the economic recovery action plan, and it is my understanding that the Department for the Economy has bid for £290 million to finance the plan. With regard to my earlier comment about the need for a cross-governmental approach, it is my hope that the Department of Finance will approve that, although I have to put on record my disappointment — I am sure that the Minister will speak to this — that, over the course of the past 12 months, the Minister has been armed with less than one third of what she asked for from the centre. If we are serious about investing in and trying to rebuild the economy, it is important that the necessary resources be provided to the Department.

The Committee was right to labour the third theme in the report: the response to COVID-19. I will read a key point from the report:

*"Investment in education and upskilling is essential, and this must be as accessible to all as possible."*

I absolutely agree with that observation. The days of leaving school at 18, maybe going to university, starting a job and being in that job for ever are over for almost every occupation, short of the Civil Service. Therefore, it is important that we create an environment where our people are constantly arming themselves with

new skills, are exposed to new areas of training to allow them to have full and productive working lives —

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

**Mr Stalford:** — and indeed, as was said, to have satisfactory jobs and contribute to the economy.

I am happy to support the motion. I commend the Clerk of the Committee for his work in pulling this report together.

**Mr Stewart:** Like the Member who spoke previously, I agree, for the most part, with the Chair of the Committee. I pay tribute to Peter Hall and the entire team in the Committee for the Economy for pulling this report together. The report is very detailed and informative and will play a very important role in the forthcoming skills strategy. Key to the report are not only the questions it asked but the people of whom it asked them. The answers that came back from over 80 stakeholders, listed in appendix A, show the level of engagement that took place, and that was key to making it the report that it has become.

I agree with the previous Member who spoke on the careers aspect and changing the age-old opinions and assumptions about where people go. There has often been an assumption that your school and the courses that you chose dictated the path that you would take, whether that was university or vocational studies. We need to change those mindsets to try to adapt to the modern world that we are living in.

We eagerly await the consultation and the final publication of the skills strategy. Given the many years of underinvestment in skills and the impact of COVID-19, the strategy will never be more important, and it is needed as quickly as possible. I hope that the work that has been put into this micro inquiry will ease the passage and production of the consultation and final skills strategy and help it get out as quickly as possible.

The report says:

*"The Strategy's design must support individuals, communities and industries to adapt to the demands of the global economy, as well as meet the changing needs of the local economy."*

The key to that is to ensure that the strategy is a live document that adapts over time, with

collaboration and cooperation from all Departments as well as local government. The skills strategy must be given time and be supported in successive mandates. Too often in the past, we have seen bright ideas come along in key strategies and publications that, two years later, are on a shelf gathering dust. Everything that we do, whether economic recovery, skills or the reform of our health service, will take years or, potentially, decades. We need to formulate policy and stick to it. Yes, we can adapt policy while working it through, but sticking to the policy is key. I will be really annoyed and upset, and it will be regrettable if, in the next mandate, we are looking at a new skills strategy because the previous one did not work. The strategy needs to be live and needs to be able to be adapted, and there are enough recommendations to do that. I know that the Minister wants to see that as well.

The report also, rightly, mentions the need for inclusive learning for people with disabilities and mental health problems. I welcome the report's call for an inclusive skills-for-all strategy. We will all acknowledge that our social enterprise sector has done amazing work to give disadvantaged people employment and training opportunities. It is essential that, within the skills strategy, we engage with the sector and avail ourselves of its skills and knowledge to develop a skills-for-all strategy.

As has been said, the economic impact of COVID-19 has not yet been fully realised. Regrettably, there will be job losses and an even greater need for retraining and new skills opportunities. I want to see a bespoke version of the UK Government's Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which is a scheme designed to help adults gain in-demand skills and open up job opportunities. We could adapt that scheme to make it Northern Ireland-specific.

Another key scheme worth mentioning is the Department for Communities Job Start scheme. I have mentioned the Job Start scheme before and how important it is to keep that scheme going. The Job Start scheme was designed to provide internship places for people coming out of education with businesses that did not have the means to provide paid internship places. Regrettably, despite many months of delays to make it Northern Ireland-specific, the scheme has been put on ice, even though it only cost £16 million. I have been contacted by many young people who want to avail themselves of the skills and on-the-job learning that the Job Start scheme would have provided. Worse still, they are talking about going to GB or further afield to avail themselves of schemes that will be supported. We often talk about the brain

drain and the impact of losing the young people whom we most need to keep. That scheme was designed purely to keep them here, and it is very important to get it back off the ground and to make that public plea. Minister, you could speak to the Minister for Communities to stress how important the cross-community nature of that scheme is.

Finally, in my last 15 seconds, I will talk about the need for our SMEs to be supported in the strategy. Too often, support measures go to big business in particular and miss out the 90% of our economy that should be focused on.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Members, Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm. Therefore, I suggest that the House takes it ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak is Stewart Dickson.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

#### Minority Ethnic Development Fund: Applications

1. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the level of applications for support from the minority ethnic development fund. (AQO 1686/17-22)

**Mrs Foster (The First Minister):** The minority ethnic development fund (MEDF) is a key element of our policy for racial equality and good race relations. It remains the flagship funding stream to support voluntary and community organisations to address the needs of people from minority ethnic backgrounds. During its existence, it has supported hundreds of groups and project.

In line with recommendations from a recent review of the fund, the 2021-22 application process opened earlier than normal on 18 December 2020 and closed on 25 January. The Department received 58 applications, of which 32 were successful, and all applicants were informed of the outcome on 2 March 2021.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. As we heard, the minority ethnic development fund is supporting crucial work. Does the First Minister agree that that work is undermined when political representatives, such as her party colleague Gregory Campbell, make unrepentant and unapologetic racist remarks?

**Mrs Foster:** As I understand it, Gregory had a very good meeting with the North West Migrants Forum. Of course, that conversation will continue. That is absolutely positive and it was the right thing to happen.

**Mr McGrath:** I welcome the new timescales that the First Minister announced. In preparation for next year, could they be brought forward a little more? Groups are concerned that, if they find out about their funding only on 2 March and people's contracts are up by 1 April, it gives them only a couple of weeks to prepare for what needs to happen in the future. Is there any way of bringing that cycle of

applications forward, even by a month or two, to give groups the opportunity to prepare?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Chairman of the Committee for his question. One of the issues that has been raised with us is the need for longer-term funding, which is probably what the Member is referring to as well. It is our desire to enter into multi-year budgets for those groups rather than their having to apply every year. We know about the pressure that spending so much time getting ready for applications and, because it is a competitive fund, having the uncertainty of knowing whether or not they will be funded, puts on organisations. We are working with annual budgets, and I hope that we can move to multi-year budgets in the new mandate next year. Officials are working out the details of how we can achieve that, but we certainly intend to move to those budgets in the next mandate.

**Ms Armstrong:** From the figures that the First Minister gave, it appears that 45% of those who applied were not successful. Are you considering taking forward some sort of capacity-building programme for the sector, given that so many have been turned down for funding at this stage? What other support will be provided for the BAME community?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her question. Unfortunately, like most funding streams, the MEDF is very much oversubscribed. She is right to point that out. To ensure that we fund the projects that best support what is going on in the community, there is an application process, and proposals are addressed by a selection panel convened by the Executive Office. The panel comprises five members, including Executive Office officials who have knowledge of the minority ethnic sector and the issues affecting minority ethnic people and have experience in administering grants. As I said, it is a competitive process. Anyone who has not been successful in the process should look for feedback. We made feedback available because some people were disappointed when they were not successful, and we hope that that will help with their applications at another time.

The Member will be well aware of a number of ongoing programmes in TEO and across Government in relation to hate crime: the Peace IV building positive relations programme; our own central good relations fund; and, of course, our councils are also providing funding. We have been doing a lot of work through our shared future fund. As the Member may be aware, that fund is not in the draft Budget, but

we are fighting very hard to get it into the final Budget because we believe that there is a lot of work to be done. As I said, groups that were not successful on this occasion should certainly seek feedback. That may give them the knowledge to apply in a more positive way in the next round.

**Mr Speaker:** I advise Members that questions 4 and 9 have been withdrawn

## **Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Dedicated Mechanism**

2. **Mr Blair** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the initial work of the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission regarding the dedicated mechanism. (AQO 1687/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** The Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission are working jointly to discharge their functions as the dedicated mechanism. As TEO sponsors the Equality Commission, I can provide some general information about the steps that it has taken to recruit staff to its dedicated mechanism unit. A director and a number of permanent staff have been appointed, and work is under way to fill the remaining vacancies. Both commissions have engaged with a range of stakeholders to raise awareness of the role and remit of the dedicated mechanism and article 2 commitments. This has included engagement with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), TEO, the Independent Monitoring Authority and the Executive Office Assembly Committee.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. Further to that, will the First Minister clarify whether the joint commission has or will be given the access required to departmental information to determine the current and possible future challenges and issues that may arise across Departments because of EU exit?

**Mrs Foster:** As I said, we sponsor the Equality Commission. The NIO looks after the Human Rights Commission, so it is in charge of the governance in and around that. The protocol, including the dedicated mechanism, is the commitment of the UK Government. Consequently, they are responsible for looking after the funding of the commission. I imagine that there will be no difficulties with either commission, given that they are independent organisations engaging right across government, getting any information needed to deal with the matters that the Member raised.

**Mr Stalford:** Article 2 of the protocol reflects the commitment made to uphold the Belfast Agreement. Given that the agreement's principle of consent is being turned on its head, is the First Minister aware of any indication that the Human Rights Commission or the Equality Commission is considering the impact upon the human rights of members of the pro-Union community in Northern Ireland?

**Mrs Foster:** The Member is correct that article 2 of the protocol says:

*"The United Kingdom shall continue to facilitate the related work of the institutions and bodies set up pursuant to the 1998 Agreement, including the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland".*

It will be very interesting to see whether either commission has been looking at the diminution of rights under the implementation of the protocol and, in particular, the change in the principle of consent. In December, under a statutory instrument, that change was effected by the Secretary of State in the House of Commons: he changed the consent from cross-community to a simple majority. I will await with interest to find out whether either organisation has any comment on those matters.

**Ms Sheerin:** Will the First Minister provide an update on the funding for the dedicated mechanism and outline the financial position for 2020-21?

**Mrs Foster:** The Equality Commission has agreed funding with the UK Government to discharge the new role of the dedicated mechanism. The initial funding agreement is for three years, running until 2022-23. The Northern Ireland Office has advised that, in common with all UK Government and Northern Ireland Departments and arm's-length bodies, future funding for the dedicated mechanism beyond 2023 will be subject to the normal spending review processes. Funding has been agreed between the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Office totalling £1,898,000 for three years until March 2023.

**Mr Stewart:** Does the First Minister agree that equality of opportunity for goods and services has been undermined as a direct outworking of the Northern Ireland protocol?

**Mrs Foster:** I absolutely agree with that. We are in a situation where consumer choice is being threatened in the operation of the protocol. We were told at a meeting of the

business engagement forum on Friday that, were it not for the actions taken by our Government, supply lines would have been severely curtailed, because people would have been taking action to get ready for the end of the grace period. There are severe difficulties in relation to the operation of the protocol and, as the Member says, to equality of opportunity.

**Mr Allister:** Given that, under the protocol, huge swathes of the law, as it effects our economy, will now be made by a foreign power, with obvious detriment to local political and equality rights, would the First Minister expect those who go by the name of the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission to show an interest in and to report on such matters?

**Mrs Foster:** As I indicated to my friend the Member for South Belfast, I would have thought that both commissions would be interested in that, given that article 2 is there, supposedly, to protect the Belfast Agreement. The operation of the protocol and the way in which the architecture has been set up has changed the Belfast Agreement. Therefore, there should be a real and meaningful look at the protocol and its operation by the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

### Urban Villages: Update

3. **Ms Mullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Urban Villages capital programme. (AQO 1688/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Middleton will answer this question.

**Mr Middleton (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** I thank the Member for her question. Completed capital projects totalling an investment of £915,000 in the Bogside, Fountain and Bishop Street Urban Village include Destined Learning Disability Centre, Fountain Play Park, and Abercorn Road Revitalisation environmental improvement scheme. The refurbishment of Cathedral Youth Club is nearing completion. The planning application has been approved for the New Gate Arts and Culture Centre, and the project will involve the redevelopment of the existing centre with the addition of a new performance space. Design work has commenced for a new build extension to the Gasyard Heritage and Exhibition Centre, and the business case for the Meenan Square development project is with the Department of Finance. Work is ongoing to

acquire the site subject to business case approval.

**Ms Mullan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome the progress, in particular, at Meenan Square, as will the residents of Dove Gardens and Abbots Walk who have had to endure that eyesight for far too many years. It is important that we continue to invest in our communities and neighbourhoods alongside the bigger strategic projects in city deal. Minister, I notice that the public realm project is in the early development stage. That will put the finishing touches to the projects. Can you give a timescale for when that project is likely to go ahead?

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for her question and her comments. I completely agree that this is very much of good benefit to the area. I welcome the support of the elected representatives on the ground who are working with Urban Villages.

I do not have a timescale to hand for the public realm work. I know that the Member has been proactive in lobbying for that work, and it is something that we very much want to see, alongside the investment in the derelict buildings and the wider area. I am happy to write to the Member with a timescale for the public realm work.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Can the Minister outline the background to the Urban Villages programme?

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for that question. The Urban Villages initiative is a headline action of the Executive's Together: Building a United Community strategy.

It is a good relations programme led by the Executive Office and spans four areas in Belfast and one in Londonderry. Each of the areas has a history of deprivation and social tension. The combined population of the areas is in excess of 100,000 people. A capital programme estimated at £47 million has been approved, subject to funding, up until March 2023. That is to support development of up to 76 capital projects across the five Urban Village areas.

## 2.15 pm

The investment by the Urban Villages initiative builds and transforms community facilities and spaces into catalysts and beacons for shared space and good relations. They are designed to equip and empower communities to increase, enhance and sustain the extent and nature of

connections and relationships between people in each space. They are physical anchors providing a long-term legacy and enabling a people- and place-based infrastructure to realise the ambition of the Urban Villages initiative as a long-term driver of good relations.

The categorisation of the capital projects reflects the amount of financial investment in each but also, crucially, the planned impact on the lives of people living in the Urban Village areas and the contribution to promoting good relations. Three broad project categories have been developed to support the capital planning model: transformational projects, which, generally, are £2 million or above and will have a major impact on the Urban Village areas; landmark projects, which are estimated at between £500,000 and £2 million; and local projects, which will have a single-use focus or mainly localised impact.

I thank the Member for the question. It is a good-news project for all those areas, and we look forward to seeing the roll-out over the coming months.

**Mr Durkan:** I very much welcome the junior Minister's update on all the schemes. I, like Ms Mullan, have a particular interest in the Meenan Square scheme, and I commend the officials who have been working diligently on it and worked hard to seal the deal with landowners, albeit for a price lower than that originally agreed on. This will be much more than a simple physical regeneration scheme. Will the Minister outline any of the detail of what the scheme will consist of and how it will be sustained going forward?

**Mr Middleton:** I share the Member's comments about officials. They have done a tremendous job in getting the project to this stage. I reiterate that the support of political members is important for all the projects in those areas.

The Urban Villages initiative transformation project in Londonderry is the Meenan Square project. It will have a truly transformational impact on the space and for the people of the area. The Urban Villages initiative has developed a business case for that major mixed-use regeneration project, which aims to reinvent the site as a shared space for fostering positive community identities and building good relations, while harnessing the wider economic and social benefits, thus reclaiming and repurposing what was a dilapidated site and, for far too long, a catalyst for antisocial behaviour.

The business case has been submitted to the Department of Finance for consideration. Work

is ongoing to secure the purchase of the site, subject to business case approval. Owing to the site's history of antisocial behaviour, it is important that fencing be installed immediately to mitigate the risk. In preparation for that, Apex submitted a planning application on 7 October 2020, which will allow for fencing to be erected to secure the site immediately on purchase. I hope and expect that the Urban Villages officials will keep all political representatives up to date in the coming weeks, but I agree with the Member that the project is very much a priority for the Urban Villages initiative.

## **Victims' Payment Scheme: Update**

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1690/17-22)

6. **Mr Stalford** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the current discussions with Her Majesty's Government on the funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1691/17-22)

10. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1695/17-22)

13. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what further discussion they have had with the British Government to secure funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1698/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5, 6, 10 and 13 together.

Let me first say that the deputy First minister and I remain entirely committed to delivering the scheme, which aims to go some way to acknowledging the suffering and trauma of victims and survivors who are living with significant disabilities. The recent court ruling has made it clear that there is a legal duty for victims' payments to be made, and it is important that we emphasise that to victims and survivors and the organisations that represent them. However, the important issue of the funding pressure on the block grant arising from the scheme remains to be resolved. It remains our view that the scheme should be funded by the Westminster Government as an addition to the block grant. The deputy First Minister and I, along with the Justice Minister and the Finance Minister, met the Secretary of State on 23

February to discuss funding to the block. Discussions focused on a flexible approach to finding an accommodation on funding issues. We committed to work together to achieve a positive resolution as quickly as possible for victims, in line with the recent Court of Appeal judgement. It was agreed that further work would be taken forward by officials and that we would meet again in the near future.

The Executive have committed significant funding this year to establish the administrative arrangements for the scheme. Progress to date includes the ongoing development of an online system to receive applications; the appointment of an interim victims' payments board; the appointment by the Department of Justice of an assessment service provider; and accommodation secured for staff who will deliver the scheme. The Lord Chief Justice also recently announced Mr Justice McAlinden as president of the victims' payments board. The draft Budget for 2021-22 provides £6.7 million for administrative costs. In particular, that will allow victims' organisations to recruit additional staff to support applicants to the scheme.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the First Minister for her response. I am sure that she will agree that it is appalling that victims have had to go for legal redress. What is the next step? Will we force victims back into court to get a political fix? I do not know whether the First Minister can give us an insight into how the figure of £800 million has been arrived at as a potential cost. Many people are surprised at that amount.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her question. I absolutely agree with her that it is appalling that this ended up in court. However, I put it on the record that the victims and survivors who will be recipients of the payment should not be distressed or concerned, because the payment is an entitlement, regardless of whether it comes from Westminster or from our block grant, and it will be paid when it is due. I also reflect on the words of Alan McBride recently, when he said that people should not be made to feel guilty about applying for the payment: absolutely not — far from it. These people are entitled to the money, and discussions on the funding source will not prevent us paying out money that is due to victims and survivors.

Work is ongoing on the figures that have been spoken about. Government actuaries from Westminster have been working with our officials on the range of expenditure that can be predicted. However, it is demand-led, so it is very difficult to assess, particularly in relation to psychological permanent disablement, how

many people will come forward. Therein lies a difficulty. We will have to find a way through that and find certainty. I reiterate: recipients of the payments who are due the payment should not be distressed or concerned. They will be paid.

**Mr Stalford:** Does my Rt Hon friend agree that those who devised the scheme should be reasonably expected to finance it and the continued foot-dragging of the Secretary of State on the issue does a gross disservice to many victims?

**Mrs Foster:** It is important that we recognise that the scheme was set up in Westminster and that normal policy is that the place that designs a scheme is responsible for funding it. We recognise that the Assembly was not sitting at the time and that is why the Government took action. However, the way forward is collaboration between us and the Northern Ireland Office to find a way through all of this. That is important, so that we end the uncertainty that has been going on for far too long. We all acknowledge that. We need to work with victims' groups and directly with victims, so that they can get due recompense for their suffering.

**Mr Butler:** The costs of the Troubles-related permanent disablement payment have rocketed, as has been said. Will the Minister outline the assumptions that her office made to lead the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) to put an upper figure of £1.2 billion on the lifetime costs of the scheme?

**Mrs Foster:** As I have indicated, initially, work was carried out by our officials and the Government Actuary's Department in Whitehall has been involved with us to establish the scheme. I am not making any apology for this: the scheme is a good and wide-ranging scheme, and, because of that, there are huge costs. We need to find a way to cover those costs. The permanent disability is 14%. That is not the highest range in the scheme, so quite a few people who meet that 14% will come forward. Therefore, we need to assess how we can cover all of those payments. Of course, the early payments will be higher, because those who are over 60 can take a lump sum and may decide to take that instead of an annual payment. That being the case, more money will be needed at the start of the scheme. We will continue to work with the Government Actuary's Department. It is technical work, and there are a lot of unknowns, but we will try to get an estimate with which we can move forward.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the First Minister for her answers. There are bereaved families across Northern Ireland who have an empty chair that will never be filled. What communication has the First Minister had with them or groups that represent them since the recent court case? What has been the First Minister's most recent correspondence with them?

**Mrs Foster:** The office is, as am I in particular, very aware of the issues affecting bereaved victims and survivors. We are keen to address as many of their needs as possible and to acknowledge their ongoing loss, which, of course, is still keenly felt. Currently, the victims' fund provides self-directed assistance payments and health and well-being support to bereaved individuals who had registered with it before 31 March. Our officials have been working with the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the Victims and Survivors Service to consider options to meet the needs of bereaved victims and survivors, and we have agreed that we will allow a scheme to open shortly, with payments made from April 2021 for people who were not captured before 31 March 2017. I very much welcome that. I acknowledge the work of the South East Fermanagh Foundation in particular. It has been lobbying for a long time to have the scheme reopened, and I am pleased that we have been able to reopen it so that we can take forward the needs of the bereaved.

**Ms Dillon:** I welcome the announcement that the scheme for the bereaved will be reopened.

The policy that has been developed around the permanent disablement scheme was developed in Westminster, and, according to their statement of funding policy, they have to fund it. I think that we are agreed on that across the House. I want to establish that we are agreed across the House that the British Government have a responsibility to fund the scheme and to fund our block grant so that we can meet the payments of the scheme, particularly given the comments that have been made around the fact that we can no longer afford to allow the victims to wait and to have the constant fear that the scheme will fall at the last hurdle and they will end up back in the courts. We do not want to see that.

**Mrs Foster:** The Member is right: the policy funding statement says that funding will come from where the scheme was developed. The Government argue that they developed the scheme only because there was no Administration here at that time. That is why

there is discussion going on in relation to those matters. There is a need for us to collaborate on finding a way forward that is acceptable to all of us. I hope that the Northern Ireland Office and the Finance Minister here and, for that matter, the Justice Minister will work with the deputy First Minister and me to find a solution to what is a big funding gap. It is vital that we deal with those matters together.

**Mr Allister:** The Court of Appeal was emphatic that the legal duty was on the Executive Office to fund the scheme. On Friday, in the court, according to press reports, counsel representing the First Minister and deputy First Minister said:

*"The position has always been that the Executive Office will fund the scheme when it has the money. It doesn't have the money".*

Will the First Minister reconcile that conditional statement with the assurance today that no one will go short and the money will be paid once it is due?

## 2.30 pm

**Mrs Foster:** To be fair to the Executive Office, we are acting under a court judgement at present, so we will have to pay the money out. The Court of Appeal has been very clear about the issue. As the Member is probably aware, it has now joined the Department of Finance to the proceedings, and I think that that is a helpful move, because TEO does not have money in and of itself and the Department of Finance does. It is important that I send out the very clear message today that, when the applications come in and when the money is due to victims, they will get their money.

**Mr Speaker:** That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Claire Sugden's question has been withdrawn.

## Mother-and-baby Homes: Expert Panel

T2. **Ms S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after wishing the First Minister a happy International Women's Day and stating that she seeks to support those women who are victims and survivors of the notorious mother-and-baby homes, what assurances the First Minister can give that the inquiry into those homes will have sufficient powers to gather all the information required to

seek absolute truth and justice, given that while she welcomes the establishment of the expert panel to work with victims to set the terms of reference for an independent investigation, she notes and is disappointed that it will not be a full public inquiry. (AQT 1072/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her question, and happy International Women's Day to her too. The group that has been set up is not the final destination. It is working with the victims under the leadership of Judith Gillespie on trying to co-design what will be the final outcome of whether there is a public inquiry or another sort of inquiry. The names that we have been able to secure for that expert panel are of very heavyweight people, and I think that that will give a lot of confidence to the victims of this terrible time in our history. I very much hope that they can work collaboratively to come back then to find out what sort of inquiry it is that they want us to take forward.

**Ms S Bradley:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. Given that the Irish Government have already realised that there is a requirement for legislative change to the issue and without wanting to pre-empt any outcome of the panel that you referred to, has the Executive Office carried out an initial scoping exercise to establish whether there will be any legislative requirements? I see that the Irish Government are looking at legislation on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and at a law that is focused on providing dignified burials. Has any consideration been given to that?

**Mrs Foster:** The Member will know that we are at a slightly different point in our process than the Republic of Ireland is in its. It had a commission of inquiry for quite some time, and the report of that came out in January. It has now decided that a number of steps need to be taken. I cannot prejudge what the inquiry will look like and what its outcomes will be, but I assume — maybe it is wrong of me to assume this — that there will be very similar outcomes to parts of what you are seeing now in the Republic of Ireland on memorialisation, apologies, recompense and all the things that are going on there. As I said, this has been set up in a way that means that we get the largest amount of buy-in from the victims, who, frankly, lost their voice in the past. We want them to have a voice in the process, and that is why co-design and co-production are so important to us in it.

## Students: COVID-19 Restrictions

T3. **Ms Bailey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister will outline the specific, detailed and unambiguous COVID-19 regulations that will apply to students while they are residing at a term-time address, bubbling and travelling in the lead up to St Patrick's Day and the Easter period. (AQT 1073/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** Obviously, that is a matter more for the Minister for the Economy, who looks after students' rights and everything that is connected with that. It is very important that everybody abide by the public health regulations at the moment. We saw yesterday in parts of Belfast people who were rightly jubilant about Rangers's success in the Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL), and I send the club my absolute good wishes. It is wonderful to see Steven Gerrard and our own Steven Davis at the top of the SPFL.

However, as Ally McCoist rightly said, we have to abide by the public health regulations. They are there for a reason: to protect our communities. I make the same plea in relation to students coming up to St Patrick's Day. Given that a lot of students are studying remotely from home at present, I hope that there will not be the same crowds in and around Belfast, but we will be sending out very specific messages next week before St Patrick's Day.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I asked a question about the PSNI response in the Holylands area last week, where £11,000 of COVID fines were handed out. There is a hamster wheel that goes on every year; I was dealing with that issue long before I was elected. The problems in the Holylands extend beyond the COVID pandemic. I am aware that the Executive set up a task force to deal with that back in August or September, when we saw the influx of freshers. Will the Minister give us an update on what has taken place with the Executive's Holylands task force?

**Mrs Foster:** That is a subgroup of our overall task force. The Health Minister has been engaging with it because he has concerns coming up to St Patrick's Day. I am more than happy to write to the Member to give her an update on the work, which is ongoing. As I said, we will be communicating generally about St Patrick's Day and Easter in the coming days.

### **Irish Language Week**

T4. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that, hopefully, the First Minister will be aware that this is Irish

Language Week, whether she will join him in acknowledging and welcoming the annual event and will she congratulate the Irish language movement in its ongoing work to promote its cause. (AQT 1074/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member. This is a very busy week, with International Women's Day, Commonwealth Day and Irish Language Week; it has become a very congested part of the year. I absolutely acknowledge the work that goes on to promote the Irish language across Northern Ireland and the work of those from the Ulster-Scots community who wish to promote the Ulster-Scots language and identity. Of course, if they desire to have a week to celebrate the Irish language, I wish them well for their week of celebration.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the First Minister for that. It was well said. It is a two-week period; it is not even one week any more. Will she confirm the promise that was made by her and her colleague at the Executive Office Committee recently that Irish language legislation will be introduced that will enable the appointment of an Irish language commissioner in time for it to be completed and enacted before the end of the mandate?

**Mrs Foster:** As the Member will know, that is part of a package of identity and cultural pieces that we will bring forward, as we said, under the NDNA agreement. It is our intention that that will come forward so that it will be completed by the end of this mandate. I am almost tempted to now say, "Sin é", but maybe not.

**Mr Speaker:** Agus sin é fosta.

### **Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland**

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after wishing the First Minister, in his role as chair of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association at Stormont, a happy Commonwealth Day, whether she will update the House on what action she is taking to rid Northern Ireland of the obnoxious Northern Ireland protocol. (AQT 1075/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** A happy Commonwealth Day to the Member as well. As I said, it is a busy day today. It is good to see the Commonwealth flag flying over Stormont Parliament Buildings today.

As the Member will know, the protocol is causing untold damage to east-west relations in

Northern Ireland for trade and the identity of those of us who are unionist. There is a need not only to tinker at the edges of the protocol but to have it replaced. That is, obviously, not the position of TEO; that is my position. There is a need to deal with that urgently because damage is being done to the economy here in Northern Ireland. Therefore, under its own terms, a recalibration is needed.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. I, too, join her in congratulating Steven Davis and the Rangers football team on securing the fastest-ever Scottish Premiership title.

Only a few days ago, First Minister, I was contacted by a scout leader in my constituency who had been working with the Woodland Trust on planting trees. That work has had to be put on hold because they have not been able to bring the trees in from the mainland. The synagogue is in my constituency. The Jewish community has been unable to get kosher meat. As we reach Passover, this problem has become particularly acute. Is Her Majesty's Government aware of the scale and depth of the problems that the protocol is causing to people in Northern Ireland and that it is not some sort of hiccup or teething problem, as the Prime Minister might suggest?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for those very real and tangible examples of the impact of the protocol. I note his remarks about the Jewish community. I have to say that that is very concerning. We have a very small Jewish community in Northern Ireland, and the fact that it cannot access kosher meat causes me a great deal of concern.

I attended the Secretary of State's business engagement forum last Friday. I have to say that the business community there universally welcomed the fact that the Secretary of State had put this variation in place, albeit for only another number of months. The business community said that the variation had to happen at the beginning of March because, had it not, some product lines would have ceased within the next week or so. Businesses raised concerns about cost, delay, technical difficulties and the diversion of trade. I listen to Members in the House speak about what business wants. I listened very clearly to what businesses want. They do not want the continuation of what we have seen in the protocol. I have also listened to people say that the action taken by Her Majesty's Government in respect of the protocol was illegal. The United Kingdom Attorney

General will say otherwise, and, frankly, that is good enough for me.

## **Paramilitarism: Executive's Message**

T6. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in order to touch on another aspect of the First Minister's campaign against the protocol, and given that she will be aware that the Executive are actively engaged in attempts to eradicate paramilitarism through their paramilitary task force and associated campaigns, whether the First Minister thinks that the fact that she met with representatives of the gangs that are actively involved in criminality, drug-dealing and murder undermines the message from the Executive. (AQT 1076/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** No, not at all, because the members whom we met are committed to peaceful and democratic means. I find it astounding to hear criticism from Sinn Féin when the army council is still in existence. That is not my assessment but the assessment of the Chief Constable of the PSNI. It is very hard to take criticism from sources who should know better. We want to encourage everybody to engage in peaceful and constitutional politics. We want people, if they have a concern, to be able to raise that concern and not feel alienated or as though nobody is listening to them. That is the important point about the engagement with the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC). It really is astounding to hear members of Sinn Féin come out and criticise this party, which has always condemned violence from any source, for meeting the LCC — quite incredible.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The First Minister will be aware that this is not the first occasion on which political unionism has sought common cause with armed loyalist groups. The point that I am making is that these groups are actively involved in crime today, largely against the communities that the DUP represents and unionism represents. When you sat down with them, you did not seek that they go away; you sat down seeking common cause in your opposition to the protocol. Do you not believe that that was a mistake?

**Mrs Foster:** I am very interested to know how the Member knows what I said to the LCC. Was he there? No, he was not there. I have always been very clear with members of paramilitary organisations, wherever they come from, that they should cease and desist from their criminality. I have always done that, and I always will. They need to move away from that. That is what our Communities in Transition

programme, which sits in TEO, is all about, is it not? Is the Member suggesting that we move away from Communities in Transition, which, by the way, is doing very good work in communities right across republican areas and loyalist areas? Let us have less of the cant and hypocrisy in the House; let us have some realism.

2.45 pm

## Omagh Bomb: Justice Delay

T7. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister will give her assessment of the appalling delay in the process of justice for the victims of the Omagh bomb, given that she will be aware that 19 August 1998 is a date that is, no doubt, etched on all our memories, when at 3.10 that afternoon, 29 innocent people and two unborn children lost their life following a car bomb in Omagh, something that has been described as the single worst atrocity of the murderous campaign in Northern Ireland, and, since then, the victims' families have been seeking justice and although, in 2013, they issued judicial proceedings that concluded six years later in 2019, to date, a verdict has not been forthcoming from the Lord Chief Justice. (AQT 1077/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** I want to thank the Member for recently facilitating a meeting with some of the Omagh victims where, again, I was struck by their determination and desire to seek justice for their families and loved ones. He is right: we all remember the really dreadful day when that horrific bombing took place. The delay is quite incredible. I think that they said that four judges have been involved in the judicial review. The final hearing was in July 2019, and yet there is still no judgement on the matter. There needs to be closure brought to that judicial review so that the families can move on in their campaign to find justice.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up; apologies. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

## Communities

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 4 and 13 have been withdrawn.

## HMO Legislation: Update

1. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the

implementation of current houses in multiple occupation legislation. (AQO 1701/17-22)

### **Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):**

The Houses in Multiple Occupation Act 2016 came into operation in April 2019. My Department commenced a review of the implementation of the HMO licensing scheme in 2020. The operation of licensing for HMOs is led by Belfast City Council on behalf of all councils. My Department provides support and assistance to councils in the development of the licensing scheme and has provided detailed guidance for local government in the exercise of its regulatory functions. We have also provided a statutory code of practice for landlords to manage their properties to the required standards. I propose that the review will look at the impact of the regulatory scheme on councils in terms of resources, guidance and legislation, with a view to identifying any changes necessary to ensure that the legislation achieves its policy intent.

We have directly sought views from councils and landlords. The Department does not have information on tenants who are living in HMO properties and therefore sought the views of those tenants through tenant advocacy groups. The online survey on the nidirect website has been open since December 2020 for tenants or anyone with an interest in the regulation of HMOs to provide their views on the implementation of the licensing scheme. The Department will analyse the responses to the survey and take forward work on any changes required to ensure that the scheme functions as intended.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, Minister. Happy International Women's Day. Obviously, we both represent the Holylands area of South Belfast, and you will know that the ongoing problems there are escalating as we get closer to St Patrick's Day.

First, to determine how their lives are impacted on, are you going to try to meet the residents of the Holylands, be it over Zoom or through some socially distanced meeting, to hear at first hand a more qualitative response from them to the consultation that closed on Friday? Will you also join me in calling for people to stay away from the Holylands on St Patrick's Day?

**Ms Hargey:** I thank the Member for her question. It is timely, given the week that we are approaching. As I have said, the primary objective of the consultation was to look at how the scheme is functioning primarily in the Belfast City Council area and how that then

impacts across all 11 council areas. The review is therefore very much about looking at the resource, the guidance and the legislation. As I have said, it will also engage with residents and those who come forward, which will, I assume, include the Holylands residents.

As a local representative for the area and having served on Belfast City Council, I am acutely aware of the issues that have been going on. I know that the previous MLA for the area, who is now the Speaker, did a report on this some 10 years ago. We have also had the Buchanan report and the one from Louise Brown Associates. A group was also set up on Belfast City Council to look at the issue. I want to continue to engage with residents who live there, students, representatives, landlords and the statutory agencies to find a longer-term solution. We recognise that the HMO legislation by itself will not deal with the issue, because the area is already over the threshold that would be set if we were to take a fresh look at HMOs today.

We therefore need to look at what we can do to rebalance that community to meet the needs of all those who reside in it. I echo the call — indeed, I have done so — to tell people that we are still in the midst of a public health pandemic. I know that the Health Minister has also spoken about this. People need to adhere to the guidance and the regulations. I ask any people who think that they want to go to the Holylands next week not to do so. I ask them to use their common sense and ensure that they stay away, not just for the peace of mind of the residents and students who live there but for the wider public as we try to deal with the pandemic and for the health trusts that are trying to reduce the number of cases at the moment.

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister's time is up.

**Ms Hargey:** Again, I echo the calls for calm and for people not to go near the area.

**Ms Mullan:** I know that you are committed to improving protections for tenants in the private rented sector, and I have written to you and the Housing Executive about unlicensed HMOs in Derry. Minister, what is your Department's oversight role in the licensing of HMOs, and what is it doing to address the unlicensed HMOs?

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you very much for your question. My Department has responsibility for policy and legislation on HMOs. HMOs, in some ways, meet the housing needs of singles, those

in temporary employment, students, those on a low income and migrant workers. It is therefore important that they be considered as part of an overarching housing mix. Councils have been responsible for implementation and licensing from 2019, and that requires landlords to meet important quality and safety standards before a HMO is let. Belfast City Council has set up a HMO unit to cover all the councils. If you have concerns about specific addresses, those should be raised with the unit as soon as possible so that further action can be taken.

## Housing Executive: Landlord Component

2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her plans for the reclassification of the Housing Executive landlord component. (AQO 1702/17-22)

9. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the planned reforms of the Housing Executive announced on 3 November 2020. (AQO 1709/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** I will answer questions 2 and 9 together, as both refer to the revitalisation of the Housing Executive.

The plans that my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín set out to Members in November's statement on housing reflect a much-needed revitalisation programme aimed at securing the long-term future of our biggest social landlord and ensuring the maintenance and investment in our social homes.

One of those measures, which I have urgently been pursuing, is to exempt the Housing Executive from paying corporation tax. I am happy to report that that exemption will now apply, resulting in millions of pounds of additional investment in Housing Executive homes. Although that is welcome news, the change alone will not alleviate the investment challenges that are faced by the Housing Executive, which in 2018 estimated that in excess of £7 billion would be needed over the next 30 years.

That level of investment is simply not affordable, particularly as one of the biggest constraints that the Housing Executive faces is its inability to borrow. Borrowing, in its current form, will score against the Executive's block grant, and so borrowing to maintain homes would be at the cost of other capital priorities, such as investment in hospitals and schools.

Work has commenced to update the investment financial analysis, which needs to reflect the recommendations following the Grenfell tower fire as well as carbon neutralisation. I have asked officials, through co-design, to consider and assess options that will realise my vision for the Housing Executive as a sustainable social landlord that can maintain and provide good-quality and affordable social homes for those who need them.

As Carál set out, the consideration of options will focus on those that promise to retain what is valuable about the Housing Executive model. Indeed, I have asked officials to ensure that they exhaust all options that limit change as far as possible.

I intend to bring recommendations before the end of this mandate —

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister's time is up.

**Ms Hargey:** — that will include details on timescales and budgets for implementation.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Have she and the Finance Minister considered making a costed proposal to the Treasury on a housing revenue account for the Housing Executive to enable it to borrow?

**Ms McLaughlin:** All options are being explored. As I said, I want to keep the good qualities of the Housing Executive. If there is a way that the Housing Executive can borrow without any change, I will explore that as the primary option. We have to look at all options because the financial challenges, and the impact that they are having on the existing housing stock can no longer be ignored. Therefore, all options are being considered. Once that has been done, proposals will be brought forward for decision.

**Mr Catney:** I wish all the women in the Chamber a great International Women's Day. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that any reclassification does not lead to insecure tenure, higher rents and less accountability for Housing Executive tenants as we have seen happen with the transfer of public housing in Britain?

**Ms Hargey:** At the British-Irish Council meetings, we have been looking at practices elsewhere across these islands. The key is ensuring that we have a social housing landlord that is fit for purpose and homes that are up to date. We know that if we do not look at the

investment challenges facing the Housing Executive, it will lose over half its stock over the next period. That jeopardises the future of social house building by the biggest landlord.

I have committed to co-designing options with tenants — we want to make sure that they are involved — and those who are on the housing waiting list and have been waiting years to find a social home to call their own. We also want to design those options with the trade unions and the workers in the Housing Executive. Primarily, I want to look at options in which the Housing Executive can borrow, as I said earlier. We have also committed to looking at a sustainable rent trajectory for Housing Executive tenants, whilst giving a commitment that they will remain among the lowest rents across these islands. I am committed to looking at all of that in the overarching plan that I will bring to the Executive in this mandate.

**Mr Boylan:** I welcome the Minister's commitment to building better homes. Will the removal of the historical debt and exemption from corporation tax enable the Housing Executive to begin building much-needed homes again?

**Ms Hargey:** The removal of the Housing Executive's historical debt and exempting it from paying corporation tax will be only a minor alleviation in the overarching investment challenge. The announcement in last week's Budget is welcome, but there is still a long way to go. We have to look at this comprehensively, in terms of a review of the Housing Executive rent, making sure that we have a long-term sustainability model. All those things will be taken in the round.

### 3.00 pm

Dealing with corporation tax and the debt in themselves will not overcome the challenges. The Housing Executive has to have the ability to borrow for future house builds while retaining its existing and future stock. Work is ongoing to cost those options, and, again, they will be presented to the Executive when the time is right.

**Mr Allen:** I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. The revitalisation statement mentioned reclassifying the Housing Executive as a mutual- or cooperative-type body. Minister, are you able to point to a similar body in another jurisdiction that has the same vision as the one that you are creating for the Housing Executive?

**Ms Hargey:** We are assessing all options at the moment. I would like to do this while retaining the Housing Executive's current classification. Other questions are being asked in Question Time about the standards and conditions in which residents are living. We know what the investment challenge is, given that almost £7 billion is going to be needed. Clearly, the money is not there. That would be nearly my full budget for the next eight or nine years. That is the reality of the challenge.

In looking at the classification, the big focus is to get the Housing Executive to borrow so that it can look at long-term investment over many years and use that borrowing function to do that. We want to look at other options, and, as I said, we are continually engaging, across the islands, to see which options work well. The new chief executive coming into the Housing Executive has extensive experience of housing associations in England and has worked for a housing charity in the South of Ireland, so we will also be engaging with them.

All that will be part of the process that we will be looking at over the coming months. The pros and cons will be costed. I want to remain committed to the good values of the Housing Executive in the 50 years since its formation and make sure that we carry those into the next 50 years. However, I want to make sure that we can retain the stock that we have and build even more properties.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Kellie Armstrong.

**Ms Armstrong:** Apologies, Mr Speaker. I was indicating for the next question.

### **Housing Executive: Cavity Wall Insulation**

3. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities how many Housing Executive properties have cavity wall insulation that is deemed to be not fit for purpose. (AQO 1703/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** In 2019, the Housing Executive published a research report on cavity wall insulation. The findings for the Housing Executive's stock were based on a sample survey of 825 properties. The research found that 63% of those properties had cavity wall insulation installations that were non-compliant with modern industry standards. Although the Housing Executive's data on the construction of its stock is not comprehensive, it estimates that if that 63% were extrapolated, it would represent 40,600 of its cavity wall-constructed

properties. So it is an issue that we are looking at.

**Mr Allen:** As the Minister pointed out, there is a significant problem in the Housing Executive stock in relation to cavity wall insulation. The research pointed out that 63% of the stock was non-compliant with modern standards, as the Minister mentioned. However, the Housing Executive indicated that it did not intend to take that recommendation forward in its current financial circumstances. Has the corporation tax situation any bearing on that? Also, on how many of the 1% of properties has action been taken?

**Ms Hargey:** A cavity wall insulation action plan is out for consultation and is due back at the end of March. We will be looking at the proposals within that as part of the wider revitalisation programme and the funding and sustainability of the Housing Executive. There are critical issues.

In real life, the investment challenges mean that people are in homes that are not up to the standard required if you were building a property today, and that is not good enough. We need to deal with and overcome those challenges.

I will look at the action plan and the consultation, and I will listen to what tenants and housing professionals say. I will consider that as part of the action plan at the end of March. We want to look at the issue in the longer term and set it against the financial plan to see what we can do to make sure that the existing stock of over 80,000 homes that are in the Housing Executive's ownership are brought up to today's standards. We also want to look forward to the retrofitting issues that have to be addressed by considering fuel poverty and carbon emissions targets. That will be part of the revitalisation, and costings will be done and will be presented to the Executive before the end of the mandate in order to be taken forward.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you very much, Minister. Minister, I am glad to hear you use the term "retrofitting", as some of us have been working on environmental options moving forward. The cavity wall review is ongoing, and given the fact that many people in the building industry say that the material that is used in cavity wall insulation, which is polystyrene balls, is causing so much of the damp, is it not time to set that aside and to start looking at retrofitting from now?

**Ms Hargey:** We are starting to look at retrofitting, and a cross-departmental working group has been established to look at the green commitments that we have made and at the 2050 target for carbon-neutral options. We will look at an assessment of properties in the time ahead. There is a huge issue with damp and cavity wall insulation and how the homes that are involved were constructed to begin with. We need to look at building standards, particularly for new builds. We are considering that as part of the wider revitalisation agenda. All that will have to be costed, we will have to prioritise what we need to move on and then we will publish a plan.

I will review the action plan on cavity wall insulation once the consultation is finished, and I will consider proposals for the implementation of that plan. Some of that may be superseded by the longer-term work that we are going to look at. However, we are not ready to give an update on where we are because we are at the start of that process.

**Mr McGuigan:** Minister, given the answers to questions that you provided today and the work that you have previously been involved in, it is clear that improving housing quality for tenants in the private and public sectors is something that you are committed to. You mentioned the cavity wall insulation plan and gave a time frame of March. Over and above the consultation period, what progress has been made and are there any implementation time frames?

**Ms Hargey:** On 22 December last year, the Housing Executive issued the draft cavity wall insulation action plan for public and industry consultation. That set out proposals for addressing research findings and recommendations. Responses to that consultation are due on 31 March this year, and we intend to publish the final action plan later in the year. We will have a more definitive date after we have assessed the consultation responses, and I will come back to update Members in due course.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I welcome the work that she outlined on energy conservation in public-sector homes, which is long overdue. Minister, you frequently referred to modern energy conservation standards for public-sector homes. What, specifically, is that standard and how does it compare with the standards that are set for private sector-built homes?

**Ms Hargey:** I was referring to the fact that building regulations standards need to be updated. That is a long-running issue. We need to ensure that we future-proof new builds, so we need to update the regulations as soon as possible, taking issues such as climate change, fuel poverty and the need for retrofitting into account. I hope that we will start to look at and engage on those regulations as a matter of urgency. If we are going to reach the targets that we want to reach by 2050, the regulations will need to be updated as soon as possible.

## Child Poverty

5. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her Department's work to address child poverty. (AQO 1705/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** My Department is leading on the development of the Executive's anti-poverty strategy using a co-design approach. Consultation on the emerging strategy is planned for later this year. It is anticipated that, subject to Executive agreement, the new strategy will be published in December 2021.

Recently, it was announced that the 2016-19 child poverty strategy would be extended until May 2022. The purpose of that strategy is to ensure that government works collectively to tackle the issues that are faced by children and families. The reason that it was extended was to allow that poverty work to continue through a co-design approach. As work progresses on the anti-poverty strategy, there will be a number of opportunities for children and young people to engage with the development process.

I also note that my Department has invested funding in the region of £304 million on a range of support programmes and projects to respond to the hardships that have been faced during the pandemic. The expert panel on the anti-poverty strategy was launched on Friday. The co-design groups have been established. They have access to that report and will now start the important work of co-designing the strategy, taking into account what the expert panel has said and also other experiences and, particularly, engaging children and young people, children's rights advocates and cross-departmental work. The role of Education and Health will be critical over the next couple of months, and a draft strategy will then go out for consultation later in the year.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Official figures show that one in five children here lives in absolute poverty.

Worryingly, there has been an upward trend in child poverty levels since 2018, which is set to continue as a result of the pandemic. In response to previous questions for written answer, the Minister indicated that the child poverty strategy has never been allocated funding specifically. Why is that the case? Is the Minister minded to support fully funded delivery models or mechanisms to accompany the development of the next strategy, including cross-departmental budgets, given that the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 would surely facilitate that?

**Ms Hargey:** We are developing the anti-poverty strategy and also looking at children's poverty. One of the early considerations for the co-design group will be whether those two strategies merge into one. There has been some consideration of that. The expert panel also looked at that issue. We are engaging the Children's Commissioner and others. Therefore, one of the first areas will be about whether that becomes one strategy.

The next phase of work by the co-design group is to work with the sector. Children and young people's professionals and advocates who are part of that co-design group will engage with children and young people themselves. The other important strand is the cross-departmental work. That is where there has to be representation from all Departments, recognising that it is a cross-cutting issue. It has to involve people who can make decisions and align budgets in order to meet needs. It is about costing up the proposals in the anti-poverty and children's poverty strategies going forward. I would like to see proposals that are costed and time-bound when they are presented to the Executive. It will then be for the Executive, when they receive that at the end of the year, to look at it as part of the Budget-setting process going into 2022.

**Mr Durkan:** As Ms Woods mentioned, child poverty figures have not improved here in five years. There are now 122,000 children living in relative poverty. Will the Minister mitigate the two-child tax credit rule and benefit cap in order to ease the immense pressure on families with children, and, if so, when?

**Ms Hargey:** That is a crucial issue, which was also raised in the expert panel when I engaged the Human Rights Commission as part of its work to look at future mitigations. That issue was also looked at. Of course I support bringing forward proposals to end that, along with other mitigations. As the Member will know, the issue will be the Budget and the block grant. We have

been trying to get into a cycle of multi-annual Budgets so that we do not come to a cliff edge each and every year around grant programmes right across the board. Unfortunately, that has not happened this year.

The Member will also know that we have a flat Budget this year, which, in real terms, means a cut. That has an impact on the whole Executive and, whether it is through the Department of Education, the Department of Health or the Department for Communities, on children and young people.

**3.15 pm**

I will bring forward proposals to look at future mitigations, and this will be one of the issues considered in the time ahead. I will bring forward costings, and it will be down to the Executive as a whole to look at the financing of that. The matter needs to be raised with the British Government. We have said that we should build back better and build back social. The pandemic has impacted most on low-income families, women and children, and the block grant has not reflected that. We have been given an increase in COVID money, but that is in-year cash, and, as the Member knows, we cannot build that into our revenue base. There is a job of work to convince the British Government of the value of looking at this in the block grant. Of course, I will bring costed proposals to that effect. I encourage all parties in the Executive to work with me to ensure that we can implement that in the time ahead.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Robbie Butler. Will you be brief, please?

**Mr Butler:** Will the Minister advise what collaboration she has had with the Minister of Education on efforts to address child poverty?

**Ms Hargey:** As I said, we are at the early stage of developing the child poverty and anti-poverty strategy. The expert panel has been established, and its report was launched last week. Before the report was made public, I communicated its content to all Executive Ministers, including the Minister of Education. Due to COVID, we have been working more closely on child poverty issues such as free school meals. The cross-departmental working group includes representatives from the Department of Education. There is a big role for Ministers and officials in looking at the plans in detail and working with the co-design group to do things differently in government. The key is to change what we have been doing up to now. Things need to change. We need to be more

joined-up and break down the silos. The strategies give us a real opportunity to work with communities and young people on the ground in the time ahead.

I will convene a meeting with Executive Ministers in April on the issues. I will give an update on the expert panel reports and, importantly, make sure that I have Executive buy-in to the strategies before the final documents are presented to them in December. That engagement is ongoing, and it is important that all Ministers work together. Poverty is not just an issue for me in the Department for Communities. I have given a commitment that I will start to devise and work on the strategies, but all Departments need to work more collectively and align their budgets to the strategies' recommendations. We will do that in the time ahead.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

### **PIP Appeals: Backlog**

T1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities, given that more than 6,039 people are waiting for personal independence payment (PIP) appeals, how she plans to deal with that unacceptable backlog. (AQT 1081/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** There has been a huge issue. The Member will understand that the public health pandemic caused the suspension of face-to-face assessments. We have been working with the Appeals Service to look at all the appeals and issues.

You are right: there is backlog at the moment. We are looking at telephone interviews and virtual interviews through Zoom. It is important to recognise that the nature and type of appeal need to suit the appellant. That is particularly true of PIP appeals, which look at a person's physical disability or their mental health and well-being. In a satisfaction survey on the issue over 60% of appellants said that they wanted a face-to-face assessment and appeal. The difficulty at the moment is that we still have the COVID regulations, which do not allow for that.

The Appeals Service has suspended face-to-face meetings, and that has been extended to the first week in April to take into account the current health regulations. We are keeping it under review and looking at more online options such as Zoom interviews and telephone appeals. If people are looking for face-to-face

contact, we will have to look at how we can accommodate that once the restrictions begin to ease. We will work with the Appeals Service to see if we can create a timeline as to how quickly we can reduce that waiting list as much as possible. I cannot give you all the answers until we know more about the regulations, which are being reviewed on 16 March, but I am hopeful that I can supply more information to the Committee and the Chamber in the time ahead.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can the Minister give me a guarantee that, when those people finally get their appeals — they could have been waiting for well over a year — the payments that are awarded to them will be backdated from the date that they applied or from the date that they had their PIP taken off them?

**Ms Hargey:** The awards are looked at in terms of backdating from the date of appeal, yes. That is one of the issues that are considered. Our focus now is to make sure that we get appeals looked at as soon as possible, and we will work through that with the Appeals Service and the independent advice sector, which is supporting many of the individuals.

### **Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Benefits**

T2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities whether she agrees that the allocation of £36.2 million for the development of the subregional stadia programme for soccer is a positive move, not just for sporting reasons but for mental and physical health. (AQT 1082/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, definitely. The subregional stadia will do a lot of good for grassroots football and will have an impact on the ground. I am keen to see that progress as soon as possible. We are working through the advisory group to look at the subregional stadia, and we are working with the sport's governing body and with the organisations that are involved. I want to bring proposals to take that forward as soon as possible and to get the money that has been allocated out as quickly as we can.

**Mr Newton:** Minister, 10 years ago, the £36.2 million was allocated. There have been two consultative exercises on the programme. What can be the problems that are not allowing you to allocate the money to the successful applicants?

**Ms Hargey:** The first report is 10 years out of date, and, when I came into office, the second report was four years out of date. The last consultation that was done will be published as soon as possible, and, when you read that consultation, you will see that not everybody was in agreement on the previous scheme. As Minister responsible, I wanted to take a fresh look at that, and that is why I have engaged in the short review process. My aim is to bring forward that scheme within this mandate to ensure that the money finally reaches those who need it.

### **Welfare Reform: Independent Advice Services**

T3. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities, given that Professor Eileen Evason envisaged that independent advice services are a vital part of mitigations to protect the most vulnerable from the harshest impacts of welfare reform, whether she can provide a further update on the discussions that she is having with the Department of Finance and the Executive to secure a £1.5 million allocation for vital independent advice services. (AQT 1083/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** As someone who was a community worker in the past and from working with people who avail themselves of the advice service in the area that I live in, I see the value of the independent advice sector. As I said earlier, we have been given a flat budget. It did not include the £1.5 million, but I have given a commitment that I value the role of the independent advice sector. I acutely see the need to continue independent advice, particularly for those who are going through the welfare changes that we face. I will find that money in the budget as we come into the new financial year.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for her answer. On 16 February, when discussing the bedroom tax, the Minister stated:

*"I have draft legislation and regulations to close the loopholes to ensure that families —just over 220 of them, I think—do not fall through them. I will soon bring those forward for Executive approval, to be introduced in the new financial year." — [Official Report (Hansard), 16 February 2021, p11, col 1].*

Can the Minister provide an update on that legislation being brought to the Assembly?

**Ms Hargey:** Yes, the regulations or the changes that are needed are ready. I had a meeting with officials last week to discuss some of the proposals that need to go through the Committee and the legislative changes that then need to be made.

I will make a further submission to the Executive shortly on bringing that forward before the end of the financial year.

### **Conversion Therapy: Ban**

T4. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on work to ban conversion therapy, given that, like all MLAs, she will have received significant correspondence encouraging such a ban. (AQT 1084/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you very much for raising this important issue.

Just over a week ago, I met a group of doctors, some of whom were involved in the 'Spotlight' programme on the issue last September. I have also met some political parties to provide an update. In 'New Decade, New Approach', the Executive agreed to a sexual orientation strategy. The expert panel's report on that draft strategy was published on Friday. The issue of conversion therapy is part of that, so, first, I make a commitment to bring forward draft legislation to ban it.

The expert panel has looked at the issue. Rather than rushing to legislate now, we need to assess how widespread the practice is. We need to look at the levels and the different names by which the practice is known. Britain made announcements over two years ago. We know that legislation was going through in the South of Ireland. They tripped up on their legislation partly because of their assessment of how widespread the issue was. We will look at that, working with the co-design group on the sexual orientation strategy, to ensure that we have up-to-date data and information on the practice. I do not want to leave any loophole that would allow the practice to continue, which would make the legislation meaningless. I will take that forward.

I will look at drafting legislation at the same time as we make that assessment of need. We will not wait for that to be completed before drafting legislation. I hope that, over the coming months, we will start to formulate that. We will establish how widespread the practice is and be able to include that in the drafting of the legislation,

and, by the end of the mandate, we will have legislation ready to come before the House.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Minister for her response. It is a harsh and cruel practice. It seriously impacts the mental health of members of our community. I welcome the announcement of strategies and impending legislation. Sometimes the Executive are good at announcing strategies and legislation but not just so good at delivering them. I take the opportunity to encourage the Minister to move as quickly as possible to deliver this, while closing all of the loopholes that she has mentioned. We are the last place in these islands to deliver this, so there should be plenty of experience out there on what to do and how to get it right.

**Ms Hargey:** When you look at other jurisdictions, you see that what they have brought forward is not good enough. The expert panel has recognised that there have been huge gaps. That is what the panel has been telling me. If I could, I would legislate to ban this practice tomorrow, but I have to listen to those who are impacted on by it on a daily basis. I agree with you. In meeting people both privately and openly on the issue over the last couple of months, I have seen how people have been affected by it. It has completely changed their lives and their family dynamics. It is a cruel treatment that must be banned and ended as soon as possible.

I have to make sure that we do not make the same mistakes as other jurisdictions, which have held up their implementation of the ban. You will be aware of the campaign that there has been. The British Government announced two years ago that they would ban it. Nothing has been done, for exactly these reasons. I want to make sure that I work with the community to assess the need and the breadth of the problem, but I will not wait for the end of that work. I want to draft legislation as we move through that process, to ensure that, once the assessment is done, we can move on the legislation. I give a commitment that I will not wait around: I want to do this as soon as possible. If you want to sit down with me at any time, I am more than willing to do that.

## Social and Affordable Housing

T5. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Communities, after congratulating her on her success in ensuring that the Housing Executive remains exempt from corporation tax, whether she can detail how much additional funding will

be available for social and affordable housing as a result. (AQT 1085/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Over £56 million has been paid to the British Treasury in corporation tax duty over the last six years.

That is a huge amount over those six years that could go into the provision of new housing and into updating existing housing. That has been a really good news story, and I thank the Minister of Finance and the officials who have been working on that. With the Chancellor's announcement last week, we finally have it over the line.

### 3.30 pm

I will continue to look at whether any of the payments that have been made can be backdated and also at the wider historical debt that is there as well. Those conversations will continue, but it is a huge help to the Housing Executive in managing its existing stock and investing in future stock.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Caoimhe Archibald to ask a supplementary question. May I have a brief question and response, please?

**Dr Archibald:** Go raibh maith agat for the answer. Will the Minister provide an update on her overall plans to increase social and affordable housing stock?

**Ms Hargey:** As I said, part of last November's housing statement looked at a supply strategy and at dealing with the financial restrictions on the Housing Executive's ability to borrow, not just to upgrade existing properties but to construct new properties. Those plans are being costed, and the supply strategy is being developed. Before the end of this mandate, I will bring forward timelines and costings for how we will take that work forward. I commit to doing that and will update Members on the specifics in the time ahead.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment, please.

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

## Committee Business

### 'Skills Strategy and Economic Output Micro Inquiry': Committee for the Economy Special Report

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly notes the Committee for the Economy's special report providing evidence from stakeholders to inform the forthcoming skills strategy; supports the development of a cross-departmental and inclusive approach to skills development; recognises the need for collaboration between the public sector, employers, industry and all levels of education to ensure that our people have the right skills and access to lifelong learning; and calls on the Minister for the Economy and her Executive colleagues to use this evidence in planning for the new skills strategy. — [Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy).]*

**Mr Dickson:** The past year has perhaps been one of the most challenging that many of us, and certainly those in the worlds of business and employment, have ever faced. Hopefully, however, we are increasingly seeing a bright glimmer of hope on the horizon. With every day, we are making progress on finding our way out of the pandemic. Nonetheless, it appears that higher unemployment in the near future is likely, and the skills strategy that the Department for the Economy produces will be key to tackling structural issues in our labour market, such as underemployment, low pay and driving our recovery from the pandemic.

Time is very short, so I will take a few moments to speak about some of the issues that have been highlighted by the Committee's report. As Members will know, skills requirements are dynamic and continually changing, so government strategies need to keep up. Unfortunately, there are widespread mismatches that lead to underemployment, unemployment and lower productivity. The report notes that there are particular areas in which focusing efforts could provide a considerable change in results. For example, the area of digital skills, which is fast becoming the linchpin of any skills set, must be central to a skills strategy.

It seems very likely that the pandemic will accelerate digitalisation trends, so this will become more acute. Employers have been

highlighting a mismatch of skills for some time. Vocational courses are not meeting the needs of manufacturing businesses, and that requires additional training to be provided. SMEs also feel that skills training support is not necessarily aimed at them.

Speaking as chair of the all-party group on social enterprise, I feel that we should not lose sight of the support that they require. I believe employers have a duty to develop the skills of their workforce, but government must also ensure that the right skills are there to attract businesses and help them to expand. Intergenerational underachievement is another structural issue. Reference has already been made today about how we should improve and invest in our education system. Communities need the tools to tackle underachievement, including careers advice. That demonstrates the need for stronger cross-departmental working.

I have criticised before what I describe as the silo mentality between Ministers in the Executive and also between Departments. Departments and agencies have a role in tackling deprivation and need to work together. Considerable work needs to be done to provide more comprehensive careers advice in schools to tackle the cultural mindset that a career path usually goes through university. Others have referred to this, and it is simply not the case for so many careers. Contrast that with Germany, where university is just one of multiple equal career paths for people to follow. Our further education colleges are key to the future. We must ensure that they are sustainable and resourced. However, considerable duplication exists, particularly with sixth form colleges.

We are all in agreement that we must establish a culture of lifelong learning, but we have not seen that embedded in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Department will look for examples of best practice, perhaps in Nordic countries. Over a third of adults in Northern Ireland say that they have not taken part in learning since they left full-time education. That is very much to our detriment. How can people access new skills if the support and advice are not there? Reference was made earlier to a life skills guarantee, offering a range of fully funded courses to those without a level 3 qualification. It is definitely something that we should seek to recreate here. I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say on that.

A number of actions in the Minister's recently published recovery action plan will help towards a lifelong learning environment. The Minister has also rolled out other programmes for

apprenticeships. Unfortunately, however, many employers have found that the time is not right to bring back apprentices. We need to encourage ongoing support as the restrictions ease. That is a key area of work. We must make sure that skills are accessible to all. We need to break down the barriers of unemployment; we need to ensure that we match our skills with the needs of businesses.

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

**Mr Dickson:** This requires serious intervention and funding for skills opportunities as we emerge from the pandemic.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Clerk and the Committee for tabling this motion. It is a very important motion and a very important piece of work that I was part of at the time. A wide range of stakeholders was involved, and we used the technology available to bring those stakeholders together to collate their views. It was a useful exercise. It is important that, with those views, we now take that forward to ensure that we address some of the issues that they have raised, many of which I share.

The Minister has taken steps to support learners during COVID-19. Skills policies will be an essential component for Northern Ireland as we exit COVID and put together an exit strategy. In recent years, Northern Ireland has made significant progress in strengthening its skills base and improving economic output. The skills of our young people are now seen to be above the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science. However, COVID has represented a greater threat to further progress.

In response to those worrying statistics, the Minister has taken a range of steps to ensure continuity of learning for our young people and towards allowing those of all ages affected by the disruption of the pandemic to upskill and reskill. To that end, I welcome that the Minister has included the apprenticeship recovery package, support for some of the most vulnerable learners in accessing digital learning, adjusting the skills focus programme and delivering a range of free online qualifications.

Retaining the focus on building a resilient and adaptive skills base will be a crucial element of the Executive's recovery from COVID-19. The economic action recovery plan, which was recently announced, sets out a wide range of actions and initiatives. The Minister has

included a wide-ranging skills strategy for Northern Ireland, which can provide a longer-term and more strategic approach to the challenges facing our work force.

The motion refers to ensuring that Northern Ireland has the right mix of skills, which should be cross-cutting in nature and cross-cutting for the Executive. That needs to be recognised through practical action, but, most importantly, through adequate funding. To that end, it is important that the Finance Minister ensures that appropriate funding is put towards addressing the many issues raised in the report that was brought forward to the Economy Committee.

New Decade, New Approach committed that the Executive, collectively, will invest strategically to ensure that Northern Ireland has the right mix of skills for a thriving economy. However, it is important to point out that, at times during the pandemic, the collegiate spirit towards supporting our economy has not always been evident or displayed. For example, the Sinn Féin Communities Minister has failed utterly to deliver on the Northern Ireland parallel scheme to the Kickstart initiative. It is a real shame that that has happened, given that, in GB, the Kickstart initiative has created job opportunities for over 120,000 young people between the ages of 16 to 24. Neither was that collegiate spirit displayed by the SDLP's Infrastructure Minister, who had to be cajoled and persuaded for months before commencing a scheme to support our hauliers and coach and taxi drivers.

When we talk about enhancing skills and building a resilient and agile workforce that is capable of responding to future crises and challenges, a cross-departmental, cross-cutting willingness to own these issues and ensure that they are sufficiently funded is vital.

**Ms Dolan:** Sinn Féin welcomes the findings of the micro inquiry on skills. With unemployment rising, it is essential that we have a skills-based recovery that can help support and train our people for new jobs and industries. Although we welcome the Department's various initiatives, such as skills academies and apprenticeship programmes, there needs to be a conscious effort to help underrepresented groups to access skills. The Department's new skills strategy will be a key driver of economic output, particularly as we emerge from COVID-19. The strategy's design must support individuals, communities and industries to adapt to the demands of the global economy, as well as meet the changing needs of the local economy.

One of the primary aims of the Minister's economic advisory group will be to assess future skills, reskilling and upskilling needs in the context of a new skills strategy. We need a skills delivery framework that can help workers of all ages, employers and communities to adapt, and one that helps to build an economy that delivers for everyone.

The points in the micro inquiry are well made around needing to look at skills matches. The needs of the workplace are changing at such a fast pace, which has probably been accelerated by COVID-19. Digital skills are becoming more important, with the majority of jobs requiring a certain level of expertise. The Department's skills barometer has been useful in identifying skills gaps. It is important that councils continue to look for those gaps and work with local colleges and training providers to help fill them so that people can find work close to home.

In my constituency, we have the top-class South West College, which has the state-of-the-art Erne campus ready to open to match the existing and innovative South West College skills centre. Facilities like that not only help to reskill and upskill our workforce but have the potential to fight back against the brain drain. One point in the report that links to that is the requirement to change the cultural mindset here that leans towards a university degree as the only or the superior option on the pathway to employment. After doing a degree and knowing what I know now and having engaged with South West College on several occasions, I would reconsider my educational pathway if I were to do it again.

### 3.45 pm

On this, International Women's Day, the Department for the Economy should look at skills programmes that will specifically assist women to reskill and re-enter the workforce. Women in Business recently launched a returners programme that is designed at getting females who have been out of work back into skills programmes and job opportunities. The most recent programme was oversubscribed, and it is clear that if the Department provided specific schemes for women, they would avail themselves of them and re-enter the labour market. To allow more women to return to work, stakeholders also urged revisiting the childcare strategy, as it plays an important role in giving parents the opportunity to work or to avail themselves of training.

The points are well made in the inquiry report that we cannot look at skills in isolation and that we need to look at affordable childcare,

guaranteed financial reward, providing appropriate training and progression plans and the option for flexible working in order to meet the demands of caring responsibilities.

While not covered in the report, it is also important that the Department continues to address rural broadband and digital hardship, as those are barriers to upskilling for rural residents like the people I represent. To that end, the Department must ensure that the digital hardship fund is accessible to the students who need it. We need sectoral agreement between government, employers and unions to update and agree standards so that employees are continually reskilled and they can maximise their personal development while ensuring that workers' rights are at the forefront.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I welcome today's debate and the publication of the Committee's report on its micro inquiry into the skills strategy and economic output. At the start, it is worth asking what the economy means for many in our society and how they relate to it. While there are obviously the macroeconomic questions that we, as policymakers, have to tackle, the relationship between the economy and the consumer or the worker is much different. The basics of it are that the relationship with the economy is such that people require a job to pay the mortgage or the rent, put food on the table and put clothes on their children's backs. Those are the basics, but we want much more than that for our citizens. We want them to be able to have a high quality of life and to have the time, space and finances to have hobbies and luxuries and to enjoy their time as well. However, I suspect that, sometimes, when workers and others hear us discussing the economy in this Building and elsewhere, it is an abstract theory rather than a reality that the decisions that we make here will affect them and their children's lives moving forward. That is perhaps more so now because of the changing circumstances that COVID-19 will bring to a changing world.

It is interesting to note that the three major elements that are facing the world today are, obviously, COVID; the changes that will come with Brexit to purchasing goods and to where those goods will be manufactured; and the greening of the economy, because more and more businesses are looking at how they source their materials for the products that they either sell or make. So, there are huge opportunities in that for our citizens, and we need to give them the proper skill sets to deal with them.

I want to concentrate on the element of the report that looks at learning and universities and schools. One particular element caught my eye, which I will come to in a moment. One of the questions at the start was about how we achieve goals. We have to change the mindset about career pathways, and my colleague Jemma Dolan touched on that. Universities are not the best option for everyone, so let us promote other career pathways that are not necessarily associated with universities.

We should value electricians as highly as teachers and bricklayers as highly as IT experts. Not everybody will be able to, want to or have the skill sets to work in IT. Of course we should attract international IT businesses, but we must also have an economy that relates to the people.

One comment in the report caught my eye. It is the view of some stakeholders:

*"Careers advice is offered in schools, but often not by a dedicated expert from the Department's Careers Service, leading to recommendations that may suit the needs of the school, rather than those of the individual pupil."*

Advice is given that suits the needs of the school rather than those of an individual pupil. There, right away, is something that has to be changed in the culture. That goes back to the point I made: if we do not value certain career pathways, young people and their parents will be dissuaded from taking them, even though those pathways can provide a high quality of life, a good salary and a good lifestyle for the person who chooses them. It is often seen as the case that, if you do not attend university, somehow you have not achieved. That is a huge mistake, and it will be detrimental to our economy. Some earlier contributors said that the skills barometer shows that skills are lacking in some areas, particularly in vocational courses.

Minister, it was a huge mistake not to provide the £500 funding to full-time students in colleges. That separates universities and further education colleges

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** It almost suggests that it is a lesser course or career pathway. If we want to change mindsets, we have to value all students.

**Ms Sugden:** It is my pleasure to contribute to the debate as an independent Member for East Londonderry and as a member of the Committee for the Economy.

I associate myself with many of the comments made by other Members, in particular those of my colleagues on the Economy Committee. The micro inquiry is important work that sought the views of many stakeholders, who have a valuable input in developing a new skills strategy for Northern Ireland. I hope that their input will be considered.

I want to talk about the skills strategy in general, and my first comment is on previous success. I speak to many businesses across Northern Ireland, and I ask them why they wanted to come to Northern Ireland when other regions were open to them. They want to come to Northern Ireland because they believe that we have a very good skills offer. That is something that we must continue to build on. For example, one of the great policies taken forward by the Department for the Economy is the Assured Skills programme. I understand that the Minister continually announces new opportunities in that respect. What is great about such policies is that they look at industry and at the skills that are required and then enable individuals through on-the-job experience, and, hopefully, they get a job at the end of it. They invest in the individuals themselves, insofar as they will take an interest and decide whether it is for them. That is really important.

The same could be said for apprenticeships. As other Members have said, not everybody needs to go to university or have a full, formal education to get to where they want to be. I was on a call with the Minister prior to the debate, and we talked about the value of all jobs and all skilled work, whether it is that of an electrician, an architect or in other areas. It is really important that we put the same value on that and ensure that we work towards a strategy that also considers people's passions. People will want to work if it is an area in which they are interested. It is not good enough to say that people should just get a job; it is about investing in them as individuals, and they in turn will invest in their communities.

Others spoke about cross-departmental working, which is key. We need to look at our system of education, the career pathways and the advice that is given to young people when they get to the point in their life when they decide what they want to do. It is not enough to say that people should go down a certain pathway because of who they are or because of

their background. Today, I heard that some young women were not being encouraged to go down the STEM route, for example. That might be simply because of their gender or, perhaps, because their school has not encouraged that route previously and there is no legacy of that. We need to look at how we develop that. We need to ensure that the advice given in a school is in line with the advice given in all other schools across Northern Ireland. Someone in rural east Londonderry should not have different opportunities from someone in Belfast or Derry. It is important that we look at that.

The Department for Communities should also have an input, as others have said. I remain disappointed that Job Start has not been progressed in Northern Ireland, despite assurances that we would get it last November. There are jobs and opportunities there. Northern Ireland is at a disadvantage because we are not progressing that scheme. We need to ensure that there is cross-departmental working on that type of scheme in any future skills strategy and ensure that we can take the opportunities when we find them. We will be left behind, and that serves no one in Northern Ireland.

We also have to look at the situation in a post-COVID era and what that means when we work from home. That will require improved infrastructure, and we see a broadband roll-out across Northern Ireland that will help with that. However, there might be other things that we need to do. How do we support people working from home, particularly if they live in rural areas? It is not enough to say that you get in front of your laptop, behind your desk, as I am doing now. Social interaction is important, and important relationships need to be built. How do we feed that into a skills strategy that considers a new, post-COVID world?

We also have to look at the issue in light of it being 2021. What does the economy look like? Today is International Women's Day. I organised a call with the Minister prior to the debate, and we talked about young women and the businesses that they are taking forward, businesses that fit into their lives and their family lives but give them the opportunities to be successful. In 2021, they utilise social media and other opportunities to ensure that their business is a success. We cannot look at the economy in the traditional way that we did before, particularly in a post-COVID era. COVID seems to have pushed us forward *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

**Ms Sugden:** There are a lot of opportunities. I am pleased that the Minister is looking at this and trying to develop something new. That is good for everyone in Northern Ireland.

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** I apologise to the Chair of the Committee for being a little too late to hear her opening remarks. The debate started earlier than we had anticipated.

I thank the Chair and Members for their contributions to the debate. I welcome the focus on skills of the Executive, Assembly and other stakeholders. There has never been a more important time to focus on and invest in skills. Only last month, I published my economic recovery action plan with a firm emphasis on the importance of investing in skills, if we, as an Assembly and Executive, are serious about economic recovery. I was pleased to see a wide range of business organisations and other stakeholders endorse my plan, and I trust that I can count on the support of the Committee and the Assembly in calling for the Executive to fund that comprehensive plan to reopen, recover and rebuild the local economy.

In addition to my economic recovery action plan, officials in my Department have been working on a new skills strategy for Northern Ireland. Therefore, from my perspective, the Committee's report is timely and helpful. The context, however, in which we are developing the strategy has changed considerably over the past 18 months. When we began developing the strategy, the biggest challenge for businesses across Northern Ireland was access to skills and talent. That position has changed dramatically, with unemployment figures at a record high and the potential for a further increase when the furlough scheme comes to an end. We also have a range of long-standing issues in the labour market, with low levels of productivity, high incidence of economic inactivity and a disproportionate number of people with low or no skills. I agree that the skills strategy has a key role to play in addressing the short-term challenges arising as a consequence of COVID and in addressing the long-term, systemic weaknesses in our economy that have bedevilled us for decades. That said, a strategy on its own cannot bring about the societal and cultural changes that are necessary to address those deep-seated issues. We will need everyone — government, business, education and communities — to play their part.

4.00 pm

Funding is undoubtedly a key component of the changes that are necessary. There is no doubt that we are losing ground to our competitors. There has been a disinvestment in skills over the past decade across the public and private sectors, and that is a trend that we must reverse. I look forward to Members who participated in the debate today supporting my bids to the Finance Minister to do just that.

I also agree that there is an opportunity to consider whether there are more efficient ways to deliver training and development, particularly given the move to online delivery as a consequence of the pandemic. I also believe that we need to change attitudes to learning and upskilling. Our economy is changing very quickly, with automation and digitisation transforming the workplace. My colleague Mr Stalford noted the number of jobs created in the tech sector during the pandemic. He quite rightly acknowledges the importance of matching skills with future jobs markets. It is essential that employers and individuals recognise the need to invest time and money in skills development. We no longer have the luxury of a job for life, and we all have a responsibility to prepare ourselves for the changes that are happening now and in the future. Increasingly, we need to make it clear that lifelong learning is a key to earning.

That point is very clearly articulated in the first theme in the report, supporting our people to greater employability. I am committed to supporting companies and individuals through the transition and, ultimately, to deliver the outcome of more people in better jobs. We already have some superb programmes such as Skills Focus and InnovateUs, which are delivered through our colleges and are aimed at supporting SMEs to upskill employees. We want to build on that success and provide further opportunity to help those companies to grow. I also intend to launch a suite of skills interventions that will assist individuals to gain the skills that they need in areas such as digital technologies and to gain employability skills and skills in leadership and management. That will be a £15 million investment over the next three years that will make a positive contribution to our economy.

The second theme deals with academic institutions and community learning. There is no doubt that we can and must have a more joined-up skills ecosystem in Northern Ireland. That was a key issue raised by the OECD report published last year, and it will be a focus for me and for the Education Minister. Part of creating a more joined-up system will be to ensure that individuals have all the relevant

information about career pathways to make informed choices about their future, and I do note the comments from Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart and Mr O'Dowd about careers advice. We need careers advice to be valuable, to be flexible and to indicate to young people that all pathways are equally valid and equally valued.

In reference to Claire Sugden's intervention, I had a really uplifting call with her and some members of the north coast business community to celebrate achievements of women on International Women's Day. Indeed, we must ensure that more young people, like some of those on the call, are able to engage in the STEM pathways, with the success that they are already proving.

I also wholeheartedly agree with the points that were made around community-based learning. I am a passionate supporter of community education. I have seen at first hand the positive impact that community learning can have on people's lives. Not everyone will want to or can attend university or college, and we have to find a pathway that meets the needs of everyone in our society and ensures that no one is left behind. I note that the Member from Fermanagh indicated the importance of online learning and access to better broadband, and I am excited to inform the House that, this week, we will announce the first live connection with Project Stratum, the £165 million intervention to provide first-generation broadband to rural parts of Northern Ireland from the DUP's confidence-and-supply deal with the Government.

The third theme usefully sets out some key points on how skills can assist the COVID response. As I said, that resonates very strongly on a number of different levels. I repeat my call for the Committee to support the funding for the recovery action plan. Investment is key. I have made a number of bids to the Executive for funding in the next financial year, including £50 million for a suite of skills interventions. A key part of that investment will be to grow and expand our apprenticeship offering. We have made great progress on growing the apprenticeship system into new areas and at higher levels. We now have nearly 1,000 higher-level apprentices working and studying at foundation and degree level. That is in addition to the 9,000 apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3. One of my priorities was to support the system during the pandemic. That is why we introduced the support for employers to retain their apprentices and recruit new ones. As we look forward, we need to expand that initiative. We also need to expand apprenticeships by removing the current age restrictions so that everyone, irrespective of

age, is able to retrain and gain skills. We also need to ensure that the public sector becomes a much larger player in the apprenticeship system and offers a range of public-sector apprenticeships. That will be key to our economic recovery.

I also want to increase the scale of the Assured Skills programme and short-term courses to assist individuals back into employment. As was pointed out in the debate, the Assured Skills programme is one of the huge successes in that policy area. Firms such as KPMG announced its centre of excellence for Northern Ireland, which created 200 new jobs in Northern Ireland, because it had access to the Assured Skills programme. We need to keep investing in the programme and lauding the flexibility that it offers employers as they seek to grow or even establish themselves here.

The report also identifies inclusive learning in the workplace as a key theme. I have already referenced my intention to expand the apprenticeships programme and the policy work that we are doing to replace existing European social fund (ESF) projects. I recognise that individuals face a range of barriers to employment, including childcare and access to benefits. Those are issues that span multiple Departments and that I know are actively being considered by the respective Ministers. I had a very productive conversation last week with the Communities Minister about the intention to launch new skills programmes with the really complementary programme of Job Start so that the two can work together on skills and the employability issues that will be needed for the economic recovery pathway.

The Committee report highlights lifelong learning as a theme. I have already stressed the importance that I place on that. It will be a key priority for the new strategy. For a range of reasons, we in Northern Ireland do not participate in learning beyond formal education. We languish at the bottom of the league table when compared with other European countries. That may be cultural, but we need a step change. We need to understand that a love of learning goes beyond the early years, school and university and that it is available to all of us at any stage in our life. As I have said before, we need to ensure that there is a pathway for everyone, whether that be into a job, into training or staying in education. We have already restarted our work on the 14- to 19-year-old project. The synergies that we will need between education and further education are very important.

I also want us to enable young people to make those pathway choices earlier than the current prescriptive age of 16.

As the Chair said in her opening comments, collaboration and cooperation across government are key if we are to deliver on the ambition contained in any new skills strategy. Success requires a whole-government approach and is not just the responsibility of the Department for the Economy. I am pleased to say that every Department is represented on the project board that leads the strategy, and I hope that I have demonstrated that to you today by talking about the conversations I have had across government about skills, employability and economic recovery.

I am actively considering the establishment of a Northern Ireland skills council, an advisory body that would include business representatives, employee representatives, education representatives and individuals with expert knowledge of the emerging demands on the skills system in an ever-changing economic environment. An early priority for such a body would be to ensure that gender diversity and equality of opportunity were at the top of the education, skills and employability agenda. As I said, the development of a new skills system in Northern Ireland is a major undertaking, but it is imperative if Northern Ireland is to flourish over the next decade.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call on Sinead McLaughlin, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy, to conclude and wind up the motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

**Ms McLaughlin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I am delighted to rise on behalf of the Economy Committee to wind up today's extremely important debate. As the Committee Chair and other members of the Committee have indicated, we are keen to engage with the Minister to ensure that the views of Members and stakeholders on the shape of the new skills strategy are acted on. I thank the Minister and all the Members who contributed for their participation today. I also thank the many stakeholders who contributed their views to the Committee's special report, as well as the Committee team for their work.

I will take a brief moment to make a personal reflection on this International Women's Day. Access to skills and education is a life-enhancing right, but, for many women in the world today, it is not a privilege that they are afforded. There are over 132 million women in

the world who are excluded from education. We must challenge that and encourage change. Today's debate is also important because we, as Members of the Assembly, must ensure that we collectively do all that we can to develop and support a world-leading education and skills strategy, ensuring gender equality and barrier-free access for all.

I will now reflect on Members' contributions to the debate. The Chair of the Economy Committee, Caoimhe Archibald, gave context to the motion, stating that skills would be a key driver for economic growth and recovery. The importance of skills for all and the benefit of lifelong learning were highlighted. The Chair raised the matter of the urgency of closing the skills gap and deficits to promote entrepreneurship, increase productivity and reduce unemployment.

Chris Stalford, from South Belfast, said that the development of a skills strategy will require a cross-departmental approach. The Member also raised the issue of the need to fund bids coming from the Department for the Economy to fulfil many of the areas outlined in the motion as we move towards economic recovery.

John Stewart emphasised the need for the skills strategy to remain a live document that is acted on and the importance of a skills-for-all approach remaining a central focus. I concur with the Member about the lack of a Job Start programme based in Northern Ireland. The Member indicated that employers and young people were ready to engage with the Job Start programme and asked the Economy Minister to engage with the Minister for Communities to find a solution.

Stewart Dickson concentrated his comments on matching skills with the needs of the economy. He also raised the important issue of delivering first-class careers advice and guidance in our schools and communities.

#### 4.15 pm

Gary Middleton concentrated on skills being an important COVID exit strategy. He also highlighted the need to finance the economy recovery plan. Jemma Dolan raised the issue of brain drain, particularly in rural areas. Jemma highlighted women's access to skills and discussed the need for affordable childcare and caring support. John O'Dowd stated that the relationship with the economy is complex and changing. He cited three key changes that will impact on our economy imminently: COVID and Brexit and the green economy. He said that there is a need to value all skills pathways, not

just academic ones. Claire Sugden indicated that skills are the main reason cited by investors who choose to locate in Northern Ireland and that, therefore, we must continue to develop and evolve our skills base. She indicated that not everyone needs to go to university and that it is important that we value all career pathways.

Finally, Minister Dodds gave a very warm welcome to the micro inquiry and report, which she said was timely and necessary. The economic action plan places a strong emphasis on skills, but one of the key areas that the Minister highlighted is the need for investment. She discussed longstanding problems with our economy and the need for a skills ecosystem. She indicated that this needs to have all-government support and that everybody must be involved: government, business and education. The Minister encouraged change in delivery; she also encouraged change in attitudes. She linked learning and earning and said that it is important that the outcome is that people are in better, well-paid jobs. The Minister went on to say that she is giving great consideration to a Northern Ireland skills council and that she hopes to set something up to support skills development in the near future.

I thank everybody for participating in the debate. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the Committee for the Economy's special report providing evidence from stakeholders to inform the forthcoming skills strategy; supports the development of a cross-departmental and inclusive approach to skills development; recognises the need for collaboration between the public sector, employers, industry and all levels of education to ensure that our people have the right skills and access to lifelong learning; and calls on the Minister for the Economy and her Executive colleagues to use this evidence in planning for the new skills strategy.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before the next item of business.

## Private Members' Business

### Promoting a Gender-sensitive Assembly

**Ms Bailey:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly, on International Women's Day, notes recommendation 12 of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly', which proposed that the Assembly should consider adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly; and endorses the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Assembly action plan as put forward by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to wind up the debate. All other Members will have five minutes. I now invite Ms Bailey to open the debate on the motion.

**Ms Bailey:** Happy International Women's Day to everyone in the Chamber. This is the first time that there have been predominantly females in the Chamber, and that is good to see. Thanks to Trevor and Mike — yes, you get a special mention.

I move the motion as the current chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus. Members will be aware that the 2015 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly' set out to analyse the key challenges and barriers facing women when entering politics in Northern Ireland and the Assembly. It also made recommendations to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena. One of those recommendations was the creation of the Women's Caucus and another was the establishment of a gender-sensitive Northern Ireland Assembly.

We have come a long way with the representation of women in political life in Northern Ireland, but we have not come far enough. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement committed to increasing women's participation, but women remain under-represented. Time and time again, Northern Ireland has been called out on that.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee's report stated that it is a serious

matter to be addressed urgently. But where is that urgency? Only 35% of our MLAs are women. It is time to get a little bit more urgent. To say that that is overdue structurally and institutionally is a gross understatement.

Our narrative in Northern Ireland for the past 20 or so years has been underpinned by parity of esteem, but that has not been extended to all of the people that the Assembly aims to represent. Where is the parity of esteem for women? Where is the parity of esteem for those with multisectionalities? Representation is not true or effective unless there is adequate representation for all the people who we are here to legislate for. There is no shortage of potential leadership outside the Chamber, and it is up to the Assembly to endorse actions to counter the marginalisation that stops those potential leaders stepping forward. It is up to us. The Women's Caucus sees that as imperative, but we cannot affect that change unless we are supported by the Assembly.

We know that women's meaningful participation in politics helps to advance gender equality for society as a whole. We know that it affects the scope of the policy issues that are debated for legislation and the types of solutions that are brought forward. We know that it allows for greater responsiveness to people's needs. We also know that it increases cooperation among political parties towards having a more sustainable future. We know that having more women in positions of leadership and decision-making will reflect women's lived reality and will directly influence legislation and policymaking so that they meet the needs of women. Our Women's Caucus is an example of that. Today we bring forward the motion, united across party lines. The potential in that is transformative for the Assembly and Northern Ireland.

The engagement of women is crucial, but women are not a homogenous group. Women lead intersectional lives with different lived experiences that inform different priorities and needs. Political representation must reflect that. A gender-blind or gender-neutral approach does not work because society is neither gender-blind nor gender-neutral. Systemic, institutional and structural inequalities have seen to that.

We know the barriers. They are very well-understood by most, and they permeate across all sectors of women's lives. Many women have overcome those obstacles, which should be recognised and celebrated, but that is not enough. The playing field needs to be levelled for all women. Equal access to opportunities

needs to be universal. That equality needs to be substantive.

Every woman MLA does an exceptional job because they carry extra burdens. We are at 35% of representation, and we need to be at 50%. A gender-sensitive approach is paramount if we are to meaningfully achieve that. The aims of the Women's Caucus are set at that. At 35%, we are on the way out of marginalisation, but considerable steps need to be taken in order to get the Assembly to where it needs to be. It will be only as the number of women MLAs increases that we will be able to work more effectively together in order to promote substantive gender-sensitive and institutional change. It is crucial to do that, and everyone should be brought along on that journey.

The root causes of marginalisation in the political sphere are well known universally and specifically here in Northern Ireland. Everyone must be involved in the solution to the problem. We must shift the focus of responsibility for advancing gender equality away from women MLAs and onto the Assembly as a whole, which means all its Members, institutional culture, processes and mechanisms. Our gender-sensitive Assembly action plan looks at the Assembly carefully. It acknowledges the unseen but undeniably felt barriers that deter the presence of women and limit their participation and retention, and it brings forward strong and actionable solutions.

A gender-sensitive Assembly is one that meets the requirements of all the people in its structures, one that does not enforce direct or indirect discriminatory practices, is one that is family-friendly, one where women and men's needs to live and work are enabled and one where sexist language and behaviour are not tolerated. That directly results in legislation-making processes that are gender-sensitive and more effective.

It results in Parliaments that deliver better to constituents, fulfil the democratic mandate and are more legitimate overall. All member states of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which includes the UK, adopted a plan of action for gender-sensitive Parliaments in 2012. Westminster has taken significant steps to work towards that, but our devolved Assembly is lagging far behind.

#### 4.30 pm

The Women's Caucus's action plan lays out a clear guide for how we can fulfil our end of the bargain so that we can improve the overall

quality and legitimacy of this institution in order to be recognised on the world stage as an example of best practice. This is an unparalleled opportunity to be outward-looking rather than insular and to keep pace with international standards so that we do not continue to procrastinate, stagnate or row back on our hard-won gains on gender equality.

The gender-sensitive Assembly action plan addresses how to do that by setting out priorities and strategies, and targeted interventions that are achievable and essential. It focuses on the needs and interests of current and future female MLAs around the Assembly's structures, operations and methods, and aims to address the problems of discrimination and recrimination; on processes that facilitate participation for everyone, such as a formal mechanism to enable the Women's Caucus to bring forward issues of concern, and reviewing the Assembly's voting mechanisms; on actions that promote equality and participation, such as initiatives that are related to encouraging women to enter politics and targeted engagement with the media; on an environment that is accessible to women and men, has zero tolerance of discriminatory and sexist language and where all MLAs are encouraged to engage in the gender mainstreaming processes; and on gender-sensitive political parties and politicians as being essential elements in driving forward that change. The Women's Caucus wants to encourage women into politics and support them once they are elected to enable them to remain in those positions and champion their progression.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee recommended those measures, so we are now bringing them forward in the action plan with a road map for implementing them. We recognise the problem and present an effective, robust and sustainable solution. I call on the Assembly to endorse the action plan so that we may finally take the steps to create a gender-sensitive Assembly. I commend the motion to the House.

I want to make a short contribution in my capacity as an MLA and Green Party member. I thank the previous chairs of the caucus, some of whom are in the Chamber. I particularly thank Caitríona Ruane, who, when I was first elected in 2016, was the chair of the caucus and gave me a special invite to join; at that time, the rules of the caucus did not allow me to be a member automatically.

There is so much that I would like to say today, on International Women's Day, not only to mark the achievements and hard-won rights of

women but to acknowledge the long road that lies ahead. In my last few seconds, I pay tribute to the women from the North West Migrants Forum for the launch of their new project and for finding not only their voice but their power in challenging the barriers and institutions that keep them marginalised. I pledge to do all that I can to support them and look forward to seeing some of them being elected to the Chamber.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Paula Bradley. All Members will have up to five minutes in which to speak.

**Ms P Bradley:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. At the end of the speech from the chair of the caucus, I was reminded of a time when Mitchel McLaughlin was in the Chair for one of our debates on International Women's Day. I was speaking and went well over time and, when I sat down, he said, "I daren't have interrupted you there". I absolutely get that and thank you, Mr Speaker, on Clare's behalf for allowing her to go over time.

**Mr Speaker:** Mitchel was always a soft touch, if you know what I mean [*Laughter.*]

**Ms P Bradley:** I also join Clare in wishing everyone in the Chamber a very happy International Women's Day. I begin by thanking all the wonderful women who have supported me and given me the strength through this journey, which at certain times has been horrendous and at other times has been a wonderful experience. I say a big thank-you to all of them. I also want to thank all the many women who, over the past year of COVID, have stepped up to the mark. They have been at the front and centre of their communities, front and centre of our health service and front and centre of our retail services, so a big thank you to them.

When I was looking through the pack prepared for us today, I read through some of the speeches. It was extremely thought-provoking to see the names of so many strong women who have stood in the Chamber over the 10 years that I have been here and delivered speeches on International Women's Day. We had Karen McKeivitt, Megan Fearon, Jo-Anne Dobson and Sandra Overend. Of course, I have to mention the great defender of rights for women, Cairíona Ruane — someone who, I am proud to say, was, by the end of that term, a very good friend.

I have very fond memories of them all, and reading their contributions took me back to 2015, when I sat on the AER Committee. Trevor also sat on the Committee, as did Pat. It

was a really motivational time, a time of hope and a time when we felt that we were going to bring about great change.

We have brought about change. This is a very different Chamber from the Chamber that I remember from 2011, when I first came here. There is a different dynamic in the Chamber. We no longer hear the heckling when a woman gets up to speak that I experienced then. By the end of the 2011-16 mandate, every Member who sat on these Benches knew that that was not acceptable, because I did not accept it. I did not like it, I did not want it, and I did not want to see any female in the Chamber being treated in that way.

As I said, we have hope, and there have been many good things. However, as the chair of the caucus said, we have so much more to do. We had three years when we did not have the Assembly, and we have had the COVID pandemic for the past year, but I am so glad to see this issue back on the agenda in the Chamber. What change can we effect to encourage the many women who will come behind us? Some of you will be here for many years after I am long gone, and a whole new generation of women should feel part of politics in Northern Ireland. I absolutely support that.

Various issues prohibit women from entering politics, and the chair touched on some of them. If you ask me whether I recommend being an elected Member, my answer will fluctuate. Some days, I will say, "Absolutely. It's one of the greatest things you could do". On other days, I will say, "Stay away from it. It is awful, it is toxic, it is horrible", but that is a reference to outside; not in here.

I read a report in the 'Belfast Telegraph' — I took part in it — that a quarter of female MLAs had been sexually harassed and three quarters had experienced sexism on social media. The report described the influence that that has on our lives. It has a deep influence on our lives and on how we behave, and that should not be the case. As women who are elected and standing up for what we believe in, we should not have to face that tyranny of abuse.

I was heartened to see the Westminster report on pregnancy. I think that it was about Ministers. The Assembly definitely needs to look at that, especially for all you wonderful young women out there — not so much for me — when it comes to pregnancy, proxy voting and taking leave to have your children. I remember what Michelle Gildernew and Nichola Mallon had to face in those first few months after having a baby. After this debate, we need

to take that forward positively. We also need to look at paternity leave. A gender-sensitive Assembly is not about just women; it is about equality across the board for women and men.

In finishing, I want to say a big thank you to Mike Nesbitt and Trevor Lunn. Trevor Lunn has been a great supporter of this issue from our time on the AER Committee all those years ago. Thank you also to Mike Nesbitt, my vice-chair on the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 all-party group, who has shown real commitment to effecting change in women's lives. To all those many men out there who are supporters and feminists in their own right, I say a big thank you. We need more of you. We need you to step up to the mark and put it out there and on the record that you support women.

**Ms Sheerin:** There is nothing difficult to follow there at all; thanks, Paula.

I am delighted to support the motion as a member of the Women's Caucus and in my capacity as Sinn Féin's equality spokesperson. The theme of this year's International Women's Day is "Choose to Challenge" and the creation of a gender-sensitive Assembly is key to challenging many of the obstacles that women and girls across the North face daily. This is not about having diversity for the sake of it, nor is it about gesture politics, which only ever have a place, in my opinion, when they are backed up by action. If you cannot see, you cannot be, but, more importantly, you will not be thought about.

For women across the globe, it takes an average of between eight and 10 years to get a diagnosis of endometriosis or PCOS, both of which have chronic pain as a symptom and require surgery to manage. If no one around the table has ever asked their doctor about their PMS, or has ever had to explain to a teacher that they could not do PE that day, or has ever realised that they have come to work without period products and have stood in a public toilet for 10 minutes with the sweat lashing off them, trying to make a £1 coin fit into a slot that was made for a 50p piece, how can we ever expect to improve services for menstrual health? If knowledge and learning on those topics are not improved, and GPs are still going to prescribe the contraceptive pill to 13-year-olds with extreme PMS instead of trying to identify the cause and treating them accordingly, how can anyone be expected to know what is healthy and what is not?

Research tells us that women have been disproportionately impacted by crises such as austerity, Brexit and COVID-19, with the last-

named — the most recent of the three — as Paula mentioned, really exposing some deficits in our public services. We know that the unpaid care economy is dominated by women and that the majority of domestic and caring duties in the home fall to women. Additionally, research tells us that the majority of public-sector workers are women and that women are more likely to have been laid off or furloughed during COVID-19. When we look at that through an intersectional lens, we can see that women who also qualify in minority groupings, as was mentioned by Clare, the chair of the Women's Caucus, have been impacted even harder. Sixty three per cent of disabled women have struggled to access basic necessities during lockdown, and 43% of BAME women believe that they will be in more debt after the crisis, compared with 37% of white women. Leaving the EU is likely to result in a rollback of workers' rights, including parental leave, equal treatment and rights for part-time workers, on which women rely.

Those are many examples of how gender equality can be mainstreamed in policy. My party colleague Minister Deirdre Hargey has just published the report of her expert advisory panel on the gender equality strategy, which includes a commitment to implementing international human rights legislation to tackle gender neutrality in policymaking.

Given the aim of the motion, there are a number of practical steps that we should consider in order to encourage more women to get involved in public life. In my experience as a rural female representative, I have received support and help from men and women in my party. Sinn Féin has more female MLAs than others at the moment. One of the key policies that we have adopted internally is the use of gender quotas for elections, which means that our councillors, TDs, MLAs, seanadóirí and MPs are representative of our membership. The mainstreaming of affirmative action really does lead to positive results. Mandatory childcare for politicians is one of the key tenets of a gender-sensitive Parliament, recognising that parenting whilst in public office is incredibly difficult and demanding and that it is something that has a disproportionate impact on women.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's (CEDAW) concluding observations in 2019 noted:

*"the Committee remains concerned about the lack of uniform protection of women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence across the jurisdiction of the State party, noting with particular concern the*

*inadequacy of laws and policies to protect women".*

This Assembly should implement a stop violence against women and girls strategy to tackle gender-based violence, particularly as much of that originates in misogyny and sexist prejudices. Those same discriminatory prejudices often manifest themselves in the form of online abuse from keyboard warriors and in negative comments about our appearance that we, as women, have to contend with every time we put ourselves out there.

The motion calls for the implementation of UNSCR 1325, which identified intimidation by paramilitary groups as an obstacle to female participation in public life. We have seen in recent weeks how that does not have to be exaggerated. To be a politician is to be a public servant and a community activist, and I got involved in politics because of my desire for a better and fairer Ireland. As such, my feminism is interlinked with my republicanism. Improving our Assembly to encourage more female participation can only be a positive thing for us all.

**Ms S Bradley:** I wish a happy International Women's Day to everybody here. I want to thank St Mary's High School in Newry, with which I had the privilege of joining this morning to celebrate International Women's Day. That was a very enjoyable experience.

At the beginning of the debate, many of us were recalling how, this time last year, the Assembly Chamber was filled with young women who were, shall I say, very enthusiastic and very inspiring.

Their absence today is noted. To have those young women around us definitely added to this place, and no doubt it will in the years ahead. During these COVID times, a bit of a dampener has been put on what we are trying to achieve through such events.

#### 4.45 pm

That having been said, it is timely that we have brought forward the motion. I thank the officials on the caucus, who are predominantly women, and the Clerks who assisted and supported us in putting forward today's proposals. The action plan is not just about getting women into politics. In a way, we have started to become good at that. We have tried to understand the barriers and open doors. Perhaps what we are less good at, or where there is room for

improvement, is retaining women in politics. When women arrive in the political forum, it may be that they are at an age and a time in their life when their choices are their own and are easier made. Once caring responsibilities become part of their life, however, there is definitely a different playing field. Ms Bradley listed names. I can think of a number of women who came through the House and perhaps left too early, and that was not always because of the expression of the electorate. It may have been because the facilities and opportunities in politics were not always there. We therefore need to get better at opening the door to women in political life. This place does stand as an example to other places and other workplaces through how we manage women in the workplace and offer facilities to them.

Reference was rightly made to childcare, not just in public life but in all walks of life. Childcare can be an absolute barrier to employment. It can be the deal-breaker that makes it not worth your while going out to work, because you will surrender so much and because there is little in the way of any financial reward or career prospects beyond that. That is not good enough. Women should have that choice, and it should be based on what they choose to do and want to do.

I thank my colleague and friend Pat Catney, who is doing a lot of work on period poverty. It is about individuals going off and taking on the mantle and task of doing small pieces, because all those little pieces of the jigsaw add up to making life better for women.

"Choose to Challenge" is the theme of this year's International Women's Day. I have chosen to challenge the lack of understanding about the issue of menopause that exists for women. It is still quite taboo in many circles. It is not openly talked about. It is not a comfortable conversation. Many people find it easier just to park the subject. I do not believe that we should. Here in Parliament Buildings, we can set an example to all. Some of the solutions to assist women through the menopause are not rocket science. Rather, they are simple things such as ensuring that there is air conditioning or a window nearby, an understanding that fresh, cool drinking water should be provided, or an understanding that, when a woman leaves a meeting, it is not an insult but might be necessary for a few moments.

I understand that many women, thankfully, go through menopause without it having any great effect. For some women, however, it can be quite problematic. Some of the jokes and jibes

that are associated with the menopause can be quite hurtful, but they are brushed aside as light-hearted banter. At times, they are not. The menopause is a time in a woman's life when there could be a knock to her confidence. It is for other women to build that woman up, not knock her down. We in the Chamber all need to be strong in our vocal support of those women. We also need to support the women and men who, as line managers, are charged with supporting those women. We need to know that they are comfortable. Let us open the conversation, make the language comfortable for everybody, and reach a time when it becomes a policy like all others, where we just understand that it is about making life better for women in their career and workplace.

I will end on that note. I thank everyone and wish everyone a happy International Women's Day.

**Mr Speaker:** I will direct my fire at Mike Nesbitt. Remember: five minutes to speak.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I will not dare go one millisecond over my time, Mr Speaker.

On behalf of my party, I support the motion, thank its sponsors and wish everybody a happy International Women's Day. I speak partly as deputy chair of the all-party group on UNSCR 1325: women, peace and security, and I thank the chair for her kind words. Behind the catchy title of that APG, there is great work going on. Jonna Monaghan and Liz Law of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) do great work with us. Rachel Powell of the Women's Policy Group (WPG) has brought forward the COVID-19 feminist recovery plan, which focuses on the gender pay gap and the disproportionate impact that the COVID pandemic has had on women.

I also speak with a little bit of international experience. I have been to Africa twice as an associate trainer with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and have worked in Sudan and Ethiopia with aspiring female politicians. It seems to me that there is a commonality between what holds them back and what holds people back from coming into this Chamber. It is largely a fear of the unknown. To some extent, it is a fear of misogyny, bullying and intimidation by men. It is also a fear of the impact on their work-life balance. Practical issues such as the absence of a crèche and working through late-night debates are all factors that need to be considered.

At that point, I have to address the imbalance in the MLA group of the Ulster Unionist Party. We do not even get over 30%, as you will all know. One of my deepest regrets on the day on which I gave up the leadership of the party — the day of the 2017 election results — was that we were saying goodbye to Jo-Anne Dobson and Sandra Overend. Sandra was the person who did most to encourage female membership of the Ulster Unionist Party at that time. She encouraged females to think about standing for election through the Dame Dehra Parker programme. I am sure that some of you will know —.

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** I will give way, yes.

**Mr Wells:** I know Mrs Dobson very well. There was an allegation that, had the constituency been properly and evenly divided, Mrs Dobson would have had a reasonably even pool of votes to canvass. As a result of the configuration of the constituency, she feels, she was not given a fair crack of the whip. That is hardly promoting one of the best women we have had in this Building.

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** I acknowledge the Member's intervention. I am not sure how relevant it is to the debate. However, I will say this to the Member: in 2017, Mrs Dobson had a larger share of the constituency than she had in 2016 and had more first-preference votes to go for. She got elected in 2016. The fact that she did not get elected in 2017 does not reflect that she had votes taken away from her: she had a larger share of the constituency.

As I said, Dame Dehra Parker was the first woman to be elected, in 1921. She also had the distinction of becoming the first female to hold a Cabinet position, when she was made Minister of Health and Local Government in 1949.

I pay tribute to three councillor colleagues from Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council who have given a modern twist to the Parker programme: Julie Flaherty, Louise McKinstry and Jill MacAuley, who have run a social media campaign called "We need you, girl". Last week, they had a major Zoom conference with a significant number of females engaging and expressing an interest in finding out more about becoming an elected representative.

During my five years as leader of the party, I found the easiest thing to do when trying to encourage people to come in was to identify whom I wanted — people such as Steve Aiken and Doug Beattie — speak to them directly and encourage them. When I went to potential female candidates, not one came back positively. It might be because of me, but I wonder to what extent it is about the reputation of the House and how they feel about it. Some really capable females, when they thought about it — they did not think about it for that long — said that they did not want to do it. We all need to reflect on that.

Briefly, I want to go on a tangent, but it is an important one. Another person whom I brought in — he was co-opted — was Andy Allen, and we should focus on the fact that we need to be more representative of people with disabilities. When Andy first came here, he was in a wheelchair and he could not vote without somebody helping because there were steps and no appropriate ramp in the Division Lobby. I would love us to think about those issues as well.

My final thought is on the COVID feminist recovery plan. It was mid-November when I mentioned the plan to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the House, and I still await their response. I hope that it is a positive one, because that would be a fitting mark for International Women's Day.

**Ms Armstrong:** Happy International Women's Day. Mr Speaker, thank you for allowing the debate to take place today. The motion has been co-signed by all parties and the independent Member and calls on the Assembly to adopt measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly. I am the former deputy chair and current Alliance Party representative on the Assembly Women's Caucus, and I am proud to hold that position. I fully support our call for the Assembly to take forward a gender-sensitive action plan. I hope that, this time, we will finally be heard.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee report, as mentioned by others — 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly' — was published on 17 February 2015 and confirmed that:

*"The Committee recommended that the Assembly should establish a working group on a gender sensitive parliament. The working group should have equal membership of male and female MLAs."*

That group did not happen, but that does not mean that it still could not. In 2016, the Assembly acknowledged the work of the then Speaker's reference group. I was part of that group but not as an MLA; I had not been elected at that stage. I came along here voluntarily, to the visitors' cafe in the basement and to other rooms, and we discussed ways forward. At that time, there was a discussion that having quotas could improve the gender balance in this place. We are getting there, but, in 2021, here we are still asking for a gender-sensitive Parliament to be introduced.

The Women's Caucus, in having its first ever debate today, used the mechanism of cross-party signatures to get the motion on the agenda. I hope that, in future, the Women's Caucus could be recognised for its work and would, as our chair mentioned, be able to table motions in its own right, rather than having to adapt procedures to help us have our voices heard. The Women's Caucus request states that a gender-sensitive Parliament is one that responds to the needs and interests of men and women in its structures, operations, methods and work:

*"A gender-sensitive parliament is founded on the principle of gender equality – that is, that both men and women have an equal right to participate in its structures and processes, without discrimination and without recrimination. A gender equality policy provides direction for the setting of priorities and strategic, well targeted interventions to achieve them."*

There are three elements that are essential to us achieving a gender-sensitive Parliament: an environment that is accessible to both men and women; processes that facilitate the participation of both women and men; and actions that promote equality and participation.

As others have stated, there are specific actions that will enable the Assembly to take forward those elements, but we need to create an environment that recognises that the Assembly is comprised of people who are elected to serve everyone in Northern Ireland and to find ways to enable that to happen. For example, why do we not take the opportunity now to update Standing Orders to enable proxy voting outside of COVID arrangements to allow Members to have maternity, paternity and adoption leave or even sick leave? That would help to encourage younger women and men to be politicians. Why is it that my colleague Judith Cochrane is the only female MLA to have had a private Member's Bill reach Royal Assent? Why does the House not do something to talk to all

the women MLAs and say, "What is stopping you? What is the barrier?"?

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

**Ms Armstrong:** Not just at the moment.

Eileen Bell was our only female Speaker. There is an opportunity —.

**Mr Wells:** Where is the equality?

**Ms Armstrong:** You will have your opportunity in a moment, Mr Wells. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** Order, Members.

**5.00 pm**

**Ms Armstrong:** In this place, we use words like "madam" and "mister". Why do we not just use the terms that people are given for the jobs that they have? There needs to be an audit of language in this place, which our report calls for, in order to make sure that it is inclusive.

Also, the House may congratulate itself on the provision of free sanitary products, but it ignores menopause, and I welcome the Member from the SDLP bringing that forward. Some of us struggle in this place with the heat blowing out of those fans or with the freezing cold air. It is not easy.

The problem is not in this room; it is getting to it. Social media, aggression, violence, attacks on offices and how the media treat us have a lot to do with that. At a previous International Women's Day, there was a female participation event and lots of young women were here. That night on the media, the one man who was in the room appeared on the television. They ignored all the rest of us — I see that a Member is nodding — who had done interviews. They ignored us completely.

Finally, I thank —.

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

**Ms Armstrong:** Mr Wells, I will give way.

**Mr Wells:** I want to put it on record that there was an inaccuracy there. Patricia Lewsley, an SDLP MLA for Lagan Valley, way back 20 years ago, successfully promoted and got a private Member's Bill through the House.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you for that.

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

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you. I will maybe have to update the Bill Office, which provided me with that information, but there we go.

Finally, I thank the women — the grandmothers and the mummies, although some of us do not have them any more — on whose shoulders I stand. I also thank all those girls, including my daughter, who I embarrassed in the Chamber, and all those young women who are looking for inspiration for their time. I thank every one of you. We may all come from different political places, but, together, as women, we respect each other in this place. We work together and are trying our best for everyone across Northern Ireland. Thank you.

**Mr Sheehan:** I thank the Women's Caucus for tabling this very important motion on this, Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan — International Women's Day. You just have to look at the membership of the Assembly to see that women are still badly under-represented. Female under-representation cannot be seen in isolation from the way that society in general is organised and the gender inequality that exists in day-to-day life for women. Even today, a report in the media suggests that, on average, a young woman who is starting out on her working life today will, when she reaches retirement age, end up with £100,000 less in her pension pot than a man. That is not right. That is just one small example of how women are disadvantaged, but there are many more.

We in the Assembly have a responsibility to try to ensure that gender equality is a priority. It rests with us, as political leaders, to set an example. While there have been improvements in here over the years, there is still a long way to go before we have a genuinely fair and gender-sensitive institution.

There are, of course, many barriers that must be overcome before we reach that holy grail, not least the fact that this institution is not family-friendly. I am constantly amazed by the ability of my female colleagues not just in my party but across the parties to carry out their role as elected representatives, which includes late-night sittings and meetings in the evenings after we finish here. This is no nine-to-five job with 37.5 hours a week. We are constantly on call, and there is no doubt that that impinges on and intrudes into family life.

However, we here on our own will not resolve what is a deeply rooted societal problem of inequality. Education clearly has a role to play in encouraging girls to pursue what could be

seen as non-traditional subjects such as science, technology, engineering and maths. There should also be mandatory subjects in schools relating to gender relations and the empowerment of girls and women.

As was highlighted, childcare is an obstacle for many women. Data from NISRA shows that the most common reason for economic inactivity among men has been identified as sickness or disability. However, for women, the most common reason is unpaid caring responsibilities. It is a fact that women, in the main, take on caring responsibilities, especially for children. How can we attract women into politics if we do not make the effort to provide childcare? The Assembly needs to set an example by establishing childcare facilities for Members.

In politics, women suffer more than men with harassment and abuse, both within politics and on social media. I noted Paula's comments that the heckling that used to be common in the Chamber has ended. I remember the Women's Coalition, in particular, complaining about male Members mooring when they got up to speak. I am glad to say that that is a thing of the past. There have also been many instances of misogynistic, hateful and sexist abuse towards female politicians from all parties on social media. Greater deterrents are needed to end that type of behaviour. Awareness training is also needed to get women into politics. Assembly staff need training so that they can anticipate policies or procedures that may have an adverse impact on women fulfilling their role as elected representatives on an equal footing with their male colleagues.

I send my solidarity to all female colleagues from all parties on this International Women's Day.

**Ms Dolan:** Happy International Women's Day to everybody. Women should be respected and appreciated every day, but their impact on and contribution to our lives should be particularly celebrated today. I commend the staff of the Women's Caucus for keeping us in check and putting the motion together.

It is internationally recognised that society's needs are better served when there is diverse political representation. While the recent increase in the 2016 and 2017 Assembly elections is welcome, women are still under-represented in the Assembly at only 33%, despite constituting 53% of the population. That is the lowest female representation compared with other devolved legislatures. The North of Ireland also has the lowest percentage of

female councillors with only 26%. Currently, in the Dáil, general election guidelines require candidate quotas of 30% women. The introduction of gender quotas before the 2016 general election to the Dáil increased the proportion of female candidates by 6.5%. Sinn Féin has been working to increase its female representation. An example of the benefit of that is that its Assembly team now has more female MLAs than males, and its two party leaders are women.

A political career path is deemed as being not family-friendly due to long plenary sittings and the varying demands that are placed on Members' time. It remains true that women are the main carers in our society, and, as such, we need to explore strategies to improve the work-life balance and consider childcare issues and other caring responsibilities, issues that have already been touched on today. If we are serious about getting more young women into political life, we need to make some serious but very doable changes. As far as I am aware — I stand to be corrected — the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance was looking into allocating space on the estate for a childcare centre and/or a family room for MLAs and Assembly staff. That would be a positive step and should be pursued.

The low percentage of women in elected roles here is a microcosm of the under-representation of women in sectors across society. NISRA statistics show that, in 2020, women constituted 79% of those in part-time employment in the North, and one third of working-age women are economically inactive. That compares unfavourably with a wider average across these islands, where women constitute 74% of part-time employees and 25.6% of those deemed economically inactive. Structural inequality disadvantages women through the persistence of a gender pay gap in the North. Research by the Association for Real Change (ARC) and Ulster University shows that the gross median weekly female earnings are £127 less than men's. All employers must work to end the gender pay gap in order to advance women's rights and workers' rights.

In Britain, gender-disaggregated data shows how many women are claiming universal credit and how many redundancies have been of females.

That crucial data is needed here to determine the extent of gender inequality. However, NISRA data is not disaggregated by gender. Publishing gender-disaggregated data is one of many measures that can be taken by the

Assembly to make the labour market more equal.

Women are more likely to be engaged in informal, temporary or precarious forms of employment, including employment with zero-hours contracts. To tackle that, I am bringing forward a Bill that will end zero-hours contracts and replace them with banded hours contracts. That will provide stable employment for women. In the North, many of the women in poverty work. This is connected to reduced working hours for women. They are more likely to work part-time and struggle to increase their hours of work due to caring responsibilities. Caring for young children limits the number of hours that a person can work and the distance that they can travel for work, which leaves many women locked in poverty, especially when jobs are low-paid.

The campaign theme for International Women's Day 2021 is "Choose to Challenge". Therefore, we should be challenging ourselves to implement the changes necessary to become a gender-sensitive Assembly and society.

**Ms Hunter:** Happy International Women's Day, everyone. This is my first in the Assembly, so I am delighted to speak today. Historically, women in Northern Ireland have played a huge role in paving the path to peace. We draw inspiration from the likes of Brid Rodgers, Mo Mowlam, Monica McWilliams and so many more. Shining a light on today, the SDLP wholeheartedly supports the motion on creating a gender-sensitive Assembly. I thank Clare and the other Members involved in tabling it.

It is fantastic to see more women involved in politics, but the reality of how far we have left to go is eye-opening. I continue to be inspired when I see women across all political affiliations leading from the front. Looking at other parties, it is evident to me that, despite our political differences, many across the House are undeniably passionate and wholeheartedly devoted to the betterment of their communities, and I respect you all for that.

Whether as a councillor, MLA or MP, it is most welcome to see so many women becoming politically involved, especially in grassroots activism. I wholeheartedly welcome the fact that Queen's student union now has an all-female line-up: a very capable bunch indeed.

There are many evident barriers for female politicians. However, many are not so visible and happen behind closed doors. Often, sadly, such barriers, when not challenged, can be found in council chambers: the dismissive

attitudes; the overlooking of intellect; not attributing ideas to the women who came up with them; and the, "You're new here. Watch how we've always done it". However, I am an optimist when it comes to change. I believe that we are in a transitional and transformative part of our history. Women are single-handedly challenging the more traditional ideas of what a decision-maker, a policymaker or a peacebuilder looks like. At my age, it has been a very interesting experience. Other female MLAs and councillors of a similar age would probably agree that, at the best of times, it is not always easy or straightforward and that the path has not yet been carved out. There is often an assumption that young people in politics lack the life experience to lead. I do not think that that is true. I have often found that, if you are not tenacious and dogmatic in your approach, you are seen to be doing it wrong, and that you have to be inherently more masculine to fulfil the role.

My vision for the future is that, within our political structures in Northern Ireland, we start to see greater diversity in our representatives to reflect our changing population and demographic. On the topic of making the Assembly more inclusive, we must urgently address the shaming of women in political roles and public life who take maternity leave. Representatives in the South have voiced concern about that. Maternity leave should not be negotiated; it is a fundamental right. Nichola Mallon, the SDLP Minister, and Claire Hanna have raised this and are seeking change.

Looking at our past political landscape, we see that women have had to fight just to be at the table. They have done incredible work, especially the Women's Coalition in the 1990s. It was really inspiring to see women coming together and rising above the religious and sectarian tensions of that time to do the best for their families and communities. Being a member of the ceasefire generation, I feel a sense of obligation to maintain the peace and stability that women fought so hard for them and for which, as we have seen in the Chamber, they continue to fight.

### 5.15 pm

More women in politics is a very positive thing. In Scotland, for example, we saw the free provision of period products in 2019. I am inspired by the work of my colleague Pat Catney in seeking to eradicate period poverty. It is a subject that we all know is traditionally taboo, but I love that it is being brought forward by a man with two daughters who speaks without shame on the matter.

There are many challenges left to be addressed. It is important that we all keep the doors open and do not pull the ladder up behind us but that we encourage more women of all ages and backgrounds to become involved in politics. Female leaders should not be limited or defined by what they wear, what they look like or whether they choose to have children or not. Women collectively coming together and having discussions like we have had today — politicians, activists on the ground, those working in the community and voluntary sector — need to speak up on the barriers and the sexism. We should continue to challenge the current barriers and to strive for change.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Women's Caucus for tabling the motion. On International Women's Day, it is especially timely and significant that we should be debating the issue. The motion talks of the Assembly adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly, and I totally agree, but I want to put a question to you all listening here today. What national Parliaments across the world have the highest percentage of women elected? Just think about it. I will tell you at the end, and no cheating. Do not look it up on Google. I will give you a clue. The UK ranks thirty-ninth.

We have only to look around the Assembly to see the imbalance that we have with the representation of female MLAs. There are 32 of us, which is similar to Westminster, which has around 33%, and at our council level. We have to ask ourselves why that is and what we are going to do about it. What are the barriers to women becoming elected here? Could it be the toxic masculinity of some areas of politics and the constant misogyny? Is it acceptable for female politicians to be told that they, as the only women present in a room full of men, are there to make up the gender balance or to make cups of tea? Of course not. It is totally wrong, and things need to change.

Paula has already mentioned this, but I was one of the female MLAs who was recently interviewed by Suzanne Breen about our experiences as female politicians, and we all must have said similar things. Seventy per cent of us have had sexist remarks made to our face by men, and three quarters have experienced sexism on social media.

Vile comments are made about women in the political arena, especially in party leadership, about what they wear, what shoes they wear, what they look like, their hair, their make-up, their personal life and their relationship status, why they are not married, why they do not have children and what age they are. That has to

stop. Personal attacks, abuse and harassment disproportionately affect women in public life, and not enough is being done to give a positive platform and credit to women who lead in our society. That is why debates on days like this are so important.

I will touch on what has already been mentioned: where is our childcare strategy? Juggling the demands of work and family is so difficult and renders many women unable to seek meaningful employment. Too often, the only option available is poorly paid work or a zero-hours contract. Having to spend the little money that they have on childcare pushes women back into a vicious cycle of struggling to balance work and looking after family.

Women bore the brunt of so-called welfare reform, and still do, and women are disproportionately affected by climate breakdown. Women are there to pick up the pieces to ensure that they not only stand as representatives but do so in positions of leadership, as well as looking at other groups that are traditionally sidelined, such as those who are disabled, as Mike mentioned, but also those who identify as LGBTQ+ and BAME women. Where are they? How do we get to 50:50 representation? Those are all questions that political parties and Departments must address sooner rather than later.

On a wider point, there is a worrying trend in many policies to neutralise gender and the realities that we actually live in. If that trend continues, it will be to our detriment. If we fail to recognise the gendered nature of specific societal issues, we will fail to deal with them. It is my firm belief that the blind pursuit of policies that neutralise gendered issues is a failure of government. Gender is not neutral. Societal problems such as domestic abuse and sexual violence are gendered issues, and, if we fail to recognise that in government, we fail to effectively tackle such issues. We cannot bury our heads in the sand.

Much more work needs to be done to recognise the unique circumstances and experience of women in the criminal justice system, for instance. The prison system was built by men for men: that is recognised. We need to look at those who find themselves homeless as a result of being trafficked, exploited and abused.

I could go on all day, but, to give an answer to the question that I posed at the start, the national Parliaments with the highest percentage of females elected are Rwanda, Cuba and the UAE.

I thank the members of the caucus for bringing forward the motion. I choose to challenge each and every one of us in the Assembly to celebrate women's achievement, to raise awareness against bias and to take action for equality.

**Mr Carroll:** I did not intend to speak at all. It is important that these debates be led by women, and they have been led very strongly today. Being a sole MLA, however, I have to speak to offer my party's support to all the women here and everybody on International Women's Day.

If I may paraphrase Kellie Armstrong, the problem is not in the Chamber. We saw previously an MLA signify the problem exactly. When women are speaking, they should be listened to, even if there is disagreement. Talking about men's equality, or alluding to it, is very offensive on any level, but especially today. I think that that is worth saying.

I offer my solidarity to everybody in our community. I offer it to all the women have been working throughout the pandemic as healthcare workers, nurses and people in ICU but also, as Members have said, to those in caring responsibilities, which fall overwhelmingly on the shoulders of women. Women have always been at the forefront — you do not need me to tell you — of the struggle to change the world and in fighting for a better world. International Women's Day has its origins in radical, socialist and feminist women fighting to change the world. It is worth remembering that.

I just wanted to offer my support for the motion and solidarity to everybody, here and beyond, on International Women's Day.

**Mr Lunn:** I welcome the motion. I noticed that it was tabled by six female Members. It could have been more gender-balanced than that, if you had asked, but there we are. I do not blame you for that.

**A Member:** It is the Women's Caucus.

**Mr Lunn:** Yes. Other Members mentioned the genesis of the Women's Caucus, which came about through the Speaker's Reference Group, which Steven Agnew and I sat on. We faded out of the process after that.

That is all by the way. I wish everybody, as everybody else has done, a very happy International Women's Day, and that includes the men as well. We are just as entitled to have a happy day as the women are. *[Laughter.]* If our women are happy, we probably will be, too.

I was a Member of the AERC Committee when the topic came up. Paula referred to it earlier. My natural modesty prevents me from saying which Member proposed that we discuss the topic at the Committee, but let us just say that it was me. *[Laughter.]* I was prompted at that time by a former Member who has been mentioned several times. She is a very good friend of mine, and we became friends through the Assembly. That is Caitriona Ruane. Caitriona had dropped a hint to me that she would like to do this investigation or inquiry, whatever the word is. Her feeling was that, in the atmosphere at the time, if she proposed it, it would not be accepted by the Committee. If somebody like me proposed it, however, possibly it would. The Committee, to its credit, accepted it quite readily.

At that time, there was definitely a need for that sort of discussion to take place. The transformation of this place in my time, which started in 2007, has been quite dramatic. That does not mean that we have got there yet, but the changes are here for all to see. At that time, we had very poor female representation. It was a male-dominated environment, in spades. Members have mentioned the unsocial hours. It was not family-friendly, while childcare was non-existent. It still is. We took evidence from a number of people, most of whom were experts in their particular field. The one who impressed me most at the time was Jane Morrice, who is a former Deputy Speaker of the Assembly and, along with Monica McWilliams, one of the two Women's Coalition Members at the time. Her words stuck with me. I looked them up today.

She referred to:

*"the incessant attempts to demean, humiliate and treat with disdain."*

That was the attitude of men towards women. That was true; she was not exaggerating. It was before my time, but the treatment that Women's Coalition Members got in this place was disgraceful. We have learned from that; we have moved on.

Members have referred to the 30 recommendations from the Committee. Have any of them been fully activated? I do not think so. Lip service has been paid to some of them, but the recommendations that matter, and which would make a big difference, have not been implemented. I will not go through the list, but the recommendation to balance caring responsibilities with a political career, which is a big one, has not been addressed.

I will touch on the representation situation here, because, frankly, it makes for sad reading for some. I am not trying to be unkind to anybody, although it may sound like it, but it is a fact that there are 38 unionist MLAs on this side of the House, seven of whom are women. Rosemary is one out of 10 in her party, so there are six in the DUP. The other parties can give themselves a bit of a pat on the back, because they have done well, but we are not there yet. There is still a long way to go, but progress has been made. The glass is one third full rather than two thirds empty. I urge the Women's Caucus to continue. Keep the pressure on and make the men and the Assembly listen to your message, because it is valid. You will find that there are plenty of men about this place who will agree with you and want to see change. We are not all misogynist pigs. I would not have said this 10 years ago, but the majority of the men in this place will support you. I want you to keep at it.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I know that I am slightly over my time, but let me say that I will be retiring next May. My contribution to this process will be, I think, to be replaced by much younger, female representation. I will leave it at that. Good luck to all of you.

**Mr Speaker:** Claire Sugden is not in the room. We had her down to appear via StarLeaf, but she is not in the audience. I call Rosemary Barton to make a winding-up speech and conclude the debate. Rosemary has 10 minutes.

**Mrs Barton:** I wish you all a very happy International Women's Day. I thank everybody who participated in what has been an interesting and wide-ranging debate, with many comments that I wish to consider. Ms Bailey talked about the purpose of the Women's Caucus and spoke about parity of esteem for women. She said that action must be taken to prevent the marginalisation of women, particularly in politics. She also said that political representation must reflect the population and that female representation here needs to be up to 50%. It is approximately 33% now. Ms Bailey also said that a gender-sensitive Assembly would result in legislation that would provide opportunities to be outward-looking. That was the most important part of her speech.

Paula Bradley referred to the strong women who have stood in the Chamber in the past. She also referred to the importance of women in society. She spoke about what we have been through recently with regard to working through COVID and keeping our homes together. She said that it has not been easy for people who

have lost employment or who have had family members off school, and she spoke of the women who have played a crucial role in that regard. She also spoke about the abuse that female MLAs take. Women should not have to deal with that. She spoke about pregnancy issues for female MLAs and the fact that there is no such thing as maternity leave for them.

### 5.30 pm

Ms Sheerin spoke about the importance of period products and about the fact that the majority of people who were furloughed as a result of COVID were women, not men. She said that many of the people who are affected as unpaid people in our economy are women; they are the ones who stay at home and look after the house. She also suggested that we should, perhaps, use gender quotas and perhaps have mandatory childcare for politicians. She said that we need to tackle gender-based violence. That is very important.

Ms Sinéad Bradley reminded us about the number of young people who were in this Chamber this day last year, and I was thinking the same when I came into it today. She spoke about the difficulties of retaining women in politics, and I think that we have seen, through the years, the difficulties that many parties have had in keeping women once they, perhaps, have families and caring responsibilities. She referred to the cost of childcare for women and how it prevents women from going out to work, and she challenged a lack of understanding and assistance for women around the menopause.

The three gentlemen Members who are present for the debate are very welcome, too. Mike Nesbitt spoke about his experience of working with politicians internationally, and, surprise, surprise, we all have the same issues. He also spoke about the Dame Dehra Parker programme that the Ulster Unionist Party had, and that, indeed, was a success. It may not seem that way, given that I am the only Ulster Unionist Party female MLA, but it was a success a couple of years ago, when we had Jo-Anne Dobson, Sandra Overend and Jenny Palmer. I know that a number of them came up through that Dame Dehra Parker programme, which I also attended. It was a success. Mr Nesbitt also spoke about the representation of people with disabilities, and I think that we, as an Assembly, need to look at that, particularly women with disabilities.

Ms Armstrong said that the Women's Caucus should perhaps look at bringing more motions in its own right. She spoke about a gender-sensitive Parliament and that that needs to

have an environment where men and women are equally valued and there is equality for both. She asked for Standing Orders to be updated, particularly for paternity leave and maternity leave. Ms Armstrong was also concerned about the language that is sometimes used, so she talked about inclusive language and the issues with social media for women.

Mr Sheehan spoke about female under-representation in the Assembly and said that young women who are starting work today will be much less well off at the end of their career than men will be over their lifetime. He praised the females in the Chamber who participate, and, indeed, he praised them for staying late into the night for Assembly sittings and talked about how that impinges on their family life. He talked about issues of childcare and caring responsibilities, and, of course, he referred to the misogynistic abuse that women have had.

Ms Dolan said that women need to be respected and appreciated, not on one day of the year but every day. She, again, referred to quotas for increasing women's representation and exploring the strategies that we need for work-life balance. She said that a third of women are economically inactive.

Ms Hunter said that we still need more women in politics. She said that the Queen's University students' union officer team is now all female, and she was optimistic that perhaps this was the start of these ladies moving up into political life and other life. She also said that women should not be defined by what they wear or look like.

Miss Woods spoke about the sexist remarks that are made to ladies. She also referred to what women look like, what they wear and the comments that are often made about those. She spoke about the difficulties of juggling childcare and work.

Mr Carroll offered his solidarity to the women who spoke today and to the women who have been affected over the past year or so by COVID. Mr Lunn again referred to 2007, when there was a very poor level of female representation here in Stormont. He talked about 30 recommendations that were put forward by a review that took place and said that a number of them have still not been implemented.

There is no doubt that the under-representation of women in political life in Northern Ireland is a problem. Attempts to address it have fallen short. We know that the repeated scrutiny of

that failure has come up with the same conclusion: it is a serious matter that must be addressed with urgency. We have the Belfast Agreement to look at and all its implementation arguments, which make commitments to increase women's representation in public and political life in Northern Ireland. We must make good on those commitments. We cannot continue to deprioritise or move slowly on them. The time is now — the time is today — to make that endorsement and to champion the targeted and strategic interventions that are set out in the action plan.

The motion calls for the Assembly's endorsement of the Women's Caucus action plan to implement measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly. That action plan is grounded in research on gender equality here in Northern Ireland. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee made those recommendations after its comprehensive audit and resulting in-depth report on women in politics in Northern Ireland. The Assembly has been scrutinised and deemed to be not good enough as an institution that facilitates and promotes participation and inclusion for women. We know that if you do not have adequate representation of women in positions of decision-making and leadership, you have an Assembly that does not legislate at the level of gender sensitivity that it should, that is not as effective as it could be and that is less democratic than it could be. We know that women's equal participation in political processes results in tangible gains for everyone, for the legitimacy of Parliament and for the quality of the analysis and solutions that are brought forward to create legislative change.

The Women's Caucus recognises that, and, today, we brought the motion to the Assembly in order to reiterate the considerable amount of work that remains to be undertaken. The action plan serves to create a gender-sensitive Northern Ireland Assembly that is founded on the principle of gender equality so that men and women can access their equal right to participate without discrimination. I call on the Assembly to endorse the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Assembly action plan that has been put forward today by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.

**Mr Speaker:** Pat Sheehan is whispering over to me. You have broken me today with the time.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly, on International Women's Day, notes recommendation 12 of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly', which proposed that the Assembly should consider adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly; and endorses the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Assembly action plan as put forward by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.*

**Mr Speaker:** I thank everybody for their contributions to the debate. It was a very worthwhile and important debate. The contributions were of significant quality and content.

I also thank the Members who took part in the Speaker's Office initiative, which includes a number of videos that are being broadcast on the Assembly's website today. As many of you will know, women here participated in that. I thank the Assembly, the Speaker's Office staff and the Communications team for putting the videos together. A total of some 17 videos are being broadcast on the website today. They feature a range of people, including a number of MLAs; people from public office, including our own Lesley Hogg, the Clerk/Chief Executive; and Brenda King, the Attorney General. We also have a range of sportswomen, disability campaigners and academics on the videos. I commend that initiative and encourage people to log on to the website to look at and listen to those very inspiring stories from some remarkable people in our community. It is really only a drop in the ocean of the talent and ability that we have across our society.

On this International Women's Day, I want to show my solidarity with all the women who are stalwarts in our communities and families and among our friends and loved ones. They are people to whom we can look up with admiration, to say the least. I thank everybody for their contributions today.

*Adjourned at 5.41 pm.*

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